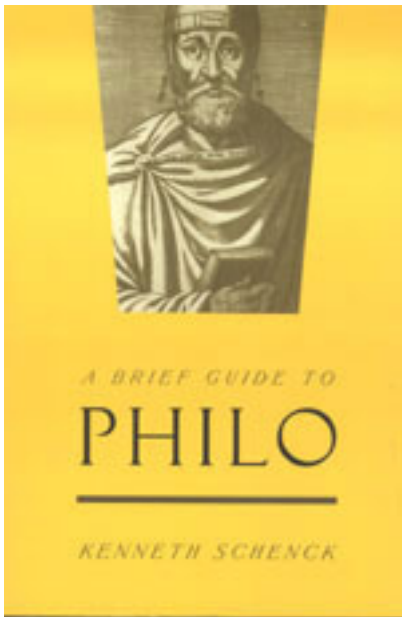


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Schenck, Kenneth

A Brief Guide to Philo

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005. Pp. xi + 172.
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This book will certainly be a welcome introduction to many students to the life and work of Philo. It is written in way that will make readers with only an elementary knowledge of the topics dealt with understand it. It has become a fine contribution to the other introductions already available. As most of the readers of this review will probably know, the main other introductions available are the ones by E. R. Goodenough (*An Introduction to Philo Judaeus* [Brown Classics in Judaica; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1986; orig. 1940, 2nd ed. 1962), and Samuel Sandmel (*Philo of Alexandria: An Introduction* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979]). These are hardly available in bookstores any more, and both are also somewhat outdated.

The more recent book by Peder Borgen (*Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete for His Time*. [NovTSup 86; Leiden: Brill, 1997) is certainly recommendable too, but most probably for those a little more initiated (!) into the world of Philo. The present book by Kenneth Schenck seems to be a worthy addition to the volumes of Goodenough and Sandmel.

The book has seven chapters; the five first are of the more usual kind dealing with aspects of Philo's life and work and the usefulness of Philo for New Testament studies. The last

two chapters are more specific for this volume, and these two alone are probably worth the money paid for the whole book.

The first chapter (“Philo’s Piece of the Puzzle” [1–8]) is a brief introduction to the study of Philo and the possible profit of reading his works. It briefly presents issues relevant to Philo’s place in the Hellenistic world, the many portraits of Philo in more recent research (exegete, philosopher, and mystic), and the outline of the present book.

The second chapter (“Philo’s Life and Writings” [9–28]) deals with Philo’s family and education, his relation to Alexandrian politics, and an overview and categorization of his writings. Philo was trained in the synagogue but also received some education in a Greek gymnasium. He subordinated, however, his affinity for the Greek world and philosophy to his Jewish identity. As a member of an influential family, he probably held both Alexandrian and Roman citizenship and was for some time, not at least after 38 C.E., involved in the politics of Alexandria.

The third chapter, “Philo among Jews and Gentiles” (29–48), tries to locate Philo within mainstream Diaspora Judaism. It further comments on Philo and the interpretation of Scripture and his relation to Jewish practices and to the temple; it also provides comments on his eschatology (destiny of Israel) and his relation to rabbinic traditions and to Hellenism.

The fourth chapter (“Philo’s View of the World” [49–72]) deals further with aspects of his ideology by first presenting a brief review of philosophical traditions in Philo (a great deal of Stoic ideology and ethics within a Platonic framework). Then a brief sketch of Philo’s view of reality is given by focusing on his view of God, the powers and agents of God, and the creation. Furthermore, this chapter deals with Philo’s ethics and Philo and society.

The fifth and last of the more ordinary chapters in this introduction (“Philo and Christianity” [73–95]) is perhaps the most interesting of these for New Testament students, since it provides an overview of the usefulness of Philo for studying the New Testament. After some comments on Philo and early Hellenistic Christianity, the author deals with Philo and Paul’s writings, Philo and Hebrews (which receives the most thorough presentation), and Philo and the Gospel of John.

The author then presents the two chapters that perhaps will be most appreciated by those wanting to get more acquainted with Philo and his works. Chapter 6, “Philo’s Writings in a Nutshell” (97–118), represents a brief but nevertheless packed with insight introduction to each of Philo’s writings. Its stated purpose is “to get acquainted with the basic content

of the Philonic corpus in a way that lets us get into Philo's head" (97). The author thus works his way through each of Philo's works, characterizing each of them in a very succinct way.

The seventh and last main chapter consists of a small, but useful "Topical Index to the Philonic Corpus" (119–37). It is obviously selective, but it provides a first help for a further study of some of the topics mentioned in the preceding chapters of the book.

Finally, the book contains a glossary (139–42), a bibliography (143–48), and two indexes (general, 149–53; source, 155–69).

The author is to be congratulated for this fine introduction geared for students coming to the works of Philo for the first time. I find it to be well informed, fair in its presentations of various scholars and viewpoints, and well endnoted. The value of Philo for studying Judaism and early Christianity is well set forth. Schenck's many brief definitions and explanatory text-boxes throughout the book will also, I presume, be valuable to students. All in all, those wanting some preliminary initiation into the mysteries of Philo's works will find in this book a trustworthy guide. Then they, one hopes, will want to proceed to some higher wisdom like Philo himself did.