

Psychological Allegorical Interpretation of the Bible



John S. Uebersax

Psychological Allegorical Interpretation of the Bible

John S. Uebersax

A Brief Explanation of the Principles of
Psychological Exegesis of Holy Scripture
with special attention to the writings of

Philo of Alexandria

Presented in the Form of Questions and Answers

Copyright © 2012 John S. Uebersax

Published by El Camino Real Publications of Paso Robles,
Paso Robles, California

First printing 2012

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher or author, except brief passages for review or scholarly purposes.

Psychological allegorical interpretation of the Bible / John S. Uebersax.

ISBN-10: 0985912103 (e-book)

ISBN-13: 978-0985912109 (e-book)

Cover image: Gustave Doré, Jacob Wrestling the Angel.
Doré's English Bible (1866). Public domain image.

Contents

[Preface](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Questions](#)

1. [What is the purpose of the present work?](#)
2. [Is this something new?](#)
3. [Since it is psychological, is it also reductionistic? Does it try to reduce the Bible's meaning to secular, materialistic principles?](#)

4. [Why are you writing this?](#)
5. [Who are the intended audience?](#)
6. [What can I gain from this?](#)
7. [What is allegory?](#)
8. [Why psychological allegory?](#)
9. [Does this deny literal truth of the Bible?](#)
10. [If something is fictional, I can see how it might be allegorical. But how could something literally true also be allegorical?](#)
11. [I'm a devout Christian. Is this approach to Scripture heretical?](#)
12. [I'm an agnostic. Is this religious fundamentalism?](#)
13. [How does this affect a view of the Bible as divinely inspired?](#)
14. [Doesn't allegorical interpretation promote wishful thinking and excessive subjectivism? Couldn't a person impose any meaning they choose on Scripture by this method?](#)
15. [How does one avoid error, wishful-thinking and excess in allegorical interpretation?](#)
16. [I'm religious. Do you have any suggestions for how I should approach the Bible?](#)

17. I'm an agnostic. Can you suggest how I might approach the Bible?
18. If psychological allegorical interpretation is so good, why haven't I heard of it?
19. Can this approach be applied to both the Old and New Testaments?
20. What are the basic principles of the interpretative method presented here?
21. Can you be more specific about what signs might suggest that a passage from Scripture has allegorical meaning?
22. Did you make all this up yourself?
23. Who was Philo of Alexandria?
24. What was Philo's purpose in writing – his motivation, goal, etc.?
25. Can you inform me more about Philo's psychological and religious views?
26. What is psychological salvation?
27. Once again, I'm concerned that this is reducing religion to secular psychology. Isn't the real point of salvation spiritual, i.e., to obtain eternal life or union with God?
28. It sounds like by psychological salvation you mean

a state of being or consciousness as well as a process. Can you more clearly describe what you mean?

29. You mentioned before that one may see figures in the Bible as symbolizing states of mind. Can you elaborate?
30. You've alluded to moral improvement, suggesting that it is a component of psychological salvation. Isn't moralizing precisely where religions tend to go wrong?
31. Can you give an example to help convince me that Philo's interpretative method makes sense?
32. Can you give another example?
33. Okay, can you give one more example?
34. Should I read Philo's works, and if so how?
35. What books or articles on psychological allegorical interpretation would you suggest?
36. What books or articles by or about Philo would you suggest?
37. Are there any caveats or suggestions to keep in mind when reading Philo's exegetical works?
38. Are there other ancient authors who used this method besides Philo and who might be read with profit on this subject?

39. [You have here focused mainly on allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament. Is there a reason you haven't discussed the New Testament?](#)
40. [Do you have any final words of encouragement or advice?](#)

[Bibliography](#)

Preface

While I continue to prepare more thorough presentations of the important subject of allegorical biblical interpretation, it seems reasonable to supply an early, succinct version of the leading ideas. This merely recognizes the fact that some people are more ready than others to understand and apply the principles and methods of psychological allegorical interpretation. Some, in fact, have likely already reached conclusions similar those discussed here, but would benefit from an explicit statement and external corroboration of them. Other readers may have a vague, subconscious understanding of these ideas, such that even a short presentation would suffice to bring them more fully into fuller awareness.

It is, then, for the sake of these more advanced and informed readers that the present short work is intended. These, I hope, will forgive any roughness of style that may attend a condensed work. Throughout I have ever resisted the temptation to add unnecessary trappings of 'scholarship'

of the kind that might seek impress the reader. As Marcus Aurelius wrote, "The work of philosophy is simple and modest, let me not be drawn away into vain pomp of words."

Introduction

There seems to be something very deep in the psyche that responds to ancient spiritual writings. The motif of consulting some ancient tome of wisdom recurs constantly in dreams, myth and literature. We are instinctively drawn to such works, and associate them with mystery and the sublime.

Scripture is sacred. As with all sacred things, its nature cannot be understood solely at a material level. It is something noumenous – a portal, as it were, between this world and the eternal realm. This is so even for those who do not see themselves as conventionally religious. Sacredness is a universal category of human psychological experience.

If you are a Westerner, the Bible is your sacred Scripture. It is your Bhagavad-Gita, your Diamond Sutra, your Avesta. It should go without saying that the Bible is in no way inferior to these other works. Its authors were no less inspired or possessed of divine insight. But, importantly, the Bible is a product of your culture. It expresses the spiritual issues common to all people in terms best suited to your cultural context, by your ancestors. It is, in short, written for you.

An agnostic or atheist may benefit considerably from studying the Bible as literature and cultural myths. Yet the religious reader receives even more benefit. For such readers I direct the remaining comments:

I am of the opinion that the Bible is best approached as a tangible expression of God's personal love for you. Therefore you may expect it to address exactly your needs and in every circumstance of life. Due to the intensely personal nature of your relationship to God – God loves as much as if you were His only creation – it follows that the Bible is a personal means by which God communicates to you. I believe there is perhaps no better observation I may offer, as a psychologist and human being, and no opinion on such matters of which I am more certain, than this.

Questions

1. What is the purpose of the present work?

To explain the principles of a psychological allegorical method of biblical interpretation.

2. Is this something new?

No. The method itself is very old and well-respected, though in recent years people have tended to forget about it.

3. Since it is psychological, is it also reductionistic? Does it try to reduce the Bible's meaning to secular, materialistic principles?

Definitely not. We use the word 'psychology' in a broad sense to mean the principles and laws of operation of the *psyche*, which is the Greek word for soul.

4. Why are you writing this?

For both religious and psychological reasons:

Religious: All Christians and Jews deserve to know this method. It is part of their tradition and birthright, but has been obscured by modernist social trends, and by certain shortcomings of modern religious education. In any case it should be explained so that people can make an informed choice whether to pursue it or not.

Psychological: Many today suffer from various forms of psychological dysfunction: depression, anxiety, substance abuse and eating disorders, chronic anger and pessimism – just to name a few examples. These problems are not new – they have afflicted human beings from time immemorial. The Bible addresses these problems, and not in an incidental way.

The common and unreflective view is that the Bible aims only for salvation in the sense of a happy after-life. This incorrectly sees happiness in this life as unconnected with (or even opposed to) happiness in the next life. However a more attentive reading of the Bible reveals that it is not as dualistic as this common view supposes: while eternal life is definitely a concern, the Bible also aims for psychological salvation in this life.

Before we can be saved eternally, we must be saved psychologically: our minds and intentions must be purified; our erroneous and harmful opinions abandoned; our attention strengthened; and whatever elements of our personality that are self-destructive and oppose our growing in integrity must be abandoned. From a psychological standpoint, the Bible is arguably the greatest self-help book every written – if people only knew how to approach it at that level. Moreover, it is a book millions of people already own, hold in high esteem, and are motivated to read and understand. If I were the czar of mental health in this country, charged with the responsibility of finding the most cost-effective tool for reducing the greatest amount of psychological misery, and promoting the greatest degree of happiness possible, I would do exactly what I'm doing now: to help empower people to use this great and powerful tool, the Bible, to improve their psychological condition.

5. Who are the intended audience?

1. Christians and Jews who already aim for a happy and virtuous life, and who seek to better avail themselves of Scripture for this purpose;
2. Devout practitioners of other religions;
3. Psychologists and counselors who seek models by which to better understand and promote the self-actualization of clients;
4. Open-minded agnostics who are willing to explore

the psychological dimensions of the Bible and to consider its possible applications for personal happiness and development.

6. What can I gain from this?

A better understanding of how to use the Bible (and, by extension, religious scripture generally) for spiritual and psychological growth, insight, mindfulness and self-mastery.

7. What is allegory?

The precise definition of allegory is much discussed, as is its relationship to other terms like parable, analogy, metaphor, fable, myth and the like. To avoid getting bogged down in definitional issues, which are of only incidental interest, at best, and generally contribute little from a practical standpoint, we use the term "allegory" in a very broad sense here that means, basically, non-literal interpretation; or interpretation at the level of symbolism.

8. Why psychological allegory?

For our purposes, psychological allegorism is understood as the literary symbolization of interior mental processes as human characters and events.

9. Does this deny literal truth of the Bible?

This is a very important question. The issues of literal and allegorical meanings of the Bible are independent. To believe in allegorical meaning of Scripture does not commit

one to a position either way concerning literal truth.

10. If something is fictional, I can see how it might be allegorical. But how could something literally true also be allegorical?

Because actual events may be designed by God to have symbolic significance. God knows we think in terms of symbols and that we are adept at learning many things symbolically. God is fully capable of using history to teach us about our own lives.

11. I'm a devout Christian. Is this approach to Scripture heretical?

No. Allegorical interpretation is an ancient tradition, present among the first Christians, and in Jewish and Hellenistic culture before Christianity per se emerged.

12. I'm an agnostic. Is this religious fundamentalism?

No. Fundamentalism implies a closed-minded attitude towards science and logic. This method is supported by reason and scientific theory.

13. How does this affect a view of the Bible as divinely inspired?

It might enhance ones appreciation for God's sophistication, as well as for the potential of human intuition and creativity. That is, it acknowledges a myriad of means by which God may inspire human writing. If a passage of Scripture is allegorical, there is no less reason to

believe that God has guided the mind of the writer and utilized the creative capacities of the human being.

14. Doesn't allegorical interpretation promote wishful thinking and excessive subjectivism? Couldn't a person impose any meaning they choose on Scripture by this method?

A tool is only as good as the one who uses it. To the foolish-minded, allegory can be a trivial pursuit, a means of pseudo-intellectual speculation and ego aggrandizement, or a way to try to justify morally questionable actions

A more prudent person, however, will recognize and anticipate these dangers and take suitable precautions against them.

15. How does one avoid error, wishful-thinking and excess in allegorical interpretation?

By self-honesty, common sense, and humility.

Self-honesty implies that one admits ones capacity for self-deception. Admitting this, one is prepared to detect and correct self-deluding false interpretations.

Common sense implies, among other things, that one is willing to test ones interpretations. A sound interpretation is one that conforms to and clarifies sound religious doctrines. Common sense also implies that the meaning of a given passage must be consistent with the overall message of the Bible. That is, the Bible is should be seen as an integrated, organic whole, not a hodgepodge of individual

personal revelations.

Humility implies that one has an appropriately skeptical attitude towards one's own knowledge and virtue: one does not over-value one's own opinions, but takes care to consult the opinions of those whom tradition considers credible. Thus, for example, one will refer to the allegorical interpretations of learned and devout writers in earlier times.

Humility also implies a prayerful attitude which seeks the assistance of God for right understanding. Agnostics can, in an analogous way, seek guidance from their Higher Self.

16. I'm religious. Do you have any suggestions for how I should approach the Bible?

Establish a special relationship with Holy Scripture. Regard it as something other-worldly, a means by which eternal knowledge is communicated and made available to your life on earth. See the Bible not only as the Word of God, but as the word of a personal God. If you were the only person in the world, God would have still written the Bible for you alone.

17. I'm an agnostic. Can you suggest how I might approach the Bible?

You might see it as a product of the collective unconscious and a work of consummate inspired literature. The reality of inspired writing, which produces works of a higher than normal order cannot be doubted. Great artists like

Shakespeare, Michelangelo, and Mozart were inspired. (If you don't think so, try to do what they did!) Such geniuses draw from springs of creative imagination beyond modern science's understanding. Approach Scripture as something reflecting spiritual and artistic genius of a very high order, which conveys extra-rational forms of knowledge

18. If psychological allegorical interpretation is so good, why haven't I heard of it?

In part, because good ideas are often unpopular, especially when they involve effort to understand and apply. And in part simply because people have not been taught it.

19. Can this approach be applied to both the Old and New Testaments?

Yes, although the principles are sufficiently different between the two to warrant treating them separately. Here we will focus attention on psychological interpretation of the Old Testament, and primarily the Pentateuch.

20. What are the basic principles of the interpretative method presented here?

There are two general guiding rules:

1. Each major person and situation in the Bible corresponds to and symbolizes an inner disposition, state, process or archetypal principle of your mind or soul.
2. No words in the Bible are accidental or superfluous.

An unusual word or turn of phrase, or the express mention of a seemingly unimportant detail, suggests presence of an allegorical meaning.

21. Can you be more specific about what signs might suggest that a passage from Scripture has allegorical meaning?

Some people compile lists of stylistic cues that indicate allegorical meaning, but these rules can become long and tedious. For convenience we may broadly divide these cues into three basic categories: (1) distinct or unusual wordings, (2) unnecessary detail, and (3) incongruities, implausibilities and impossibilities.

Distinct or unusual wordings. Here the important principle is that nothing – no word or even punctuation – in Scripture is held as accidental or superfluous. Therefore such things as repetitions of words, unusual turns of phrase, a curious or seemingly inconsistent choice of words, etc. all serve as signs to some subtle meaning. We frequently find such unusual wordings in the Bible, but tend to gloss over them, subconsciously dismissing them as minor errors or stylistic quirks of authors or translators. Instead we should let these alert us to a possible allegorical meaning. For example, when God says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1:26), the plural pronouns "us" and "our" are significant and invite our investigation. Similarly, the mention of making man not just "in our image" but also "after our likeness" is meaningful and important.

Unnecessary detail. Sometimes descriptions of events

include specific details that have no obvious, literal purpose. These should be considered for possible allegorical meanings. For example, Genesis states that in Eden were four rivers (Pison, Gihon, Hiddekel, Euphrates). From a narrative standpoint, it might have been sufficient to say merely that there were several rivers in Eden. But it is specifically stated that there were four rivers; and, moreover, these are named. Such seemingly unnecessary detail suggests an allegorical meaning of the four rivers.

Incongruity, implausibility, impossibility. When a literal interpretation would imply incongruous or strange behavior by a character, it is often a sign of a deeper, allegorical meaning. For example, when Jacob seeks the blessing of his blind father, Isaac, he disguises himself as his brother, Esau, by putting goatskins on his arms and neck (Gen 27:16). Although some men are hirsute, it is implausible to think Esau's arms would be as hairy as goatskin, or that Jacob could not tell the difference. Hence an allegorical meaning is suggested.

In each case the ability to detect the existence and intuit the meaning of biblical allegory is greatly enhanced by a careful and attentive reading of Scripture, which is itself something very beneficial.

22. Did you make all this up yourself?

No. As already stated, allegorical interpretation was well known in ancient times. The Greeks applied it to understand their mythology and the works of Homer. In Hellenistic times, Greek allegorism was applied by Jewish

scholars of Alexandria, Egypt to the Old Testament. The foremost practitioner of this Alexandrian Jewish tradition of allegorical biblical interpretation was Philo of Alexandria

23. Who was Philo of Alexandria?

Philo of Alexandria (or Philo Judaeus, as he's sometimes called), was a prominent member of the Jewish community of Alexandria. He lived from approximately 20 BCE to 50 CE. Philo was both a devout Jew and a scholar well-versed in Greek philosophy. A prolific writer, he left a large corpus of works on biblical interpretation. Though his work was neglected in subsequent Jewish tradition, it was embraced by early Christian writers. Philo's exegetical method and interpretations were absorbed into the Christian tradition via writers like Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ambrose of Milan. By the Middle Ages, Christian writers were routinely using Philonic interpretations, but unaware of their source.

24. What was Philo's purpose in writing – his motivation, goal, etc.?

Philo was both an ethical philosopher and a religious contemplative. That his purpose in writing was not self-aggrandizement comes across clearly in his works. One might describe his aims as threefold: religious, humanistic, and technical.

As a religious person, Philo wished, first, to clarify the allegorical meaning of Scripture to fellow Alexandrian

Jews. In fact, some of his works come across like homilies, and it is possible that they were written for oral delivery to a synagogue congregation. Further, from the descriptions of his own experiences, Philo was a mystic who experienced religious states of consciousness – illuminations and contemplative union with God; it seems natural that he would wish to assist others on the mystical or contemplative path.

Second, Philo often reveals himself as intensely humanistic. Part of his motivation was to help alleviate the unhappiness and suffering people experience due to disordered thoughts and emotions.

Third, as an innovator and scholar, Philo, having become adept at a powerful new method for understanding Scripture, naturally wished to share it with others.

25. Can you inform me more about Philo's psychological and religious views?

The general subject of Philo's religious views is too complex to pursue here; nor is it necessary to understand his allegorical methods. It suffices to say that his views are sometimes strikingly similar to early Christian writings, especially those concerning the Logos, or the manifest aspect or power of God that mediates between human beings and a more remote, transcendent God.

In terms of psychology, Philo is strongly Platonic. That is, he follows Plato's tripartite model of the psyche. By this view, the human soul is seen as consisting of three parts: an

appetitive part (*epithumetikon*, the locus of *epithumia* or passions), an honor-seeking and irascible (i.e., easily 'riled up') part (*thumos*); and a rational part (*logistikon*). Philo tends to combine the first two parts under the common rubric of 'passions'.

In a properly ordered soul, the intellect rules the passions, producing a state of harmony in the soul; when this attained, the soul can then achieve its destiny, which is to strive upwards, towards God, Wisdom and Virtue. However, if the passions dominate, they corrupt the soul and oppose its upward journey.

In modern terms, we could say that, as a psychologist, Philo aims to help people achieve a state of psychological salvation.

26. What is psychological salvation?

Psychological salvation is a concept evident in classical philosophy (e.g., Platonism and Stoicism), modern theories of psychotherapy and counseling, common experience, myth and literature, and religion.

In classical philosophy, for example, it is understood as involving knowing yourself, finding truth and Wisdom, and becoming ones true self. In psychology, it may be understood as a state of self-actualization and integration. In religion it is known as the Kingdom of Heaven and the Promised Land.

Generalizing across these various traditions we may arrive

at some basic understanding of the principles of psychological salvation. These could be stated very broadly as being that: (1) human beings are intended for a happy and fulfilling existence; (2) we generally fall short of this, and instead usually exist in varying degrees of unhappiness, incompleteness and distress; (3) the obstacles to happiness are at once emotional, cognitive, and ethical in nature; and (4) there are definable steps that can be taken for one to progress from unhappiness to the intended happy or blessed state.

27. Once again, I'm concerned that this is reducing religion to secular psychology. Isn't the real point of salvation spiritual, i.e., to obtain eternal life or union with God?

For convenience we can distinguish between spiritual salvation, which you allude to, and psychological salvation. If one seeks spiritual salvation, then psychological salvation is a necessary part, and, in fact, a pre-requisite of that. One cannot seek or find God without a mind suitably purified and properly oriented. And it would be of dubious value to have eternal life, if that life consisted of an endlessly confused or agitated state of soul. It makes little sense to talk about spiritual salvation without there being psychological salvation first.

Religious believers, agnostics, and atheists alike, therefore, should be motivated to seek psychological salvation. The principles are the same in each case.

28. It sounds like by psychological salvation you mean a

state of being or consciousness as well as a process. Can you more clearly describe what you mean?

Again, integrating evidence from a variety of sources, we may suggest that psychological salvation has several discernable components:

1. *Mental well-being*: A state of positive affect and mental clarity; freedom from disturbing emotions (anger, sadness, disordered appetitive urges etc.); feelings of pleasantness, confidence, calm happiness, and quiet joy.
2. *Virtue*: a mind and life oriented toward virtues – humility, charity, piety, courage, endurance, fairness, excellence, intellectual growth, etc.
3. *Non-duality*. This term has various meanings, but here we use it to mean a condition of harmonization between the world and oneself.
4. *Transcendence*. Psychological salvation also implies that the ego is aware of levels above it – either associated with God or a Higher Self – from which the ego seeks guidance and direction. This guidance may come, at least in part, as a stream of inspirations, revelations and graces, sometimes likened to heavenly manna. It is an opening or re-opening of a channel connecting the ego with higher wisdom. The orientation to some higher power saves the soul from the bane of egoism.

29. You mentioned before that one may see figures in the Bible as symbolizing states of mind. Can you elaborate?

By the Philonic method of psychological interpretation, each figure in the Old Testament may be seen as symbolizing some personality disposition. Thus, by this view, you have an inner Adam and an inner Eve, an inner Cain and Abel, an inner Abraham, an inner Moses, and inner Pharaoh, and so on. The struggles and dynamics amongst human characters in the Old Testament mirror the conflicts and dynamics of your psyche. This view implicitly recognizes the *plurality* of the human personality. Many modern psychological theories agree that each of us possesses myriad dispositions or divisions of this kind; different theorists refer to them by different names, including sub-egos, part egos, complexes, or 'archetypes'.

However, unlike most psychological theories, the Bible sees this state of affairs as having a definite purpose and, as it were, resolution. There is an alternative to merely being a chaotic assemblage of states and feelings. A higher, integrated level of organization of the personality is possible.

30. You've alluded to moral improvement, suggesting that it is a component of psychological salvation. Isn't moralizing precisely where religions tend to go wrong?

We can distinguish between an outer and an inner level of morality. By the latter we mean basically integrity of mind. To be virtuous for Philo, as well as for Plato and Aristotle,

means to seek and live the excellence of human nature. In Aristotelian terms, everything has its purpose or *telos*, that for which it was designed. The *telos* of the human being is moral excellence, or *arete*, a Greek word translated both as virtue and excellence. Thus, unlike a negative morality, which emphasizes things like sin, punishment, and what one should *not* do, Philonism and Greek moral philosophy emphasize the positive: that is, to be moral – in the right sense that emphasizes free will, unprejudiced reason and clear vision – is to be fully self-actualized. It is a positive, happy, beautiful, even glorious path.

31. Can you give an example to help convince me that Philo's interpretative method makes sense?

In the story of Garden of Eden, Philo sees represented the basic human moral and existential dilemma. The three principle characters (besides God) are Adam, symbolizing the mind or intellect, Eve, symbolizing the body or sense perception, and the serpent, symbolizing pleasure (as distinct from sense perception itself; for example, to see a beautiful object, and to take pleasure in the seeing, are two different things.)

The basic issue concerns the continuous choice a person must make between being directed mainly towards pleasure, or towards the *desires of the intellect*, namely virtue, integrity, Wisdom and God. In short, Philo contrasts two fundamentally different personality orientations: love of virtue, and love of pleasure. The former is what we are designed for; to the extent that it dominates, we live in an Edenic existence, as God intends.

However, when one becomes a lover of pleasure, the tone and operation of the psyche changes. A cascading sequence of mental events occurs, bringing about disharmony and a loss of integration. Our intentions become set on pleasure, not virtue, and our experience of both the external and interior realms becomes distorted. We cling to sensory pleasures and things that produce them instead of seeking higher pleasures (knowledge, virtue, grace, etc.) .

This is the Fall of the soul. Once fallen, we must undergo a process of purification and renewal. That process is symbolized in the subsequent events and characters of the Old and New Testaments.

32. Can you give another example?

Another story of special significance for Philo is that of Cain and Abel. In these figures he again sees represented two basic and opposed personality orientations. Cain symbolizes the egoistic personality that refers everything to itself and seeks rigid control over self, others and the world for selfish gain.

In contrast is Abel, who symbolizes a non-egoistic personality. Abel *refers everything to God*. His attitude is expressed by the passage from Proverbs:

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
And lean not on your own understanding;
In all thy ways acknowledge him,
and he shall direct thy paths. (Proverbs 3:5-6)*

Thus, Abel represents the disposition of soul that trusts in a power higher than itself – God, or perhaps a Higher Self.

Cain, the ego-ridden, selfish disposition, makes himself the center of all his thoughts and actions. When God didn't approve his sacrifice, Cain's response was not, "God, how may I please you – for whose sake sacrifices are offered in the first place", but rather "God, why do you treat me so badly?"

It takes little self-observation to see how strong of an inner Cain we all have. Indeed, just as Cain kills Abel, so our inner Abel – our natural inclination to do good – tends to be completely overwhelmed by our inner Cain.

33. Okay, can you give one more example?

Philo's psychological exegesis reaches a new level in his treatment of the Exodus. There he confronts even more strikingly the issue of the plurality of the human psyche. As many writers beside Philo have observed, the human personality is something like a vast assembly or commonwealth of many often-conflicting personas, ego states, complexes, etc. In Philo's view, these can be likened to the nations of Egypt (our selfish, materialistic thoughts and dispositions) and Israel (the positive, devout, virtuous parts of ones personality). The positive parts tend to be, in a sense, enslaved or held in bondage by the negative ones. As part of the process of self-actualization, a special disposition or ego function, symbolized by Moses, must become a central, organizing leader or commander of the personality. In short, to reach the Promised Land of

psychological salvation, one must become as Moses towards ones own psyche.

Knowing just this much, it then becomes possible to examine closely the biblical events of the Exodus and to understand them as symbolizing parts of a process of psychological redemption, salvation and self-realization.

34. Should I read Philo's works, and if so how?

Philo is definitely worth reading, but as to how much, that will vary by person. Modern readers may find classical writing generally, and Philo's in particular, intimidating. Mainly it's a matter of expectations and attitude, however. If one believes there will be a payoff, one will invest the time and energy needed to read a long sentence or complex paragraph, such as one may find with Philo or other classical authors. Spend as much time as necessary to understand the point of every sentence. Approach reading with the conviction that everything Philo writes he has written for a definite reason, that he is not merely being wordy to impress readers, stretching interpretations to absurd lengths, etc.

A suggestion would be to start with one or two of Philo's non-exegetical works, to get accustomed to his style and to develop a feel for his way of thinking. One candidate for initial reading would be *Embassy to Gaius*, wherein Philo describes his visit to Emperor Gaius (Caligula) in Rome, as head of Jewish delegation from Alexandria. This is a remarkable and interesting work in its own right. Another good introduction is *On the Contemplative Life*, perhaps his

most popular work, and one of our best historical sources on the Essenes, and another ancient monastic group, the Therapeutae. From these works one might then proceed to Philo's biblical commentaries, especially the three-part work, *Allegorical Interpretation*.

35. What books or articles on psychological allegorical interpretation would you suggest?

I've written two short articles that illustrate this general method: [The Psychological Significance of Psalm 1](#), and [The 'Strange Woman' in the Book of Proverbs](#).

When seeking an allegorical understanding, it helps to read Scripture in a careful and attentive way. The traditional Christian practice of *lectio divina*, or spiritual reading, is useful for this. The article, [A Method for Lectio Divina Based on Jungian Psychology](#), explains a form of *lectio divina* in psychological terms:

A good general resource for interpreting the Old and New Testament is the [Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture](#) series. These volumes proceed through the Bible supplying excerpts from Church Fathers, commenting on various chapters and verses.

Concerning psychological allegorical interpretation of the Bible, a moderate literature exists. Of some special interest are the works of Edward Edinger, a Jungian psychiatrist. Two of his better exegetical works are [The Bible and the Psyche: Individuation Symbolism in the Old Testament](#) and [Eternal Drama: The Inner Meaning of Greek Mythology](#).

One may easily detect a strong prejudice in Edinger's writings against traditional Christianity, however. Edinger would instead, it seems, make a religion of Jungianism. Alerted to this prejudice, the reader can filter out and disregard some of Edinger's more dogmatic assertions. His works are, arguably, more of interest for their methodology, general psychological theory, and informative literary and historical references than for the specific interpretations they present, which often miss the mark and contain subtle but important errors.

An excellent example of psychological allegorical interpretation applied to the Greek epic, the *Odyssey*, is Thomas Taylor's (1758–1835) essay, [On the Wanderings of Ulysses](#).

A good general overview of psychological biblical interpretation may be found in D. Andrew Kille's book, [Psychological Biblical Criticism](#). Another contemporary writer, Wayne Rollins, has also made useful contributions to this subject.

Clues to 'archetypal' or mythic meanings of biblical events can often be gained by consulting the literature on Jewish folklore. Two helpful sources are [The Legends of the Jews](#) by Louis Ginzberg and *The Lore of the Old Testament*, by Joseph Gaer.

36. What books or articles by or about Philo would you suggest?

For an general overview of Philo, Kenneth Schenck has

written an excellent and easily recommendable book, [A Brief Guide to Philo](#). A good article-length discussion of Philo and his work can be found in [The Jewish Encyclopedia](#).

Philo's works themselves are available, free, online, in the translation of the famous 19th century classicist and historian, Charles Duke Yonge: *The Works of Philo Judeaus* ([vol. 1](#), [vol. 2](#), [vol. 3](#), [vol. 4](#)). In 1993, Yonge's translations were slightly updated and assembled into a [single, inexpensive volume](#).

A 20th century translation of Philo's complete works is the 10 volume series in the [Loeb Classical Library](#), translated by Colson & Whitaker. The Loeb edition has Greek text and English translation on facing pages. (Greek text of Philo's works can also be found on the web.) Significantly, the cost of the 10 Loeb volumes is (at the time of this writing) 20 times the cost of the 1993 Yonge edition, making the latter an attractive alternative. [Volume 10](#) of the Loeb edition is of special interest, however, as it contains a detailed topical index. (Note: Loeb volumes are smaller in physical size than most books; this is of little practical consequence, but it may come as a surprise.)

Besides the 10 volumes of Colson & Whitaker's English translations of Philo's extant Greek works, the Loeb Library contains two supplementary volumes. These contain English translations by Ralph Marcus of two other important works of Philo known only from old Armenian manuscripts (for these, the original Greek versions have not survived). These two volumes can both be downloaded

from archive.org ([Vol. 1. Questions and Answers on Genesis](#); [Vol. 2. Questions and Answers on Exodus](#)).

Often overlooked by scholars, this older book by Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie emphasizes Philo's mysticism: [*The Message of Philo Judaeus of Alexandria*](#).

The modern English translations by David Winston of some of Philo's works deserves special mention. These also tend to emphasize the mystical and experiential dimensions of Philo's thought. Especially recommended is his book, [*Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, The Giants, and Selections*](#), part of the Paulist Press Classics of Western Spirituality series.

There is much current scholarly interest in Philo generally, and new translations of his complete works are underway.

Finally, Philo scholar David Runia has made valuable contributions to understanding the impact of Philo's writings on later Christian writers.

37. Are there any caveats or suggestions to keep in mind when reading Philo's exegetical works?

I would offer the suggestion that one not get too caught up in Philo's writings themselves. The whole point is to help illumine the message of the Bible.

One area where Philo's interpretations might seem genuinely unusual to modern readers is his number symbolism. Here he reflects his Pythagorean influences. Even to a very sympathetic reader these may seem strained

and unusual. It's possible that in these sections Philo was writing for the sake for contemporaries, who were used to this manner of speculative numerology.

38. Are there other ancient authors who used this method besides Philo and who might be read with profit on this subject?

St. Ambrose of Milan wrote extensive allegorical commentaries on the Bible – often borrowing quite liberally from Philo, but also adding a Christian emphasis. In the Eastern Christian tradition, the works of St. Gregory of Nyssa are an excellent source for allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament. Origen of Alexandria wrote extensively on allegorical interpretation of the Bible. St. Augustine applied allegorical interpretation of Scripture throughout his works. The [*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*](#) series is an excellent resource for identifying writers who allegorically interpreted various sections of the Bible.

39. You have here focused mainly on allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament. Is there a reason you haven't discussed the New Testament?

Yes. Partly that is to produce a shorter and more focused work here. And partly because there are certain qualitative differences between the Old and New Testament which a fuller discussion would need to take into account. For example, in the case of the New Testament, it is more clearly evident that we are dealing with actual historical events. However – to emphasize what was stated earlier –

even Scripture that relates actual historical events can be interpreted at the level of psychological allegory. It is, for example, an established Christian teaching that the events of Christ's life have symbolic significance for the life (and mind) of the Christian. A companion volume to this work which treats allegorical interpretation of the New Testament is planned.

40. Do you have any final words of encouragement or advice?

Yes. (1) You are to be commended for making the effort to understand the Bible at a deeper level. It takes hard work and no little degree of courage; (2) approach this prayerfully; (3) apply yourself, but don't try too hard – rely on the Holy Spirit do the work.

Bibliography

Cohn, Leopold and Wendland, Paul (editors); Leisegang, Hans (contributor). [*Philonis Alexandrini Opera Quae Supersunt*](#). 7 vols. Berlin, 1896-1930. (Greek text of Philo's works.)

Colson, F. H. and Whitaker, G. H. (editors, translators); Earp, J. W. (contributor). *Philo*. 10 vols. [The Loeb Classical Library](#). Harvard University Press, 1929-1962.

Dillon, John M. [*The Middle Platonists*](#) (Philo, pp. 139–183). Cornell University Press, 1996. ISBN 0801483166.

Edinger, Edward. F. [*The Bible and the Psyche*](#):

Individuation Symbolism in the Old Testament. Inner City Books, 1986. ISBN 0919123236.

Edinger, Edward. F. (author); Wesley, Deborah A. (contributor). *Eternal Drama: The Inner Meaning of Greek Mythology*. Boston: Shambhala, 2001. ISBN 1570626731.

Gaer, Joseph. *The Lore of the Old Testament*. Little, Brown, 1951.

Ginzberg, Louis; Stern, David M. (ed.), *The Legends of the Jews*. 2nd ed. 2 vols. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003. (Original work published 1909-1938). ISBN 0827607091.

Guthrie, Kenneth Sylvan. *The Message of Philo Judaeus of Alexandria*. London, 1909.

Kille, D. Andrew. *Psychological Biblical Criticism*. Fortress Press, 2001. ISBN 080063246X.

Lauterbach, Jacob Zallel. "Philo Judaeus". In: *The Jewish Encyclopedia* Vol. 10. Isidore Singer, Cyrus Adler (editors). New York, 1906.

Oden, Thomas C. (General Editor). *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 29 Volumes. InterVarsity Press, 2000 – 2010. ISBN 083081471X.

Marcus, Ralph (translator). Philo: Supplements 1—2. Vol. 1, *Questions and Answers on Genesis*; Vol. 2, *Questions and Answers on Exodus*. Loeb Classical Library. Harvard University Press, 1953.

Rollins, Wayne G. [*Soul and Psyche: The Bible in Psychological Perspective*](#). Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1999. ISBN 0800627164.

Runia, David T. [*Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey*](#). Uitgeverij Van Gorcum, 1993. ISBN 9023227131.

Schenck, Kenneth. [*A Brief Guide to Philo*](#). Westminster John Knox Press, 2005. ISBN 066422735X.

Taylor, Thomas. "[On the Wanderings of Ulysses](#)". In Thomas Taylor (trans.), *Selected Works of Porphyry*, Appendix. London, 1823. (Reprinted as Volume 2 of The Thomas Taylor Series, The Prometheus Trust, 1999, pp. 201-224).

Uebersax, John S. [*A Method for Lectio Divina Based on Jungian Psychology*](#). 2007. . Accessed July 30, 2012.

Uebersax, John S. [*The Psychological Significance of Psalm 1*](#). 2008. . Accessed July 30, 2012.

Uebersax, John S. [*The 'Strange Woman' in the Book of Proverbs*](#). 2007. . Accessed July 30, 2012.

Winston, David (editor, translator). [*Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, The Giants, and Selections*](#). (Classics of Western Spirituality). Preface by John Dillon. Paulist Press, 1981.

Yonge, Charles Duke. *The Works of Philo Judeaus*. Four volumes ([vol. 1](#), [vol. 2](#), [vol. 3](#), [vol. 4](#)). London: Bohn, 1855 (repr. 1890, 1894).

Yonge, Charles Duke. [*The Works of Philo*](#). Complete and unabridged, new updated edition. David M. Scholer, editor. Hendrickson Publishers, 1993. ISBN 0943575931.