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Special issue: Legacies of medieval dance

# Dance as a liberating practice into divine darkness?: A systematic theologian re- reads Philo of Alexandria's descriptions of dance

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**Abstract** In this article, I show how a deeper understanding of Lived Theology can enrich discussions about historical dance practices. I elaborate on the teachings of Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE–50) and how his descriptions of dancing indicate that such practices may be understood as worship and contemplation. I further suggest that dancing in Philo's texts, especially *On the Contemplative Life*, can be understood as an exegetical practice. I describe how a supersessionist logic insensitive to traditions of Lived Theology has operated in the theological discourse on Philo and thus has been unable to recognise these dimensions of the described dancing.

**Abstrakt** Denna artikel öppnar upp hur teologiska insikter kan fördjupa vår förståelse av historiska dans praktiker. Genom att läsa utvalda texter av Filo av Alexandria (c. 20 f.Kr.–50), där dans presenteras, skapar jag en fallstudie som visar på hur tidigare teologisk forskning missar dans inslagen i texterna. Jag visar även på att läsningar av historiska texter som är känsliga för frågor om hur teologi och rasism samverkar, öppnar upp för att dans varit av större betydelse i judiskt-kristna traditioner än vad tidigare forskning påvisat. Genom att centrera danspraktikerna i Filo som exempel på levd teologi och filosofiska praktiker, visar jag att dans haft funktionen av kontemplation, tillbedjan och en exegetisk

*praxis. Vidare visar jag på att det är en typ av ersättningsteologisk logik som hindrat tidigare forskning att förstå dansens performativa och teologiska betydelse. Slutligen exemplifierar jag hur dans, även i den tidiga kyrkan och under medeltiden, kunde förstås på nya sätt, när tolkningsnyckeln inte längre präglas av ersättningsteologins föreställningsvärld av dualismer.*

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## Introduction

This article aims to present a re-reading of the practices of dance found in Philo of Alexandria's writing and to show how dancing can be understood as theologically significant in a historical context less influenced by supersessionist tendencies. The article is structured as follows. First, I will present the methodological approach of Lived Theology as a theoretical framework that can resist some of the tendencies of supersessionism present in earlier research on dance and theology. I will then contextualise Philo of Alexandria's writings, in particular his *On the Contemplative Life*. Next, I present a re-reading of some of the main passages where dancing is discussed in Philo's work with the help of a Lived Theology approach. In such a reading, focusing on praxis, I suggest how dancing could be understood in three different ways: dance as worship, dance as an exegetical practice, and dance as a contemplative practice.

## Theoretical background

The last decade can be defined by several types of 'turns' within theological research: spatial, spiritual, practice, pragmatic, aesthetic and empirical, to name a few. The majority of these analytical turns have been critical of the previous paradigm—a paradigm in which texts and textual interpretations, primarily by male academic clergy, have long been centred as the sole authority in theological discussions (Tveitereid 2022). In writings on dance in Christian traditions, interpretations of textual statements made by Church Fathers or other presumed theological authorities are often over-emphasised as *the* religious standpoint on a specific topic (Arcangeli 1994; Rohmann 2013; Tronca 2016, 2017).<sup>1</sup> Even well-contextualised and nuanced articles on dance and Christianity rarely bring forth the possibility of investigating dances as creating religious claims in their own right (Lepeigneux 2022, 97–109).<sup>2</sup>

1 An exception to this is Ruth Webb's scholarship on the consequences of different forms of action and how specific theatrical approaches were received by practitioners in church settings (2008).

2 Exceptions to this can be found when authors focus on so-called mystery cults (Schlapbach 2021). For a modern example of this, see LaMothe (2017); and in the context of medieval dancing, see Hellsten (2022).



While scholars have recently created space for varied interpretations of early Christian dance, a modern and secular social imaginary continues to obscure some readings and nuances of dance. Saba Mahmood and Talal Asad, two prominent contemporary scholars of religion, have concluded that modern secular views of religion are poorly versed in understanding religious lives and experiences, both past and present (Asad 1997; Mahmood 2011). One reason for this deficiency is that today's secular approaches do not pay enough attention to the important role that practices play in forming religious beliefs. Religion, Mahmood argues, is more about enacting rites, rituals, and liturgies than about having 'faith' or believing in a set of cognitive propositions about transcendence, causality, or cosmology (Mahmood 2010). Thus, theologians and dance scholars alike could start asking questions about which kind of theology is formed in a specific type of dancing. Further, the social imaginary (Taylor 2007) of the secular age is often accompanied by an underlying assumption that secular, scientific worldviews are more rational, civilised, and democratic than religious understandings of the world, and thus tend to 'other' and belittle those who do not follow such modern paradigms (Mahmood 2010; Cavanaugh 2009; Scott 2018). Kelina Gotman's *Choreomania* (2018) exemplifies this analysis for depictions of dance. Her work is attuned to the religious dimensions of dancing, and it exemplifies how frenzied movements by women, as well as the colonial 'subject', have been medicalised and marginalised in modern accounts (Gotman 2018).

On a subtler level, the scholarly tendency to dichotomise Christian thought, into those who were either wholly opposed to dance or those who championed dance as a vehicle of liberation, is equally problematic.<sup>3</sup> I argue that this dichotomization emerges from a historically supersessionist framing. According to Willie James Jennings and J. Kameron Carter, early forms of supersessionism worked in two distinct ways. On the one hand, authors wrote texts that erased the Jewish roots of Christianity, substituting the biblical story of the Jews as a chosen people living in a special relationship with God with the Christian communities as the elect. This erasure includes understanding the Church as the new community of lovers of God who replace Israel (Jennings 2010, 32, 140, 167–168, 251, 265; Carter 2008, 6–9). On the other hand, Christians started to elaborate a logic that positioned Christian identity outside the identities of Jews. From such a space grew the idea that the establishment of the Church was capable of evaluating all peoples in all places (Jennings 2010, 36). Supersessionist logic was thus developed before most of Europe had even become Christian. Supersessionism is further a concept that may bring forth racial logics functioning in historic dance descriptions from Late Antiquity. Particularly given that Philo's *The Contemplative Life* was written by a Jewish author who would become highly valued in Christian

3 In the newly published anthology *Dance as a Third Space* (2022), dancing is placed on the continuum of either coming from the devil or offering paths to ecstatic freedom and healing (Walz 2022, 29–32). Recent scholarship on dance and medieval church practices has nuanced this claim (Dickason 2021; Hellsten 2021b).

4 My emphasis is on plural traditions and Christianities; one of the problematic claims this article addresses is that there is one monolithic and concise Jewish or Christian tradition.

traditions, there is need to follow the reception of his writings with special attention to supersessionist tendencies of interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

Supersessionist logic, which can come in both secular or religious forms, also argues that the world can be split into dualistic pairs, like reason/faith, fluid/rational, immanent/transcendent, worldly/other-worldly. In its most secular format supersessionism tends to expose enchantment and break down the relationship between norms and practices, imagining that humans can become freed from tradition or see through the veils of oppression. Thus, they are also able to ‘reveal’ all the past transgressions from their now ‘liberated’ standpoint of critical inquiry (Lloyd 2011). In contrast, in the religious format, supersessionist thinkers want to enchant the world, either by longing for a past that is no more, or suggesting that a new utopian paradigm can overturn the current world and show us a better system. Such a supersessionism would treat history as a source for drawing inspiration for a better future. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2017) explains that previous historical writing has been dominated by a fascination with the ‘grand narratives’ of the Western tradition. Depending on the standpoint of the author, specific movements or people have been portrayed as ‘villains’ and others as ‘heroes’ of historical developments. In this way, the specific material context of a text or circumstances of a particular period are swept up in affect to such a degree that we get a distorted view of the world.

To counter supersessionist logics of reality, Vincent Lloyd proposes scholarly writing that turns towards the ordinary, the lived, and describes the practices of people. He calls this method a ‘thick’ description of tradition—a kind of writing that cannot claim it has reached ‘the truth’ or a final certainty about how things are or were. Instead, he says: ‘cutting through the obvious to the ordinary, new, unexpected’ enables fresh options to appear (Lloyd 2011, 215). Furthermore, he specifies that all sound theological descriptions should build on social criticism that supports the oppressed in both the past and the present (Lloyd 2018, 5–9). Rather than letting the historical imagination play the hero, turning to practices may unsettle norms and assumptions from previous scholarship. It is due to this theoretical background that I have turned towards Lived Theology as a method with which scholars of dance and theology may find new ways to make meaning from the practices they encounter.



## The methodological approach of Lived Theology

In contrast to the secular social imaginary that centres on texts and cognitive reason, studies of vernacular theology and lived religion focus on bringing forth the experiences of everyday religion and writings of marginalised groups. This method often includes examining narrative structures, local practices, and oral history, along with artworks and immaterial aspects of religion (Corbari 2013; Knibbe and Kupari 2020; Illman and Czimbalmos 2020). Within Lived Theology, which Charles Marsh considers a form of liberation theology, particular emphasis is placed on examining religious practices in their social and historical contexts. In this tradition, not only is praxis the start and end point of theological reflection, but divinity is seen to be present particularly in the experiences of the poor and marginalised voices (Prosén 2020).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in Lived Theology, practice is understood as inherently communicative—both at the communal and individual levels. There is a focus on keeping a narrative space open so that the social consequences of theological ideas can be understood and criticised when necessary (Marsh 2017, 6–8).

Emphasising text over practice also misconstrues theology historically. Contrary to the modern focus on textual authorities, teachings of the early church, as well as many medieval authors, suggest the primacy of the body (Brown 1988). The Benedictine rule is one example of how the Church taught that bodily acts of worship are not only effective, but that engagement in these acts shapes possibilities of belief and understanding (Coakley 2015, 112–121). Furthermore, specific strands of liturgical theology understand the historical development of dogmatic standpoints within various Christian communities, as well as the living faith of communities today, to be rooted in a pattern where worship and praxis precedes and forms intellectual confessions of faith (Schmemmann 1966; O'Lounglin 2021).<sup>6</sup> This method does not, however, suggest that historical research on dance cannot focus on texts when they are the primary available documentation. Rather, I highlight *how* these documents can be productively read and what conclusions can be made from such readings. In order to exemplify how the methods of Lived Theology may be used for the re-reading of texts with dance descriptions, it is now time to turn to the writings of Philo of Alexandria.

## On the contemplative life

Philo was born in the first century into an aristocratic Jewish family in Alexandria, Egypt. He received classical Greek schooling and became well-versed in the writings of Plato through the works of Antiochus of

5 Liberation theology is an approach to Christian theology that emphasises the political and economic liberation of the oppressed. In certain strands, it also addresses other forms of inequality such as race or caste.

6 For more details on the shift from theology as a set of practices, ritual, and rhythms of social interaction into mainly dogmatic concepts and cognitive argumentation about ideas, concepts, and beliefs, see Harrison (2001; 2017). For similar arguments in the Late Antique society, see Barton and Boyarin (2016).

- 7 For a more detailed discussion on the mysticism found in Philo, see Sterling (2018, 156).
- 8 In line with Forger, I do not use the term *Christian* as it was not in use in the period. Likewise, I avoid using the even more problematical description of what has come to be known as the religion of 'Judaism.' The term *Jewish* is preferred (Forger 2018).
- 9 Theologically speaking, God can broadly be approached in two ways: cataphatically and apophatically. Cataphatic theology deals with what can be said of God; it speaks in positive language of what we can know of God. The apophatic tradition approaches God 'negatively,' stripping away what is finite.
- 10 For more on the connections to Platonism, see Lossky (1976) and the connection between divine darkness and racism, see Coakley (2022).
- 11 For arguments against such a view, see Taylor (2017).
- 12 For arguments against the latter, see Hellsten (2016, 2021a) and McGowan (2014).

Ascalon (c. 140 BCE–60 BCE). According to John Dillon, having had this kind of schooling meant that the Platonism he was acquainted with contained large-scale Stoic formulations (Dillon 2009; Forger 2018). Philo was an exceptional and creative philosopher; he interpreted the Platonic teachings he had received through the lens of the stories from the Hebrew Bible (Harrison 1998). In his overarching oeuvre, Philo suggests that his Jewish forefather Moses was as important a teacher as Socrates or Plato, if not the most accomplished philosopher of all time (Gavrilyuk 2019). Philo describes how Moses attained the *raison d'être* of a philosopher: contemplation of the divine—becoming one with God (Dillon and Timotin 2015).<sup>7</sup> Philo, in his *On the Contemplative Life*, compares different formats for symposia with the learning that occurred in his Jewish community. Along with his writings, Philo's particular methods of engagement with texts and the dialogue created with Hellenic philosophical traditions would greatly influence how later followers of the Jesus movement would build their theological traditions (Gavrilyuk 2019).<sup>8</sup>

In *On the Contemplative Life*, Philo introduces two Jewish communities: the Esseans and the Therapeutae. The Esseans represent the *via activa*, while the Therapeutae, supposedly living on the outskirts of Alexandria, were an ideal community for the *via contemplativa* (Gavrilyuk 2019). The Therapeutae are described as an 'egalitarian' community; there were no enslaved individuals, everyone ate vegetarian food and dressed in white, and the community worship was intoxicating without the use of alcoholic beverages (Taylor 2017). Just as Moses had once experienced, inspiration of the Spirit took this community into 'enlightenment'—the illuminating light of divine darkness (Hadas-Lebel 2012). The concept of divine darkness has its roots in the apophatic traditions where the only way one can get to know God is through a process of unknowing.<sup>9</sup> The fifth-century Christian theologian Dionysius the Areopagite, borrowing from Neoplatonic authors, coined this term when he described his meeting with God 'in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence' (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 135).<sup>10</sup>

In more recent dance scholarship, *On the Contemplative Life* has become known for its depictions of dancing (Tronca 2019; Arcangeli 2000). Donatella Tronca describes the ecstatic dances practised at the feast of Pentecost as paths to perfect one's awareness (Tronca 2019, 441–442). Many contemporary theologians regard the Therapeutae community as ahistorical.<sup>11</sup> They have argued that the dancing depicted by Philo was a mere methodological tool to describe mental states, understood to be part of the soul's journey of leaving the body in its ascension towards God (Fergusson 2017; Forger 2018).<sup>12</sup> However, there is much more to be discovered here.



Importantly, at the beginning of the text, Philo sets up a philosophical argument and proceeds to explain how true philosophy is practised (Philo 1941, 125–131). According to Paul Gavriluk, Philo couples the importance of an ascetic life of withdrawal, as found in Plato, with a daily routine of continuous prayer from the Jewish tradition. The model described by Philo—solitude, regular prayers, composing hymns, and reading and interpreting scriptures—becomes the structure of later Christian monastic life (Gavriluk 2019). Here, one notes a strong continuity between Jewish and early Christian communities that negates the often-held assumption that Jewish ways of worship were problematic for Christians (Arcangeli 1994; Davies 1984; Hakola, Nikki, and Tervahauta 2013; Lepeigneux 2022; Quasten 1930).<sup>13</sup> Even though strong antisemitic rhetoric did emerge in Christian communities, the most recent works on Late Antiquity argue that the period during which ‘Jews’ and ‘Christians’ seem to be largely indistinguishable and overlapping groups is longer than has earlier been presumed (Boyarin 2010; Lieu 2003; Lieu 2015). Creating distinctions that did not actually exist during the eras in question distorts the depictions of the time.

Most importantly, though, Philo’s writings cannot be understood accurately when approached from a modern perspective that prioritises theoretical discourse and rational arguments over practice. Forger, building on Pierre Hadot (2002), states that ancient Greek philosophy must be understood as teaching *for* a way of being and becoming. In congruence with the Lived Theology paradigm, philosophy can be used to cultivate specific bodily practices as a way of life. In Forger’s reading of Philo, the ascetic side of these practices is emphasised (Forger 2018). I argue that, within Philo’s writings, worship is portrayed as a similarly crucial theological praxis of becoming.<sup>14</sup>

## Worship as a theological praxis

I focus on two different kinds of praxis here: the praxis of reading texts and the praxis of dancing. Notably, in the Early Church, theologians would have considered both of these forms of praxis as forms of worship or prayer (Hellsten 2021a). Reading biblical texts was perceived as a form of dialogue and a path to communion with God (Coakley 2015). Most importantly, contemplation accommodated very sensual aspects (Gavriluk and Coakley 2012). Similarly, in a later, medieval setting, engaging in worshipful movements and the singing of Psalms were also considered paths of communion with God (Heiding 2022). Texts, just like movements, could be further used for educational purposes (Schmemmann 1966, 107–108, 118–119, 126–130).

13 Tronca has worked towards modifying such a view (2016; 2017).

14 For a similar dialogue around the importance of prayer for Greek philosophy, see (Dillon and Timotin 2015).



Carol Harrison, in *The Art of Listening in the Early Church* (2013), explains that theological traditions convey these teachings:

We must treat words as revelatory or as sacramental; as communicating something of divine truth in embodied form. In this way the object or words cease to be merely a fixed or static thing but become something living, they embody the reality that lies both within and beyond them, and demand a response. (Harrison 2013, 21)

Due to such teachings—of the relational and sacred quality of the praxis of reading texts or, more accurately, of hearing words—early Christian interpretations of biblical texts rarely remained on a literal level of understanding. Instead, preachers, teachers, and exegetes attempted to reach new depths of comprehension and open up new mysteries of being through various reading techniques. These included, but were not limited to, different kinds of allegory: figurative, narrative, typological and spiritual, historical reading, moral understanding, and the use of symbols and metaphors in various ways, for example, analogically (Gavrilyuk and Coakley 2012, 22–26, 34–35, 73–74, 95–98).

The wish to create a two-way communication in and with texts was a skill from Philo that influenced early Jesus communities (Gavrilyuk 2019; Goldenberg 2005). In the introduction to *On the Contemplative Life*, Philo explains how the Therapeutae community had a daily exercise of meditating on the sacred scriptures and practising virtues. To philosophise on the text was to investigate the allegories and symbols found in the readings. This was done individually as well as when the community gathered on the Sabbath. Philo further explains that, to understand the secret meanings found in the texts, the community used older allegorical interpretations as their models. However, this is not the only way they received truths from the divine. There was also the practice of contemplation (Philo 1941, 129–133, 159–163).

Sarah Coakley explains that, while meditation is designed for discursive reflections on Scripture, contemplation is a more vulnerable activity of ‘space-making’—wordless prayer before the divine. Simultaneously, contemplative practices are not limited to stillness and silence. They may also include practices of responding to the divine through rituals and symbols by which a person can be transformed over time to experience the world in new ways (Coakley 2002, 34–35). Such dual processes are also found in Philo’s depictions.

Philo makes singing, composing music, and participation in rhythmic practices of worship central to his depictions of the gatherings of true contemplatives. In one way, worship is set apart from the practice of contemplation (Philo 1941, 129–131). In another way, a contemplative life *par excellence* seamlessly weaves together seeing God in nature,



practising a virtuous life, worshipping God as a response to his goodness, exploring the scriptures for deeper teachings, and being formed into friendship with God (Philo 1941, 169). I argue that worship practices laid a foundation for all of these processes of spiritual, emotional, and intellectual development.

In the widely-circulating critical edition of *De Vita Mosis* published in 1935 (Loeb Classical Library 289), Philo is understood to explain that just before Moses received the gift of prophecy or, in other words, became ‘possessed’ by the divine Spirit (Philo 1935, 579), the following had occurred:

He divides the nation into two choirs, one of men, the other of women, and himself leads the men while he appoints his sister to lead the women, that the two in concert might sing hymns to the Father and Creator in tuneful response, with a blending both of temperaments and melody—temperaments eager to render to each other like for like; melody produced by the concord of treble and bass; for the voices of men are bass and the women’s treble, and when they are blended in due proportion the resulting melody is of the fullest and sweetest harmony. All these myriads were persuaded by Moses to sing with hearts in accord the same, telling of those mighty and marvellous works (...) And the prophet, rejoicing at this, seeing the people also overjoyed, and himself no longer able to contain his delight, led off the song, and his hearers massed in two choirs sang with him the story of these same deeds. (Philo 1935, 577–79)

Even though F.H. Colson, the translator of this section, omits dancing, in the Torah Miriam not only led the women in singing but also in dance.<sup>15</sup> The Greek word used for two choirs (δύο χοροῦς) can also mean two groups of dancers.<sup>16</sup> According to Maren Niehoff (2020), pantomime—a silent dance performance, including music and movement but no spoken dialogue—was used by both rabbinic teachers and the Church Father Origen in texts where they wanted to bring forth how important embodied actions are for teaching people a virtuous life. This suggests that when earlier theological traditions have translated *choros* only to mean choirs or musical worship—omitting the possibility for dance in the context of Philo’s writing—this is a limited choice.

Furthermore, the language of prophetic rejoicing (προφήτης γεγηθώς) may itself have carried undertones of dance-like exulting gestures. These gestures are often understood as emanating from an overflow of the ‘Spirit’ (Tronca 2016). However, while some scholars willingly associate ‘possession by the divine’ with theurgic dance practices (Rohmann 2009; Talabardon 2022; Redondo 2015), Philo explicitly states in the introduction that even though the Therapeutae may have ‘cured’ bodies as well as

15 See also Moses I for a clearer paraphrase of Exodus 15:20. The translator uses ‘choir’ for χοροῦς there also (Philo 1935, 368–369). For Miriam as a prophet, see Portier-Young (2022).

16 In Greek and Roman Antiquity, choral-song dances and the term ‘music’ were characterised by a union of words, music, and dance (Gianvittorio-Ungar and Schlapbach 2021, 7); see also Isar (2011).

souls, their primary focus was on worship/ministry (θεραπεύειν) (Philo 1941, 115).<sup>17</sup> In other sections of *De Vita Mosis*, Philo makes it clear that worship is the accurate response to God's actions of goodness in the world (Philo 1935, 409).

In *On the Contemplative Life*, Philo provides more explicit descriptions of how worship is conducted in specific meetings. He writes:

Then the President [leader of the community] rises and sings a hymn composed as an address to God, either a new one of his own composition or an old one by poets of an earlier day who have left behind them hymns in many measures and melodies, hexameters and iambs, lyrics suitable for processions or in libations and at the altars, or for the chorus whilst standing or dancing, with careful metrical arrangements to fit the various evolutions. After him all the others take their turn as they are arranged and in the proper order while all the rest listen in complete silence except when they have to chant the closing lines or refrains, for then they all lift up their voices, men and women alike. (Philo 1941, 163)

In this section, it is clear that the gathered congregation's worshipful response included graceful dancing, 'or for the chorus whilst standing or dancing, with careful metrical arrangements to fit the various evolutions' ('στασίμων χορικῶν στροφαῖς πολυστρόφοις εὖ διαμεμετρημένων' (Philo 1941, 162). Here, the term used in Greek for chorus (χορικῶν) has not changed from the earlier section.<sup>18</sup> The word στασίμων added to chorus means 'in stillness' or 'a song performed without movement,' which indicates that the author knows that his contemporary readers would have associated the use of chorus (χορικῶν) with both dance and song. The author then continues with στροφαῖς, which means 'to twist or turn,' bringing back movement into the description and additionally speaks about πολυστρόφοις εὖ διαμεμετρημένων, which are carefully made turns.<sup>19</sup>

This language leaves the translator, Colson, in a situation where a comment on movements, not just song, needs to be added to the text. A more detailed description of the choreography follows, to which I will return momentarily (Philo 1941, 165), there is little room left for interpretative formulations other than that some parts of the congregation responded, not only with singing, but also with choreographed dance movements. In my view, this language shows that dancing might be an accurate option—maybe even preferred—for translating terms such as chorus or choir in several other passages of Philo. Furthermore, the kinds of songs specified show that processions, different tempos, and varying forms of movements were likely used on diverse occasions. The worship leader seems to have had the creative freedom to call for the appropriate response to each type of teaching and situation. Sometimes this would

17 For a discussion, see Taylor (2017, 206–207).

18 Taylor and Hay have recently argued that χορικῶν comes from an Armenian manuscript commentary, meaning 'choral dancing' (Taylor and Hay 2020, 333).

19 For help in analysing these passages I want to thank Joonas Vanhala.



have included stillness, yet more often the songs and movements would have flowed alongside each other in different tempos.

As this praxis of song and dance became a reoccurring event in the Therapeutae community, scholars should perhaps understand it as a liturgical enactment of worship. It is simultaneously a response to God's deeds, possibly used as preparation for hearing from God, and a charismatic prayer, in which—in its original form—the presence of 'Shekina' is strongly felt in the flesh and bones of Moses.<sup>20</sup> This reading would place worship movements within the realm of a contemplative activity in Philo's writing. With Moses' life as an ideal template for contemplation, one could further argue that, as he continuously led his people to respond in this manner to God, worshipful dance and song constituted the foundation on which a community of contemplatives was built. However, if this interpretation were to stop at a statement that merely suggests that Philo was favourable towards dance practices and saw dancing as part of the contemplative life of the Therapeutae, there would be risk of supersessionism. If the argument instead moves towards understanding what kinds of exegetical meaning can be made from these practices, I suggest, it can provide greater nuance.

20 שכינה (shekina) is the Hebrew term for the dwelling of the presence of God in a place. The word is encountered in the rabbinic literature yet is commonly understood as the divine presence that was found in the Temple in Jerusalem as well as in the cloud on Mount Sinai.

## Dance as an exegetical practise

To my knowledge, Philo's deep attention to dancing has gone unnoticed in existing scholarship. Philo refers to dance in several different ways. In the following I will turn to his use of dance as an exegetical practice. In the first part of *On the Contemplative Life*, he depicts the gatherings of non-Jewish communities (Philo 1941, 137–167). The first symposium is associated with luxuries of Italy, which have corrupted Greeks and non-Greeks alike. The corruption includes the participants being served by enslaved individuals and sitting on comfortable cushions. They eat food gluttonously and, when still unsatisfied, turn to getting drunk. This feast offers some form of entertainment, but nothing substantial is said about it. Earlier in the text, Philo has noted that feasts are sometimes combined with gymnastic games. However, it remains unclear if that would be the entertainment of the first kind of symposium. He states that the participants may be called athletes and thus know how to form their bodies. Unfortunately, once they consume alcohol, they turn into beasts (Philo 1941, 140–147, 137–139). He similarly criticises idol worship in Egyptian communities (Philo 1941, 115–119). It seems that he used these different groups of people to show how proper virtues have not been formed in these communities.

Gay Byron argues that Philo adopted the Greco-Roman tendency to display negative attitudes toward Egyptians in his writings. She particularly highlights that his system of allegorisation promoted a view of Blackness as being associated with sin and ‘evil’ (Byron 2002, 35, 59). David M. Goldenberg, however, argues that western scholars have read Philo through a social imaginary that cannot think about associations between Blackness and sin without also adding a history of slavery. Simultaneously, Philo seems to have a tendency to refer to the culture and practices of different ‘nations’/‘tribes’ (*ethnos*) or ‘kinds’/‘lineage’ (*genos*) of people. While Philo’s framing of social categories is not the same as modern (epidermally-based) concepts of race, it does ‘demarcate human beings through differences’ (Heng 2018, 19). Sometimes, as exemplified above, people from the region of Egypt were associated with negatively charged behaviour in Philo’s writings, and at other times he states that virtuous people abound in Egypt.<sup>21</sup> How are we to understand these descriptions in relation to the organization of people in structural hierarchies? And was there a relationship between specific kinds of dancing and the formation of certain virtues present in Philo’s text?

Goldenberg gives a comprehensive overview of the passages of the Hebrew Bible and early Jewish and Christian writings that address Black people, Ethiopians, and Egyptians.<sup>22</sup> Contrary to recent scholarship, he interprets the dominant image of the Black African as a militarily powerful, tall and good-looking person placed in or descending from the remote region of Kush. He goes so far as to declare that there is no clear anti-Black sentiment found in early biblical scholarship (Goldenberg 2005, 195–200).<sup>23</sup> Goldenberg further shows that, to biblical Israel, the Kushites were known as inhabitants of the southern-most reach of the earth. Even though encounters with people from these remote areas south of Egypt (also known as Ethiopia and Nubia) were not an everyday event, they were not exclusively limited to stories and legends (Goldenberg 2005, 17–25).<sup>24</sup>

According to Antti Lappalainen, such stories and legends should be distinguished from texts in which the author actually aims at describing specific lands and places with the intention of creating so called ethnographic accounts of the world. In the case of the later Byzantine empire and the interactions within the spheres of the Orthodox church, authors situated not only in Egypt, like Philo, but also in Jerusalem or Constantinople, would have had frequent interactions with Black Christians from the Aksum empire (Lappalainen 2023; Selden 2013). Thus, some textual references can be read as actual accounts of the ideas of people in a particular time and place (Seppälä 2022). In other texts—often with reference to stories found already in Antiquity—ethnic names are used as ‘markers’ of a whole set of associations and the readers understood

21 ‘This kind exists in many places in the inhabited world, for 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 round Alexandria’ (Philo 1941, 125).

22 Goldenberg seems more precise in limiting his study to canonical texts, while many of the worst examples of pejorative writing found in Byron’s readings arise from apocryphal texts.

23 This viewpoint is at least partly contest by for example Byron (2009, 173), with references to Benjamin Isaac’s work (2004). Also here, I seek a path between what I see as two extremes.

24 See the story of Moses’ Kushite wife in Numbers 12.



a subtext of connotations that are mostly lost to us today. This is for example the case with ‘Scythians’ as the freedom-seeking, opportunistic, nomadic warriors of the North and their ‘opposites’ described already in the Homeric epos as the sinless and elect people from ‘Aithiopes’ (Lappalainen 2023; Selden 2013). Some re-constructions like these can be created, but as Serfim Seppälä writes, many of the puns or teachings of older texts will not have a clear interpretative pattern available to modern readers.<sup>25</sup> The question is then, when Philo played with stereotypes in his writing was he inhabiting a racialising social imaginary? Meaning, did these demarcations of cultural differences play into an actual view of reality and was that reality organised in hierarchical and fundamental constructs? Bringing this back to the examples from *On the Contemplative Life*, should we read Philo’s condemning statements towards idol worship in his native country, as him stating that the movements done by Egyptians rendered them an inferior race? Or, could it be that when Philo inserts the terms ‘idol worship’ and ‘Egypt,’ he is actually referencing the passage in the book of Moses where the Israelites were dancing around the golden calf (Exodus 32)? Even though Philo clearly does make connections between the bodily habits of people and their moral character, there is no clear sign that such habituation is to be understood to stem from an overarching pattern where a whole nation or ethnic group is inferior to another.

Goldenberg affirms that, regarding the allegorical interpretations people forge from biblical texts, different systems of thought may come into play. In the Greco-Roman world, ethnocentrism did exist, and geographical parameters determined it. Those who lived in the centre of the ‘known’ world were considered civilised, while people became increasingly barbaric and ‘primitive’ the further away from the region they resided. At the ‘ends of the world,’ we find so-called monstrous people—living as beasts (Goldenberg 2005, 67).<sup>26</sup> This kind of thinking influenced how specific authors interpreted biblical stories. The more tightly knit the Jewish, and later Christian, authors emerged within the strong cultures of empire, the more dominating the ethnocentrism in the allegorical interpretations seemed to become (Goldenberg 2005, 150–156, 166–167; Goldenberg 2017).<sup>27</sup> Simultaneously, such a ‘centre place’ was not an all-encompassing Christian idea; instead the descriptions of who the barbaric people were depended on where the account was written, and at times the ‘ends of the world’ included other Christian communities, not only the barbaric or monstrous ones (Lappalainen 2023).

More importantly, for this article, the more ‘gnostic’ the interpretative framework of the authors, the stronger their emphasis on the split into spiritual, psychic, and material kinds of humans. Sometimes such interpretations were combined with ethnic ‘markers.’ Particularly in the

25 I want to acknowledge Topias Tanskanen for pointing out this article (Seppälä 2022) to me.

26 The chief example of this is Pliny, where Ethiopia is in the outermost district of the world.

27 Another prime example of where we can see the ‘logic of empire’ at work is in the writing of Aristotle, where he argues for non-Greek subjects to be regarded as ‘natural slaves’ based on a combination of environmental factors and physiognomy (Leunissen 2017).



later Christian interpretations, a strict duality is upheld between the ‘spiritual’ and ‘material’ worlds (Carter 2008, 11–38, 229–254, 343–370). Goldenberg states that a specific kind of allegorical argumentation, which emphasised the relationship between ‘blackness’ and ‘sin,’ as portrayed by Philo, was picked up by the Christian Church Father, Origen. Origen made typological distinctions between the ‘gentile’ church of the Kushites, who were Black and did not know God, and the ‘daughters of Jerusalem,’ who were the Jewish community that knew God. Once the Kushites came to Christ, their Blackness diminished, and they became fair skinned. Such a reading then travelled from Origen to numerous other early church authors (Goldenberg 2005, 48–50; Goldenburg 2017).

Kameron Carter shows that the authors of the early church had, a wide variety of responses to the biblical passages and proposed numerous ways these should be read in relation to the cultures and customs of the surrounding communities. His emphasis lies on the fact that for some—in accordance with supersessionist logic—the Jewish body of Jesus was ‘traded’ for a more spiritual sort of Christ.<sup>28</sup> In the case of Maximus the Confessor, for example, his writings directly address a crowd of Origenist monks and argue that the Jewish flesh of Jesus—and human bodies as an extension of this structure—function as the ‘bridge’ between the intelligible and the sensible spheres. Humans may be transformed not by turning away from matter but by becoming more deeply connected with matter (Carter 2008, 258–262). These examples show that there are several different approaches to the traditions surrounding a community and that within a specific community, there can be many different approaches to the interpretative framework offered from one generation to another.

Goldenberg argues that later Christian interpretations should be kept distinct from Philo’s own arguments, while I argue that what makes Philo’s arguments interesting is that they are centred around the Israel–Egypt axis, de-centring—at least to some degree—the Greco-Roman world.<sup>29</sup> In this I agree that we should not place Philo into a direct line with the later Christian traditions. Instead, I employ dance to focus on how Philo actually spoke about bodies and spiritual formation.

Compared to the Italian-style banquet, Philo had more gracious things to say about the older Greek Symposia, as they show how philosophers conducted themselves in a convivial manner. At the banquets of Plato, the focus lies on philosophy rather than feasting. However, the discussions of love centred around homoerotic encounters, which were not pleasing to Philo. Philo was instead invested in love images that drew men and women together. This is because, in such a ‘mystical’ union, the fusion of ‘male’ and ‘female’ attributes in the soul made room for fruitful contemplation. The intellect and the senses—represented by Adam and Eve—needed each other. The soul, which was non-gendered according to Philo, cannot

28 Such mechanisms are much later used in the rhetoric of the racialisation of Black bodies (Carter 2008, 11–38, 229–54, 343–70).

29 A similar case can actually be made for Origen, but that is beyond the scope of this article (den Dulk 2020; Seppälä 2022).



mature without the ‘male’ attributes of virtue and self-control. Neither could it grow towards God without the ‘female’ attribute of virginity, which is to be receptive to how God re-directs human perception and desires. While the Platonic philosophers believed that eros and the love of beautiful things and bodies could move people towards ultimate beauty, Philo, and later Christian authors, argued that prior renunciation of sexual activities was crucial for such transformation (Harrison 1998, 527–529).

The Greek banquet that Philo preferred was that of Xenophon. In this story, a dialogue is created around a group of artists (a flute player, two dancers, and their Syracusan ‘director’). Philo’s appraisal is not just that the banquet exhibits themes that he calls ‘natural pleasures.’ The ‘vulgar, promiscuous love’ named in Plato’s *Symposium* drained courage from the men watching it (Philo 1941, 147–151). He contrasts this vulgarity with Xenophon’s feast in which courage is displayed. When interpreting this passage based on the notion that philosophy is not just what is said, but what is done and how, dancing appears as a method of philosophising. What is missing in Plato and found in Xenophon is the connection between words and actions. In Plato, the dancers are sent away; instead, humorous tales and the folly of mythical stories are shared. This is not pleasing to Philo. With Xenophon, a series of performances and dialogues are displayed instead (Bocksberger 2021).

Xenophon’s *Symposium* is an ancient description of narrative dance (Gianvittorio-Ungar and Schlapbach 2021).<sup>30</sup> In addition to showing many different kinds of dancing, in his description, Socrates enters into a dialogue about what we can learn from the gestures and actions displayed by the performers. Sophie Bocksberger explains that, through the different schema of what bodies may express, both the *ethos* (character) of the soul and the *pathos*—the ‘emotion’—of a person, can be made available to those observing this performance (Bocksberger 2021, 59–63). The required acrobatic movements of the first group of dancers, involving loop catching and jumping around swords do not only portray courage, they *are* courageous. In the last dance, the performers interpret the love story between Ariadne and Dionysus. Their mimetic dance not only gives life to passionate love between man and woman; it draws the audience into a spectacular embrace (Bocksberger 2021, 74–75). According to the social imaginary of this time, the people watching such gestures would not have been primarily ‘entertained’ by these performances. Instead, participation in these symposia would have infused them with the same characteristics that the performers embodied while acting in the play (Webb 2008; Niehoff 2020).

Contrary to these events, Philo explains that the *Symposium* of Plato rendered the men effeminate and in the long run brought destruction, even to the state in which they lived. Harrison associates Philo’s remark on the

30 Succinctly defined by Gianvittorio-Ungar and Schlapbach as ‘In (...) narrative dance, performer and character coincide, just as they do in a tragedy or a comedy, or when a rhapsodic performer recites the direct speeches of an epos or a lyric poet or performer sings in the first person.’ (2021, 10).



- 31 Yong translates this as ‘men-women’ (Philo 1993, 924).

lack of courage in the ‘men-woman’ with his disdain towards homosexual behaviour (Harrison 1998).<sup>31</sup> However, I suggest that the account more importantly illustrates the interplay between character formation and the exegetical interpretation of the texts presented by the dancers. Both the displays of courage performed by women in Xenophon’s *Symposium* and the longing and desire depicted by the dancers in the final act form specific kinds of virtues for members of the audience. Philosophy is not only discussed: it is experienced in flesh and blood. This reading suggests that, according to Xenophon, the maturation of a fully formed human requires not only the star gazing of a disembodied mind but also the union of sensory experiences with rational or symbolic explanations. According to Sterling, entrance into the Platonic realms of reality is accompanied by some degree of dancing (Sterling 2018).

For Philo, dancing functioned as a process of doing philosophy that was simultaneously exegetical, interpretative, educational, and formative of virtue. Dancing was not only a prayerful devotion or communication with God in its aspect of worship; Philo understood how different kinds of dancing could exemplify the embodiment of diverse forms of spirituality.

## Dancing with the Therapeutae

- 32 Taylor calls the whole treatise *bioi* or exemplary text (2017, 212–214).
- 33 This is a complicated passage to understand. Other scholars have suggested that the seven sets of seven refer to the year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25:1–12 (Purhonen 2019, 43).
- 34 More examples of this in Oesterley (2002 [1923]). This is critiqued in Hellsten (2017).
- 35 Eusebius is also one of the early Christian authors who blamed the Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus.

Philo explains his ideal banquet in accordance with the sacred instructions of Moses.<sup>32</sup> Contrary to Tronca (2016)’s claim, this celebration has nothing to do with Pentecost. The feast is outside the usual Shabbat gatherings but follows a similar pattern. Philo states that this particular celebration was held after seven sets of seven weeks (Philo 1941, 151).<sup>33</sup> According to some Christian traditions, the feast of Pentecost was modelled after the Jewish holiday of the ‘commemoration of the Decalogue given on Sinai’ (Schmemmann 1966, 69). That feast was celebrated as a fulfilment of the Exodus story, about fifty days after Pesach. However, the readings of that feast do not centre around the passing of the people of Israel across the Red Sea. Thus, either Tronca errs, or the sources used are problematic. It may seem futile to discuss the feast’s name in such detail when the text is so unclear.

My concern is the latent supersessionist tendency found in Western writing that substitutes Jewish tradition with Christian terminology. Often this habit takes the form of erasure of the unique character of Jewish practices by neglecting them for a more ‘advanced’ formula arriving with Christianity.<sup>34</sup> Philo has been a special ‘target’ for these kinds of tendencies. Already the historian Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–339) made Philo known to medieval communities as a ‘Christian’ theologian.<sup>35</sup> In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius suggests that the practice of voluntary



poverty taken up by ascetics in Egypt was modelled according to the example set by the Apostles of the Early Church. He takes for granted that the wisdom of allegorical interpretation of scripture in the Therapeutae community was that of the New Testament texts. Finally, Eusebius understood the celebration described as a Eucharistic rite instead of a Passover ritual (Eusebius 1926, 145–57).

I suspect that it is precisely the supersessionist logic of substituting the dance practices of a Jewish community of contemplatives with the idea of a monastic eucharistic ritual that has prevented earlier research from seeing how dancing plays an exegetical role in this story. The danced celebration of the passing of Moses and Miriam over the Red Sea has been taken over by the idea of a celebration of Christian Pentecost, further leading to a tradition of interpretation of Philo that assumes that all his writing on dance should be understood as merely metaphorical statements or conceptual types (Fergusson 2017). The writings of Philo have been dislocated from his Jewish roots, and with that, the Western tradition has lost the ability to understand the dancing portrayed in the text.

I discussed some of the specifics of the meetings of the Therapeutae above. Compared to the previous two banquets, their gatherings centre on careful examinations of texts and stories rather than on clever rhetoric. People sit in stillness and listen attentively so that whatever is spoken by the elders passes through the ear and into the soul. They do not just hear correct teaching; they enter into a relationship with what is heard, practice appropriate virtues, and re-emerge as different people (Philo 1941, 131–133). Listening is followed by embodied actions. Take, as an example, the story about King David that states that he dressed only in his linen cloth (*ephod*) and he danced ecstatically in a procession in front of the Holy of the Holies—the Ark of the Covenant. In doing this, the story states that his wife, Michal, became upset that he had shown himself almost naked before all the people (2 Samuel 6:12–22). Rather than simply being a story that approves of more exalted forms of dance movements, reading it in a more embodied way could instead prompt an inner dialogue. Listening to this story and embodying the different characters in the text would lead me as the reader to ask which parts of me felt ashamed when moving in exaggerated ways (the voice of Michal) and which parts of me would need to be more at ease with being a fool for Christ? Such a reading could even be given to the practice of dancing in an exalted way and then doing an examen of myself regarding what that practice did to me; what kind of feelings and sensations arose?<sup>36</sup> In the Jewish tradition, dancing yearly with the Torah rolls is an actual practice. In the Christian traditions, we can find examples like the writings on prayer of St. Dominic of the twelfth century, where he prescribes a set of bodily actions to be used for deepening our prayer-life. Among them can be found making gestures and

36 ‘Examen’ is a term that will be used in the Late Medieval/early modern spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) for examining our hearts by entering into a dialogue with biblical texts (Heiding 2022).

acting out the prayer that arise when reading specific biblical passages (Heiding 2022). These are the kinds of contemplative and spiritual practices that may arise from reading Philo's descriptions of how to do exegesis in a manner freed from supersessionist logic.

To end, I want to turn to my current re-reading of Philo. When Philo wrote that the contemplatives at the feast of the Therapeutae stand in two lines, create harmonious songs, and choreograph dances to symbolise the passing of the people of Israel across the Red Sea, their actions mimetically open to the indwelling of the spirit experienced by prophets and prophetesses. Philo explains:

Then they sing hymns to God composed of many measures and set to many melodies, sometimes chanting together, sometimes taking up the harmony antiphonally, hands and feet keeping time in accompaniment, and rapt with enthusiasm reproduce sometimes the lyrics of the procession, sometimes of the halt and of the wheeling and counter-wheeling of a choric dance. Then when each choir has separately done its own part in the feast, having drunk as in the Bacchic rites of the strong wine of God's love they mix and both together become a single choir, a copy of the choir set up of old beside the Red Sea in honour of the wonders there wrought. (Philo 1941, 165)

By reenacting the dances of Moses and Miriam, the community takes on the character of their ancestral leaders. In my first reading of this section, I called this passage a worshipful response to God's goodness and a description of a preparation for contemplation. I also hinted at worship as contemplation. I now wish to add more depth to that reading. As I discussed in the examples from Xenophon, reenacting the movements of mythical stories as an exegetical praxis also creates a certain character within the people. Philo simultaneously invites the community to contemplate what it means to be caught up in the wild waters of the sea—if one does not leave a sinful life behind—as he opens up something else. He states that the ecstatic dancing enacted after one has been saved from the enemy is a pure response to God's salvation. Furthermore, Philo shows that entering into the dance movements helps the community transcend words and thoughts. By dancing, they even transcend hope and reach the pure bliss of love. This bliss is described as a 'divine darkness.' In it, both light/grace and darkness/sin are dissolved when the dancer comes into an entirely different state of being. In contrast to a supersessionist logic, where the crude matter of bodies is left behind for ascension into an 'illuminating light' of a 'spiritual' state of being, what I see at work here is a 'descent' into darkness that transforms both matter and spirit (Coakley 2013, 2022). By moving into the deep and chaotic waters of the Red Sea



and being led by God out of them, the old patterns of community have transformed into new ways of relating to each other. Circling now back to the earlier passage in Philo on Egypt, I would suggest a reading in which Philo advises that humans need to live in Egypt and enter into whatever ‘darkness’, they have inside or face in the world and pass through that *with* God, in order to take part in a new way of being a community.

Philo repeats this last distinction, with an emphasis once again on the fact that even the formerly strict structure he understood, of binary men and women in separate lines, is abolished. The ultimate goal of a true contemplative’s life, for him, was the union of what he saw as the male and female—the masculine and the feminine. I suggest that the actual praxis of dance is what brings this community into a new relationship with God. Such a community is, furthermore, not to be found in the ‘heavenly’ spheres of an angelic chorea which would be the transcendence of certain forms of theology. Rather, I suggest that Philo wants to encourage people reading his text to envision a transformation that happens in the here and now.

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