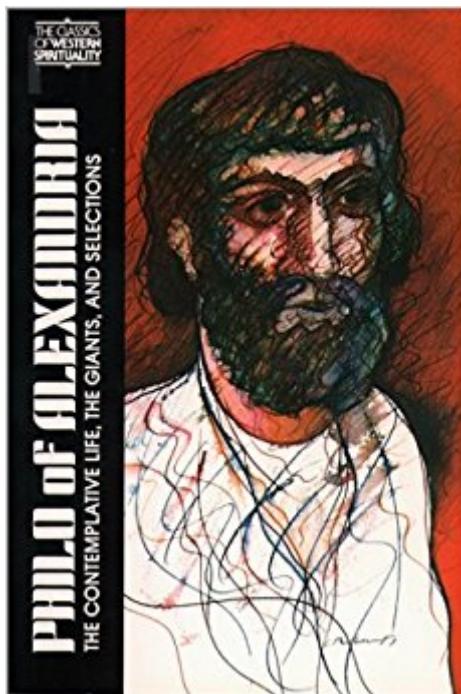


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The Contemplative Life, Giants And Selections (Classics Of Western Spirituality)



Synopsis

This anthology contains the basic vision of Philo (c. 20 B.C.E.-50 C.E.), the greatest Jewish mystic, philosopher and theologian of the Graeco-Roman era.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is an anthology of the works of Philo of Alexandria, thankfully translated in a clear, modern style, and well-annotated. The introduction helps familiarize the reader with Philo, a Hellenized, possibly Pharasaic, Jew, who is also a Platonist. Major themes are explored: Theory of Creation, Mysticism and Significance. The body of the book contains two complete treatises: "The Contemplative Life", which concerns a monastic Jewish sect at Lake Mareotis, and "The Giants", which concerns what was apparently something of an obsession among intertestamental Jews, the single verse of Genesis (6:2) in which the sons of God mate with human women. These treatises are both short, and produce, in a sense, a justification for the approach of the rest of the book.

Philo's style is both rhapsodic and digressive, so that any alleged topic can veer off in a number of marginally related directions. The bulk of the book, over 200 pages, is devoted to selections from all of Philo's treatises, titled by the translator, generally a paragraph in length, but sometimes running to a couple of pages. These are grouped according to 13 topics: I. Autobiographical, II. Scriptural Exegesis, III. Divine Mind, IV. Cosmogony, V. Souls, Angels and Daemons, VI. Divine Transcendence, VII. Knowledge and Prophecy, VIII. Worship, IX. Mysticism, X. Providence, Theodicy and Miracles, XI. Ethical Theory, XII. Moses and the Law, XIII. Universalism and Particularism. The only complaint I have is that due to editorial laziness, informative headers are not

present in the selections section to inform the reader exactly which topic any given page falls under. Other than that, this is very good.

Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C. - 50 A.D.) was a Jewish-Greek philosopher to whom I have returned several times over the years. Philo's writing tends toward the dense, prolix, and difficult. For the new reader, it is best to approach him in carefully selected sections, such as the selections included in this anthology, published in 1981 by the Paulist Press as part of its valuable series, "The Classics of Western Spirituality." I have owned this book for years and return to it frequently. For readers who become interested in pursuing Philo in more detail, a single-volume translation of his complete works is readily accessible.Â The Works of Philo For all his historical and scholarly importance, I want to explain why I, as a nonspecialist reader, remain fascinated with Philo. Philo lived at about the same time as Jesus, before the destruction of the Second Temple and the creation of Talmudic Judaism. He was deeply familiar with the Greek learning of his day, especially the thought of Plato. Although he was a devoted Jew, Philo probably could not read Hebrew. Instead, he read and expounded the Scriptures in the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. Philo was among the first thinkers to attempt to combine the best thought of his day with religion. He struggled early with the tensions between secularism and religious faith. It is valuable to me that he came to religion in his secular, Greek language. Philo attempted to use Plato, a philosopher, to effect this reconciliation. His was one of the first attempts to Platonize religion. With his Greek background, residence in Alexandria, and, on occasion, active political life, Philo's religious outlook tended to the internalized and the universal. He did not teach that any single group had sole access to religious truth. Philo's writings are replete with what readers today would describe as mystical or spiritual tendencies. Many of Philo's works are in the nature of exegesis of the first five books (the Torah) of the Hebrew Bible. He endeavored to show how Scriptural teachings were allegorical and philosophical. Thus, Philo was far removed from fundamentalist and literalist readings of Scriptures. Philo's work influenced the early Christians, who were responsible for its preservation, but had little impact on Judaism until about the 16th Century. Normative, Talmudic Judaism followed a path different from Philo's. Today, of course, Jews may read, respect, and learn from Philo. For all that, Philo remains somewhat of an outsider who followed his own path. As with some people today, Philo pursued his own understanding of Judaism in a manner which was not and did not become traditional. For those wanting to read Philo's own words, this book as an excellent choice. It includes a Preface by John Dillon, a student of middle Platonism, and a detailed introduction by a distinguished student of Philo, David Winston, which centers upon Philo's understanding of religious

creation and his mysticism. Winston sees Philo's thought as akin, in many ways, to that of Spinoza's. The book includes copious and highly detailed notes, indexes to the texts, and a bibliography. A cross-section of Philo's works are presented. Two short works are presented in full: The Contemplative Life and The Giants. The former book greatly influenced early Christians. It tells the story of a Jewish ascetic community called the Therapeuta that lived near Philo's Alexandria. Jewish asceticism sometimes receives short shrift, and it is valuable to see what Philo admired in this group. The latter treatise shows Philo applying his allegorical, Platonic reading of Scripture to Genesis 6:1-3 to create what Winston aptly describes as "a beautiful evocation of the spiritual dimension of being." Philo draws a sharp contrast between the way of the flesh and the way of the spirit in his reading of the puzzling Biblical story of how angels of God mated with the daughters of men. The remainder of the texts in the anthology consist of mostly short sections from Philo's lengthy writings. Each selection is introduced by a short, descriptive heading. The selections are arranged in 13 chapters, ranging from "Autobiographical" to "Universalism and Particularism" with subdivisions. The selections show the range and character of Philo's thought. The chapter headings can be somewhat limiting, as many of the selections cover a number of interrelated themes. Philo is properly included in a series of works of seminal Western spiritual teachers. This book will appeal to lay readers, more than to scholars, who remain concerned with the broad form of religious questions that Philo explored. The texts reward the effort required to read them. There is value in simply knowing of Philo, and of his efforts to explain and develop his understanding of a spiritual path. Robin Friedman

Very good book with an informative format. I look forward to purchasing other books in this series on western spirituality. I would recommend this to anyone interested in the journey of mankind.

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