Advances in the History of Rhetoric
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uahr20

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Published online: 21 Mar 2014.

To cite this article: Joshua Reeves (2014) The State of Babel After the Fall: Philo Judaeus and the Possibility of Rhetoric, Advances in the History of Rhetoric, 17:1, 34-42, DOI: 10.1080/15362426.2014.886927

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15362426.2014.886927

Advances in the History of Rhetoric, 17:34–42, 2014

ISSN: 1536-2426 print/1936-0835 online
DOI: 10.1080/15362426.2014.886927

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The State of Babel After the Fall: Philo Judaeus and the Possibility of Rhetoric

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This article contextualizes Philo Judaeus's treatise De Confusione Linguarum *in rhetorical and intellectual history. While most interpretations of the Tower of Babel legend have found that its primary function is to explain the dispersion of the world's diverse nations and languages, Philo argues that the "confusion of tongues" signifies a more basic existential condition. For Philo, this confusion disrupted humankind's capacity for perfect communication, helping us value rhetorical action as an essential element of the confused, ongoing process of struggle that characterizes our everyday sociality. The confusion of tongues, therefore, simultaneously gave rise to rhetoric and the masses, as it imposed a principle of difference in language and discordant heterogeneity in the social order.*

> In no language is it so difficult to communicate as in language itself.
> —Karl Kraus
>
> What we've got here is failure to communicate.
> —Lucas Jackson, *Cool Hand Luke*

Legend has it that after Noah and his family braved the Great Flood, the remnants of humankind wandered west into Shinar in search of food and shelter. According to the Torah, at this time the world was composed of a single tribe that possessed "one language" and occupied a narrow sliver of land in Babylon. Yet this essential unity soon propelled their desire to live like God, so they began to build a great tower that could reach into the heavens. As this Tower of Babel grew taller and taller, God eventually

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grew jealous and decided to thwart their plans. According to the King James Version of Genesis, God declared: "Behold, the people *is* one, and they have all one language; . . . and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech . . . . Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth" (11.6–9). Not only did God scatter humankind across the earth, he also "confounded" or, more popularly, "confused" their speech, leaving them helpless to finish their journey to heaven. Thus the Tower of Babel crumbled and its architects were dispersed throughout the earth.

Although there has been endless commentary on this Genesis passage in the rabbinical and Christian traditions, most interpretations have viewed it as an anthropological allegory. That is, in most cases the Babel legend has been interpreted within a genealogy of nations and their unique linguistic traditions (see Hiebert 2007). Yet an undercurrent in this intellectual history finds that the "confusion of tongues" indicates a more basic existential condition, signifying our fall from the divinity of perfect communication and our rebirth as fractious, rhetorical beings. For these thinkers, the Tower of Babel legend contains a powerful lesson: if God wanted to tame our aspirations to divinity and have our great towers fall on their own accord, what more essential faculty could he "confuse" than our language? From this point of view, "confusion" does not simply arise when a Greek attempts to communicate with a Persian or a German; rather, we are all confused as soon as we are thrown into language; and rhetoric, therefore, is the source, medium, and instrument of our confusion.

This reading of the Babel legend has surfaced in various iterations throughout intellectual history[1]—for example, with Augustine (1972) and Dante Alighieri (2003, 31.67–90) on opposite ends of the Middle Ages, with Vico (1999) in early modernity, and with such figures as Walter Benjamin (2004, 71–73), Kenneth Burke (1969, 23–34, 138–140), and Jacques Derrida (1985) in the twentieth century. Yet Philo Judaeus, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria from about 20 BCE to 50 CE, was perhaps the first to grant rhetoric an existential significance based on the biblical tale of Babel. To answer how violence, selfishness, and reconciliation arose out of humankind's essential unity before the fall, Philo concludes that the problem must lie in the confusion of our tongues—and, therefore, in the simultaneous rise of rhetoric and the masses. Philo leaves us, indeed, with a provocative and mutually illuminating perspective on rhetoric and its masses: in the wake of the Confusion, rhetoric is not a *technē* of togetherness; rather, arising from a sudden introduction of difference into language, it is the basis of our division and alienation. The masses, accordingly, are not characterized by an anonymous, cohesive, and homogeneous clamor à

la turn-of-the-century social theorists like Gustave Le Bon and later critics of mass culture; instead, the Confusion generated the masses by dividing them from one another, leaving them fractured, heterogeneous, and incomprehensible. Turning to the book of Numbers (31.49), Philo recalls the social state of the masses before the Confusion: they had reached such a divine unity that "there is not one of them who has disagreed, but like musical instruments, skillfully tuned in all their tones, . . . neither uttering any word nor doing any action which shall be unmelodious or discordant" (1993a, 239). Yet the fall of Babel gave rise to a radically different social order, such that, as Donatella Di Cesare points out, today "Babel [has become] the homonym and synonym of 'confusion'" (2012, 36; also see Derrida 1985, 219). "Babble," therefore, characterizes Philo's conception of this essential relationship between rhetoric and the deracinated masses.

Despite Philo's provocative and highly original stance against the "sophists of literalness" who dominated Hellenistic Jewish thought during his lifetime (Philo 1993c, 373–4), his work has received little attention from theorists and historians of rhetoric. The present article addresses this gap in late Hellenistic rhetorical history by reviewing Philo's treatise on the Babel legend, *De Confusione Linguarum*. My argument proceeds as follows: First, I contextualize Philo's thesis within the historical context of Hellenistic Jewish philosophy. Then I describe how his provocative reading of the Babel legend differs from the prominent tradition of anthropological interpretation and anticipates important undercurrents in intellectual history. Next, I present Philo's work as a helpful supplement to contemporary theories of identification. In particular, Philo helps reframe the debate about whether humankind's origins lie in identification or division and how this relates to the essence and origin of our being-rhetorical. I suggest that Philo's most important contribution to rhetorical theory is his contention that the confusion of tongues provided the ontological conditions for rhetoric to emerge in human affairs. The great rupture effected by the fall of Babel gave rise to the division and desire that are ultimately rhetoric's conditions of existence: as Kenneth Burke would assert two thousand years after Philo, rhetoric characterizes "the state of Babel after the fall" (1969, 23). I conclude by briefly developing an argument that Philo leaves implicit in *De Confusione*: that the confusion of tongues is not purely a curse, but that its gift of rhetoric has allowed us to experience the ongoing "coming together" that we, before our division in Babel, had no reason to seek and no way to fulfill.

PHILO AGAINST THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL THESIS

The most prominent of the Alexandrian allegorical philosophers, Philo occupies an unusual and syncretic space in classical thought. Like most Jews living in the remains of the Ptolemaic Empire, he encountered the

Jewish tradition through a Hellenistic lens: Philo read the scriptures in the Greek-language *Septuagint*, and he encountered the Tower of Babel legend primarily through oral tradition and a few primary texts such as Genesis, the *Book of Baruch*, and the *Book of Jubilees*. Thus while he shares much in common with the Palestinian Jewish allegorists known as the *Dorshe Reshumot*,[2] the diasporic flavor of Philo's method shines through as he weaves insights from Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics into his scriptural exegeses. Philo was, moreover, something of a dissident in the classical Jewish tradition: his analysis of the Babel legend, in particular, departs from the prevailing interpretation of his day. This standard interpretation held that the "confusion of tongues" described in Genesis was the origin of the world's linguistic and ethnic diversity, as the inhabitants of Babel dispersed throughout the earth and gave rise to distinct language communities. This interpretive legacy has reverberated throughout modern intellectual history, as most scholars have valued the Babel legend primarily for its anthropological implications. Philosophers as diverse as Hobbes (1968, 1.4), Herder (1992), and Kant (2003, A707/B735) have turned to the Tower of Babel to explain the dispersion of peoples across the earth. A number of thinkers, however, have looked beyond the tale's anthropological implications to the existential crisis to which the Confusion gave rise. In *City of God*, for example, Augustine provides a familiar interpretation of the Babel legend, attributing "the diversity of languages" (1972, 16.4)—seventy-two in all (16.6)—to the fall of Babel: "And so the nations were divided by languages, and were scattered over the earth" (1972, 16.4). Yet, as Jean Bethke Elshtain points out, the fall of Babel and other divine ruptures convinced Augustine that language "helps to account for the irremediable murkiness of human affairs" (1998, 27; see Augustine 1972, 19.7). And Vico, following in Augustine's footsteps, likewise recognized that the Babel myth is more than simply a tale of ethnic dispersion. While Vico acknowledged that "[t]he confusion of languages happened miraculously, creating many different tongues all at once" (1999, 62), he also emphasized that Babel marked for humankind an existential corruption that was as thorough as our initial fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. In the words of Mark Lilla (1993, 21), for Vico, "[t]hese events—the separation of gentiles and Jews after the Flood, and the dispersal of the nations after Babel—imply two subsequent 'falls,' one in the faculty of spirit, the other in the faculty of language" (2003, 21). For Vico, of course, the confusion of tongues helped give rise to a divisive, yet ultimately creative, "poetic" misunderstanding among the world's fallen subjects.

Long before Augustine and Vico, however, in the first century CE Philo was already arguing that the anthropological thesis prevented us from learning the more fundamental lesson of Babel: "But they who follow only what is plain and easy, think that what is here intended to be recorded, is the origin of the languages of the Greeks and barbarians . . . . I would exhort not to be

content with stopping at this point, but to proceed onward . . . , considering that the mere words of the scriptures are, as it were, but shadows of bodies, and that the meanings which are apparent to investigation beneath them, are the real things to be pondered upon" (1993a, 251). This signature passage displays Philo's exegetical style, as well as his Middle Platonist roots: he often uses scriptural controversies to forward Cratyline arguments about meaning and popular misinterpretation. A demythologizing hermeneutics, therefore, is Philo's central method, and the scriptures serve as his primary tool of invention. As Maren Niehoff observes, "Philo idealizes language more than man. For him the ideal language does not belong to the realm of createdness. It rather seems to have preexisted with God Himself [and] entirely pertains to the realm of the eternal, unchanging, most real and most true" (2001, 191). Philo thus finds that his contemporaries have merely "stumbled" toward the divine truth of the scriptures (1993b, 345), because humans, with the "fallen speech" they acquired after Babel (1993a, 345), ultimately fail to grasp the divine language over which God maintains exclusive control and access. Philo's primary intellectual task in *De Confusione*, then, is to break down the scriptures and come closer to the truth of this divine language—a posture that often leads him to offer unorthodox, agonistic perspectives on the passages at hand.

While scholars disagree about which edition of the *Septuagint* Philo used, with some even claiming he invented his own text to lend credence to his unconventional interpretations,[3] we are fortunate that he begins his analysis by laying out his version of the Babel passage:

> And all the earth had one pronunciation, and there was one language among all men . . . . And they said, Come let us build ourselves a city and a tower whose head shall reach to heaven . . . . And the Lord came down to see the city, and the tower, which the sons of men had builded [*sic*]. And the Lord said, Behold, all mankind is one race, and there is but one language among them all; and they have begun to do this thing, and now there will not fail unto them anything of all the things which they desire to do. Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that each may not understand the voice of his neighbor. And the Lord scattered them from thence over the face of all the earth, and they desisted from building the city, and the tower. On this account the name of it was called Confusion, because there the Lord confused the languages of all the earth, and from thence the Lord scattered them over the face of all the earth. (1993a, 234)

For Philo the exegeticist, the precise meaning of *confusion* is central to the condition described in Genesis. He excavates the import of this "confusion" by arguing that it signifies "the destruction of all the original distinctive qualities, owing to their component parts penetrating one another at every

point" (1993a, 251). Continuing, Philo warns: "When God threatens impious reasonings with confusion, he is in fact not only commanding the whole species and power of each separate wickedness to be destroyed, but also that thing which has been made up of all their joint contributions; so that neither the parts by themselves, nor the union and harmony of the whole, can contribute any strength hereafter towards the destruction of the better part" (1993a, 251). Therefore, Philo argues, when God pronounces "let us then confuse their tongues," that is equivalent to him saying "let us make each separate one of the parts of wickedness deaf and dumb, so that it shall neither utter a voice of its own, nor be able to sound in unison with any other part, so as to be a cause of mischief" (Philo 1993a, 251; see Lieber 2005, 166). God's aim was "to dissolve the company of wickedness, to put an end to their confederacy, to destroy their community of action, to put out of sight and extirpate all their powers, to overthrow the might of their dominion" (1993a, 252). And God accomplished all of this, argues Philo, simply by confusing their language.

This division of humankind—which God accomplished through linguistic confusion—atomized the masses of Babel "in order that men might not be able to cooperate in common for deeds of wickedness through understanding one another; and that they might not, when they were in a manner deprived of all means of communication with one another, be able with united energies to apply themselves to the same actions" (1993a, 235). At this stage of the text, Philo argues that the fundamental identification-with-others that characterized the masses before the fall eventually gave rise to a "symphony of evils": "consider the ineffable multitude of evils which proceed from each individual man, and especially when he is under the influence of that ill-timed, and inharmonious, and unmusical agreement" (1993a, 235). For Philo, the evil nature of individual humans is exacerbated by the harmony granted by perfect communication. As Joseph O'Leary notes, for Philo "*symphônia* is not always a good thing: a concourse of calamities can bring down the guards (*doruphoroi*) of body and soul, and the collusion of the three parts of a corrupted soul . . . resembles an insane crew and passengers uniting to scuttle their boat" (2003, 34). Philo teaches that wickedness can easily arise in the absence of a fractious physical and social body. Accordingly, by confusing the tongues of the masses, God threw their symphony of evils into disharmony; he made "each separate one of the parts of wickedness deaf and dumb, so that it shall neither utter a voice of its own, nor be able to sound in unison with any other part" (1993a, 187). Thus while Philo's contemporaries interpreted the fall of Babel as a curse on humankind, Philo finds in the Confusion a tale of God's creative victory over evil: "[God's] especial object here is to dissolve the company of wickedness, to put an end to their confederacy, to destroy their community of action, to put out of sight and extirpate all their powers, to overthrow the might of their dominion, which they had strengthened by fearful lawlessness" (1993a, 193). In short, the

meager upside is that the Confusion deprived the masses of the symphonic wickedness that fueled their desire to challenge God's supremacy.

CONCLUSION: IDENTIFICATION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR FELLOWSHIP

Despite its eccentricities and Platonic trappings, Philo's oeuvre provides some attractive footholds for current theory building. Perhaps most obviously, Philo's *De Confusione* is relevant to recent debates on identification. While Kenneth Burke famously argued that "Identification is compensatory to division" (1969, 22), Diane Davis has provided a Freudian—and, I would add, perhaps Philonic—supplement to that claim. Davis speaks of an "originary identification" (2008, 140) that precedes the division that accompanies our thrownness into language: "almost immediately after birth (42 minutes after, according to recent studies) infants will imitate a number of facial gestures . . . . Here, identification surely does not depend on shared meaning: a mimetic rapport precedes understanding, affection precedes projection" (131). For Davis, there is a primitive "affectability" that suggests identification tends toward a *recovery* rather than what Burke calls "compensation." Philo's genealogy presents us with a similar conclusion: when Burke argues that "[i]f men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity" (1969, 22), one can respond with Philo that the gift of rhetoric is what at first drove humans apart. From this perspective, rhetoric can be understood as the struggle with and over logos in an always-unfolding—and always clumsy—quest for the identification we irretrievably lost in the collapse of Babel. For Philo, to identify is not necessarily to "compensate" for division, but is rather to stumble closer toward—or further away from—an essential togetherness that is our originary condition.

To conclude this article—which should serve as a mere footnote to Philo's contributions to rhetorical theory—I would like to elaborate on an assumption that lies implicit in Philo's account of the Confusion. Philo argues that, because of our essential identification-with-others before the fall of Babel, we had no need or desire to strive for fellowship (*koinônia*).[4] From this perspective, the introduction of rhetoric into the lives of the masses—that is, the introduction of discord and division brought on by imperfect communication—gives rise to more productive possibilities for our being together. This revision of the Babel legend, therefore, allows us to value rhetorical action as an essential element of the confused, ongoing process of struggle that characterizes our everyday sociality. Without the division effected by the confusion of tongues—in other words, if we still possessed "one language"—perhaps our great towers would practically build themselves. Our rebirth as rhetorical beings, however, presents us with the

opportunity and challenge to overcome difference, and to struggle with and against one another in search of new forms of human fellowship.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Hans Kellner and the anonymous reviewers for their excellent feedback during the development of this article.

NOTES

1. See Steiner (1998) for a thorough history of the Babel problem and its implications for theories of language and translation.

2. See Longenecker (2004, 45). Also see the classic, authoritative investigation by Jacob Z. Lauterbach (1911a, 1911b).

3. See Marcos (2000, 264); also see Katz (1950).

4. Philo speaks of fellowship as *koinônia*, a term that takes on special significance vis-à-vis logos in Philo's thought. See O'Leary (2003, 35–39). For a more general discussion of communication and *koinônia*, also see Peters (1999, 267).

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