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The Forgotten Jew, 1968.

The Forgotten Jew
Daniel Jeremy Silver
December 1, 1968

In an ordinary speech the word, mystery, refers, of course, to an unsolved problem, an unknown quantity, and it is in that sense that I want to present to you the intriguing puzzle of the forgotten Jew. Entymologically, the word, mystery, is derived from a Greek noun, mysterionon, which referred to any number of secret societies, of groups of people in the ancient world, who believed that they controlled some special theological knowledge, some potent wisdom, whose possession gave them the key to immortality or to salvation, wisdom which could be granted only to those who were initiated into the secret group, into the society, which made them different from, better than the ordinary run of men. And this root meaning of mystery, keep in mind, because I think it may help us later on with a clue towards the solution, or towards a solution, of the problem of the forgotten Jew. And the forgotten Jew is a man named Philo who was born around the year 15 B. C. E. He died at about the age of sixty. He was born and he lived and he died in the city of Alexandria, Egypt which was then the greatest Jewish center of the diaspora, perhaps the largest Jewish center in the world. He is a contemporary of Hillel and Jesus and Paul. He was the equal of these men in piety and he was certainly their master in the art of philosophic analysis, of Greek logic. Philo was perhaps the most inventive Jewish thinker of his era. He was trained in the categories of Greek thought. He wrote any number of important commentaries on the Torah which were unique, quite special, and quite ingenious. He was one of the staunchest defenders of the Jewish people. He was ready to stand up against anyone who trod upon us, and the mystery of his life is this: that this man who was devoted heart and soul to the continuity and to the preservation and to the development of the Jewish people, this man who wrote any number of quite important books; no sooner had he died than his life and his works passed into oblivion. They

were quickly forgotten by our people. For the next fifteen centuries they were not to be found in any Jewish library. It was as if he had never lived, and had it not been for a number of early Christian monks, patristic fathers, who rummaged about in the great library of Alexandria and who copied down some of his works along with many others, had it not been then for some of the fathers of the church Philo would be unknown to us today and we would not have any of his books or any of his commentaries or any of his philosophic justifications for Judaism. Indeed, it was not until the 16th century, until the Italian Renaissance, until one of those periods in history when the high walls of separation between the church and the synagogue began to disappear and dissolve, that a Jewish Bibliophile and scholar, a man by the name of Zariah Dirasi, rummaged about in some of the patristic literature and found there, among the church manuscripts, a number of the scrolls of the books of Philo and returned them to the Jewish world and renewed our acquaintance with this man who may have been the most significant seminal Jewish thinker of his age. And so the mystery. Why was this man forgotten? Why did his works disappear? Why is it that he wrote and it had been as if he had never lived?

Well, perhaps he was one of those poor research people whom we find in the depths of every major library, who write voluminously and endlessly and the world passes them by as if they didn't exist, until perhaps some generations later a research scholar finds their notes piled high and he bothers to read through them. He discovers here an original mind, somebody worth publishing. Perhaps Philo is simply an unknown quantity, an anonymous man, one of those shadow men who live but who do not really live among us. Not so. Philo was a son of the richest and most influential family in Alexandria. His brother was the titular representative of the Jewish community to the Roman Procurator. The family's wealth was legendary. His brother,

Alexander, had given the gold and silver with which seven large portal gates in the Temple in Jerusalem had just been redone. Philo was not an anonymous man, whatever else he was. Well, perhaps, then Philo was one of the family sensitives, these people who turn, occasionally turn their backs to prestige and to family responsibility and noblesse oblige, to the establishment, and ask only for the privilege of walking away, of leaving behind them all the so-called advantages of society, of leading their own life in poverty, in loneliness, where they will. And there are some indications that in Philo's early life he in fact did turn his back on Alexandria and on privilege and he went out, at least for a number of months, to live with one of those semi-monastic communities of the Essenes, a pious sect of near monks, pious Jews who lived in the wilderness outside of Alexandria down near the Dead Sea in Egypt, who lived a life of fasting and prayer and ritual and silence as they sought to prepare their souls for the coming of the kingdom. There is every indication, also, in his works that he very soon realized that man must be master of his soul and find peace of soul in the thronging crowd quite as much as in the wilderness, and that he returned to his privilege and to his position, and he lived out his life, probably, as a judge, a senior and judicious official of Alexandrian Jewry and, in fact, we know that in the year 35 of the C. E. he was chosen by the community of Egypt, a billion Jewish Jews strong, to head a delegation which was sent to Rome on a very delicate mission, a mission ^{on} whose success depended the continuity of Jewish life in Egypt.

The Roman caesar, a man named Gaius, was one of these men who took his deification seriously. The Caesars of Rome, you know, were declared to be gods, and this was done largely as a formal act of nationalism, of statehood, and because it gave to their laws and imperium that they were to outlast their reign. They were to be long-lived. Now, this Gaius took his deification as becoming a god seriously and

he was very much put out with the Jewish community of Alexandria because they refused to erect statues of him in their synagogues and bow to these statues as part of their regular worship. He accused the Jewish community of treason, and many in Egypt resented the Jewish community which had made a name for itself, had made an economic place for itself, and they took advantage of the Caesar's displeasure and there were a number of near riots, a number of attacks on Jews, and no one was quite certain that the emperor might not all of a sudden, in one of his nearly mad moods, order either the total destruction of the Jewish community or their exile.

And so Philo was sent as the head of a mission to Gyas and for a number of months he was kept warming his heels in the forum outside the Caesar's palace. For a long time he was forced to engage in very delicate negotiations with an erratic, nearly mad man who might at any moment rather flippantly toss off an edict that these ambassadors to him, these Jews who were unwanted in the court, were to be killed, and he carried it all off, the skill and tact and diplomacy and this is attested to not only from his own writings, but from the chronicles of Josephus and others of the times.

So, we are dealing here with a man of position, a man who was not unhonored, certainly not unknown. Perhaps he was the best known Jewish writer and maybe the best known Jewish figure of his day and this, of course, only heightens the mystery. How shall we then explain it?

Well, a partial explanation lies in the fact that the language which flowed from Philo's pen was a form of Greek. Greek was the English of the day, the common speech of most people, the language in which most scholars wrote their works. Commerce, diplomacy, scholarship was carried on largely in Greek. Philo, to gain an audience for his work in defense of his faith, naturally chose the language in which he had been trained, the language which came naturally to him, the language

which would gain the broadest audience, but there is a truism in Jewish history, that only those works which are written in Hebrew, which are early translated into Hebrew, last among our people. A writer must make a choice between a large audience now and a lingering audience over the generations. By and large, those works which are not written in Hebrew or not translated into Hebrew disappear. And we know that in the decades a century or so preceding Philo, Alexandrian Jewish life produced a number of first-rate literary men, philosophers, historians, dramatists, critics. Fragments of their works have survived imbedded in other works, but none of their works survived within what we call the Jewish library. They wrote in Greek, and once Greek ceased to be the lingua franca, the common language of Jews, their works simply disappeared.

Well, perhaps, then we have no mystery at all. Perhaps we could simply say that Philo wrote in Greek and his works were not translated and that was the sum and substance of it. But it's not quite so simple.

About 1100 years later, another Egyptian Jew, Moses Maimonides, wrote another fine philosophic defense of Judaism, The Guide to the Perplexed, which is perhaps the classic medieval book of our people and he wrote it not in Hebrew, but in Arabic which was the English, the common language of the day, and that book became part of the mainstream of Jewish culture and Jewish thought and within two, three years of its writing it was being translated by two fine scholars, one in Spain and one in southern France. Now, why did men set about translating the one book and not the other. Both books are seminal. Both are original. Both are significant. Why was Maimonides translated and Philo not?. Philo was as pious a man as Maimonides. He was as observant a Jew as Maimonides. He was as fine a scholar as Maimonides was. The answer, I believe, lies in this, that Maimonides' attempt to redefine Judaism in the spirit of his age was done in a way which was congruent with the uniqueness,

the specialness of Judaism. He defined Judaism as it was, as it is. And Philo's redefinition of Judaism was done in such a way that he resculpted and reshaped Judaism so that it ceased to be what it had always been. Let me make my point.

Philo used the technique of commentaries, of longish paragraphs explaining Biblical text for his philosophy. So did, for that matter, Maimonides. Philo wrote two kinds of commentary. One was a rather literal sermonic explanation of the Biblical text. Another was ^{an} allegorical explanation, an explanation which looked beneath the text for its deeper meaning. Now, Philo himself believed in the Torah quite as much as anybody else as the revealed word of God, as the truth, but when you are through reading the allegorical interpretation you find the truth, which Moses never suspected, the truth which its almost entire he knew. Let me illustrate with the text from the Torah which we read this morning.

The story is that of Jacob. Jacob has roiled the family and it is necessary for him to flee, and he goes from the family home in Bershiba to the home of his uncle in Haran and he's caught out in the wilderness at night and he takes a rock as his pillow and he lies down and he has this dream of a ladder, the base of which is on the earth, the top of which touches the heavens, and there are the angels of God ascending and descending upon this ladder and God renews the ancient covenant with him that night. He awakens and he has the sense that God has been in this place and he builds there an altar to God. Now, a sermonic, a literal interpretation would place this paragraph within the context of the development of Jacob's life, would explain why he is leaving Bershiba and why he is going to Haran. It might use the image of the ladder with the angels, the messengers, ascending and descending as the ladder of man's prayers ascending to God and descending answered from the Heavens, but it would stay, by and large, with understandable, fairly literal, explanations of that which the text actually says.

But in the commentaries which Philo wrote for those who were philosophically trained, the more subtle minds, we find a totally new kind of commentary. He starts with the very word Bershiba. You know Bershiba as the central city in the Negev, one of the thriving metropolitan places in Israel today. For a long time it was a center of caravan trade. It was a marketplace, a shouk. It was the family home of the patriarchs. Beir in Hebrew means a well, and it's this etymology that Philo begins with. He speaks of the well. Jacob was leaving a well, but not just any well. The well was a symbol of wisdom. A well is deep and its waters are clear and they are cool and they are refreshing. And wisdom is deep and it's profound and when you drink from the waters of wisdom you drink a cool, refreshing liquid which, in his terms, is a liquid which brings a new dimension to your life. It cleanses you. It purifies you. You gain a certain leg up on salvation. And why was he leaving this piece of wisdom? Because he had sinned; because he had violated his responsibilities as a brother and as a son. Whenever man sins he's driven off from philosophy; he's driven away from great ideas and pious thoughts. He can no longer think them because he's caught up with his sins, with what evil that he has done. And where does he go? He goes to Haran and, again etymologically, he explains Haran as the place of the senses where the wisdom that exists is that of ordinary people doing ordinary things of the everyday. Haran represents the marketplace, the political arena, life in the raw, the bruising, bustling life which the philosophers of the ancient world simply did not like. They wanted to be free of these responsibilities, to allow their souls, their minds, to soar up to the heavens, to attach there in some kind of mystical unity with the great intellect, the grand idea, which was God. And so why must man be pushed out into the world, the thronging, bustling, bruising world? Because he sins. And how does he find his way back to the quiet and to the wisdom? He finds it back when

all the honesty of Philo's concern for Judaism, he was essentially changing it to

is willing to give up the rich life, the home, the mattress, the bed, the coverlet, pillow and live, in a sense, in the raw, without luxury, in the open, only the stone as his pillow. Then, somehow, he frees his soul which can ascend towards the heavens because he is not preoccupied with things, with desires, with passions, with wants. Now he can free his soul to soar up to deal with the grand, the glorious, the clean, the pure and the true. And his soul rises to heaven and the heavens respond and the soul comes down purified and man has achieved salvation. It's a brilliant kind of analogy. The only trouble is it isn't in the text. You know, the Bible never intended this truth. What we have here, essentially, is a translation of Judaism into a Greek mystery. It is now no longer the obedience of the commandments, but the thinking of pure thought, Greek metaphysics, which is the way of salvation; and the rabbis, the Pharisees who read, who knew Philo's text must have recognized the degree towards which, in defense of Judaism, Philo had redefined Judaism into something entirely different from what it originally was. And we have Philo's in our own day, people who are as eager as any of us to find the language, to fit the modern idiom of Judaism, so that we can make it understandable to the young, to the eager, but who, somehow, in the process redefine Judaism so that our monotheism and our mitzvots become modern humanism or secularism, or even agnosticism, who transform Judaism to defend it, into something entirely different, entirely new, and in the process they kill the spirit of the very thing that they are trying to save. And I believe, though I have no proof of it, that when a Hillel or when any of the other sages of the day read these works of Philo, and they spoke Greek and they read these works, certainly, they recognized what Philo was doing and they deliberately did not have these works translated into Hebrew. They deliberately did not bring them into the mainstream of Jewish life because they were foreign to it. For all their ingenuity, for all their subtlety, for all the honesty of Philo's concern for Judaism, he was essentially changing it to

something quite new, quite radical. Well, if this be true, a second problem in intriguing mystery, if you will, presents itself. What did the church fathers see in Philo which allowed them, which made them, if you will, keep and copy out in each generation the works of this defender of Judaism? In part, the very method of interpretation, the allegorical method of commentary, which Philo has used because he had applied this not only to the legends of Genesis but to the law in the Torah, and he looked at each law not as a discipline which he, by the way, obeyed, but as a guide to metaphysical truth. They taught a truth and the church, as you know, was willing to understand the commandments as guides to truth but not as guides to action, antinomism, the breaking down of the disciplines of Judaism, the going for what they call the spirit rather than the law, as one of the cardinal teachings of Paul and the early Church.

But there's a second element in Philo which I think appealed even more to these church fathers. In the Greek world God was affirmed, but he's a rather interesting kind of god. He is eternal. He is timeless. He is ever removing Himself from the world. He exists, but man can really know nothing about what He is in Himself. He's not the God of the Torah, and not the God of the Bible who is constantly relating to man and answering men's prayers, speaking through the prophets, revealing to the people His law. He is a creative force and once He has created has moved aside. He's the place in the universe who man, somehow, cannot relate to and cannot touch. He's the unmoved mover. He's the source of the pure ideas, but he's not a God who is alive and vital and concerned and immanent. And this was the God whom Philo defended, whom he speaks about again and again. Now the ancient Jewish ethic had been based on the idea that man set a measure for himself and sought to achieve that measure in his life. And what was the measure? The ethical attributes of God. As God is holy so be thou holy. As God is merciful, as God is just, as God loves freedom,

so be thou merciful and sensitive and sympathetic and a lover of freedom. Man wants to imitate God, but how can he imitate a God you can't know? How can you imitate a God who is out there so far removed from you that you can't know anything about Him? And Philo answered: you cannot. But what then becomes the standard of a man's action? A Philo, a standard of a man's action where the lives, the biographies of the great prototypes, the great progenitors of the Jewish people, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and, most especially, Moses. And Philo went through the lives of these men as they are told to us in our Bible, and he rewrote their biographies and essentially he created of these men the very models of refined, Jewish Greek philosophers of his day. They became paragons. They became people, unrecognizable if you will, from the Biblical narrative. They had no faults. Every failing on their part was rationalized away or simply forgotten. He treated them as models. He speaks of Moses someplace as the living law, the law incarnate. Moses was no longer a child of the slaves who had some relationship with the court of Egypt, who murdered an Egyptian, who fled into the wilderness. Moses was now a young man who is raised in the court of Pharoah, trained in rhetoric and music and arithmetic and mathematics and philosophy and all the Greek disciplines, trained by the best teachers of the world. He was the heir apparent to the Pharoah and he did not flee because he had murdered a taskmaster. He fled because he could not accept the responsibility, the onus, of being a slave-owning monarch. He could be the leader only of free men, and on and on and on.

Now, these biographies make exciting reading, but they transform the flesh and blood figures of the Bible into stock figures, saints, paragons, such men as have never been and it's only a very small step from Moses as the law incarnate to Jesus as God incarnate. And Christianity, you know, centers on the modeling of man after the life of the Lord, the life of Jesus. And Philo was perhaps the greatest of

what are known as aretologists, the men in the Greek world who wrote the model biographies which were the heroes around whom young people, school children, were taught to formulate their lives. I'll give you a parallel which will show you how diametrically opposed to the Jewish tradition this tendency is.

Think of the Haggadah, the book that we read on Passover night which retells the story of the Exodus from Egypt. If you look at it carefully you'll be struck by one fact - the Haggadah goes on for at least an hour telling all of the details of the exodus from Egypt, the wandering in the wilderness. Never once does it mention the name of Moses. The deliverance is of God. The miracles are by God. It is God who brings about the salvation of the people. We are a people who constantly play down the role of men because all men are frail and all men are fallible and all men sin. No man is a model, that much of a model. Philo was moving in a different world, unbeknownst even to himself. He created human models, and in doing so he violated something which was integral in our Jewish tradition.

Why, then, is Philo the forgotten Jew? Why, then, was this defender of the faith abandoned by those whose faith he defended? Because, in the defense, he transformed Judaism into something that was radically different, reform Judaism. There is no point in sustaining this long enterprise which we call our religious life unless we're going to be true to those basic ideas which have always shaped it. If we're going to create something new of it let's create it. Let's go over here and start again and use the values of modern society or the values in his day of Greek society and create a religion based on those, but if we're going to talk about the continuity of the Jewish people and if we're going to speak of those elemental ideas which are basically valid Jewish insights, let's hold fast to them, let's understand them. Sure, let's find the words which express their truth in modern dress, but that's not

in our urgency to appeal to the new generation, distort and pervert, because if we do the inherited good sense of our people will take what we have to offer and quickly forget us and they will recognize that what we are presenting as Judaism is in fact ersatz, false, and not true.



The word MYSTERY has several meanings. As being
 now it refers to something unexplained - an unknown
quantity and in fact now a known or possibly known
 to place before you: The Case of the Fargallan Jones

Elfrid, mystery is almost gone. back now
mysticism which depicted any number of magical
 acts which seemed to know within mystical secrets
 which was unknown to the conventional or school
 person prepared to reach for solution. Further
historical meaning of mysticism is
 basic to it, it must provide
 analysis of any mysticism.

The forgotten Jew is a man named Philo, who was
born in Alexandria Egypt around the year 40 BC and he
died in the same place around 60 years later. Philo was
a leading part of Mark and Joseph - of the
House - of David - and Jesus - of Nazareth
He was the father of Jesus and was born
in the city of Alexandria. He was born in the city of Alexandria.

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next day the service would be -

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being, attended, attended - the service was to be held
the service for Paul's in the church - Paul's
wife had a certain relationship - as to the service
service - he was not to attend - was then the service
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science - all to understand mind - fact -
language - psychologist you can understand mind -
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relevant

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"They who offer themselves offer
the highest sacrifice".

