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# Abraham as Model for Instruction and Virtue in Jewish *Paideia*: Observations on Philo of Alexandria's *De Abrahamo*

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## Abstract

*This essay aims to demonstrate how Philo in his treatise De Abrahamo presents Abraham as “self-taught” taken to mean “God-taught,” as one who obtained instruction from God and nature in contrast to any human teaching or written sources, such as those available in the Greek encyclical education. According to Philo, anyone can emulate Abraham as a model of being “self-taught,” since the written laws of Moses reflect, reproduce, and replicate Abraham’s virtues in harmony with the unwritten laws in nature. This meant that adherence to the written law of Moses and emulating the exemplar of Abraham provide the best possible approximation for any human being to the unwritten laws in nature. Abraham, as the founding ancestor of the Jewish nation and forerunner of proselytes, was a paradigmatic figure of identification for “the study of the philosophy of the fathers” and the acquisition of virtues, which takes place each Sabbath in the synagogues.*

## Keywords

*Abraham; “self-taught”; instruction; unwritten law; learning from nature; model.*

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## 1. The Aim of the Study

This essay is meant to be a small contribution to Philo of Alexandria as an important source for Jewish *paideia* in relation to encyclical education in the first century CE.<sup>1</sup> In Philonic studies, much has been written about his view of *paideia* and the two “school systems” or educations available to contemporary Jewish students, participating in both the Greek schools that the Jews have in common with their pagan surroundings and the Sabbath “schools” that are held in the synagogues.<sup>2</sup> With regard

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1 In this essay, I refer to the concept of *paideia* as the role of education in cultivating and passing on virtues in terms of the aim of formation and development of a person.

2 For a survey, see, e.g., Peder Borgen, “Greek Encyclical Education, Philosophy and the Synagogue: Observations from Philo of Alexandria’s Writings,” in *Libens Merito: Festskrift till Stig Strömholm på sjuttioårsdagen 16. Sep. 2001*, ed. Olle Matsson, AASU 21 (Uppsala: Kungl. Vetenskapsamhällets Uppsala Handlingar, 2001), 61–71.

to the former, Philo takes Abraham's involvement in the encyclical studies as a model for himself, and also highlights the dangers involved in not having the right aim and motivation for the secular education.<sup>3</sup> Much less attention, however, has been paid to the issue of Abraham as a special paradigm for Jewish *paideia* in the treatises of Philo written for the addressees of the Jewish community and "outsiders," such as non-Jews qua potential proselytes.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the aim of this chapter is to shed fresh light on Abraham as an educational model within Jewish *paideia*, based on observations from Philo's treatise *De Abrahamo* as the point of departure.<sup>5</sup> The following interrelated aspects shall then be explored: How does Philo emphasize Abraham as an educational model in this treatise, and why? How is the figure of Abraham interpreted on different levels of biblical exegesis in relation to Greek educational concepts? What is the meaning of Abraham, conceived here as "self-taught" by nature, in contrast to Philo's portrayal of Abraham elsewhere as one who is taught and learns through instruction? How are Greek educational ideas related to the conception of the law of Moses and further applied to the instruction of the schools that takes place in the synagogues? The search for answers to these questions leads to the following main thesis:

1. Philo negotiates Abraham in the context of the Greek educational concepts and distinctions between the "self-taught" by nature, on the one hand, and instruction/learning by any human agency, on the other. The self-taught character of Abraham is associated with the perfection of virtues promoted by the "unwritten laws," through which the patriarch obtained his instruction from God in contrast to any human teaching, such as the one available in the encyclical education.<sup>6</sup>
2. The self-taught character of Abraham, aligned with the unwritten laws, is emphasized by Philo in order to present him as an educational model for the Jewish

3 As Abraham as his model, see Samuel Sandmel, *Philo's Place in Judaism: A Study of Conceptions of Abraham in Jewish Literature* (Philadelphia: Hebrew Union College Press, 1971), 198 n. 407; Alan Mendelson, *Secular Education in Philo of Alexandria*, HUCM 7 (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1982), 65; Borgen, "Greek Encyclical Education," 61–62. For the warning about secular education, see Peder Borgen, "Alternative Aims and Choices in Education: Analysis of Selected Texts," *SPhiloA* 28 (2016): 261–62, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1gxxpz0.16>.

4 Martina Böhm, "Abraham und die Erzväter bei Philo: Überlegungen zur Exegese un Hermeneutik im frühen Judentum," in *Philo und das Neue Testament: Wechselseitige Wahrnehmungen; 1. Internationales Symposium zum Corpus Judaico-Hellenisticum, 1.–4. Mai, Eisenach/Jena*, ed. Roland Deines and Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, WUNT 172 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 390–91.

5 Most recently, several studies refer to the aspect of the sage as an exemplar in this work, without, however, exhausting the relevance of Abraham as a role model of Jewish *paideia* in the context of Greek education and the place of this topic in Philo's oeuvre as such; see, e.g., David T. Runia, "The Place of *De Abrahamo* in Philo's Oeuvre," *SPhiloA* 20 (2008): 145–50, esp. 145; Elisa Uusimäki, *Lived Wisdom in Jewish Antiquity: Studies in Exercise and Exemplarity*, Education, Literary Culture, and Religious Practice in the Ancient World (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), 31–34.

6 I shall use the idea of *unwritten laws* or *natural law* to refer to a universal moral code as distinct from the idea of *laws of nature*, taken to mean the physical laws governing physical reality. For this distinction and a survey of these ideas in Greek thought, see Anthony A. Long, "Law and Nature in Greek Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Law*, ed. Michael Gagarin and David Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 413, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521818400.023>.

nation as well as for a broader audience. According to Philo, the life of Abraham recorded in the Mosaic writings provides the best possible approximation to the unwritten laws and their perfect virtues, and serves the aim of legitimizing Jewish *paideia* and the law of Moses in the light of Hellenistic education and culture and its appeal not just to Jews, but also to a broader audience of potential converts to the Jewish nation. This means that Philo conceives of the Mosaic writings as containing two distinct sets of laws or jurisdictions, the unwritten law embodied in Abraham and the patriarchs, and the special written laws mediated through Moses. Thus, the Mosaic jurisdiction identifies and leads to the same virtues that Abraham and the patriarchs already achieved, in terms of being unwritten laws before the written laws were established.

3. On the literary level of biblical interpretation, Philo's conception of Abraham's way of acquiring divine instruction also bears on Jewish *paideia* that takes place in the synagogal gatherings. As designed for reproducing the divine wisdom and perfection of virtues in contradistinction to the Greek encyclical education and teaching, the Mosaic training in the philosophy and virtues of the fathers was also applied to the historical context and circumstances of Philo's own time. Abraham's ascent and recognition of the one true God, and the resulting virtues served, then, as a scriptural model, in the light of which the Jewish people were able to sustain their stamina and protest against the divine claim of the emperor Gaius Caligula.

My method of analysis follows a historical-critical approach, in which the various concepts or ideas in Philo's texts are traced and situated in the broader cultural context of Jewish and Greco-Roman literature. As a biblical exegete for his time, Philo applied the biblical text to his own contemporary and historical situation on various hermeneutical levels, that is, on the concrete or literal level, on the level of the cosmic and general principles, which includes the deeper or allegorical meaning, and on the level of the divine realm of the beyond.

## 2. Previous Work

Much has already been written on Abraham's *paideia* in terms of his double relationship with Hagar and Sarah.<sup>7</sup> According to Philo, Abraham took part in two schools for the following reasons: "It is because the virtue that comes through teaching, which Abraham pursues, needs the fruits of several studies, both those born in wedlock, which deal with wisdom, and the base-born, those of the preliminary lore of the schools" (*Congr.* 35). Thus, his relationship with Hagar represents the encyclical ed-

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Karl Olav Sandnes, *The Challenge of Homer: School, Pagan Poets and Early Christianity*, LNTS 400 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 69–71; Jason M. Zurawski, "Mosaic Torah as Encyclical Paideia: Reading Paul's Allegory of Hagar and Sarah in Light of Philo of Alexandria's," in *Pedagogy in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Karina M. Hogan, Matthew Goff, and Emma Wassermann, AIL 41 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 286–91, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1qqhfvv.16>.

ucation (ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία), which was conceived as preparatory and subordinate in relation to wisdom and virtue, illustrated by his true wife Sarah. Accordingly, applied to his historical setting and also his own education, Philo thought encyclical training should only prepare for true philosophy, that is, the wisdom and virtues attained in the real *paideia* in the context of the Jewish school.<sup>8</sup> Since Philonic scholarship seems to have paid most attention to Abraham's encyclical *paideia*, this essay takes its lead from the need to explore further Philo's conception of Abraham as a model for instruction and virtue within a Jewish schooling and context.<sup>9</sup> I shall commence with some brief remarks on why this study might remedy such a need as it relates to previous works within this field.

With regard to the educational aspect of Philo's portrayal of Abraham, *in casu* the portrayal we find in his treatise *De Abrahamo*, several scholars have pointed to Abraham as a model whom the addressees are to imitate. Thus, referring to *Abr.* 3–5, Alan Mendelson suggests that Abraham “is a model for the *acquisition* of virtue” and “in the center for an educational system which places a premium on imitation.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Annette Yoshiko Reed highlights the role of Abraham in the same passage as a model for moral edification and emulation, pointing in general to the role of *exempla* of various heroes in Roman historiography and Greek education, and thus akin to Livy's *History of Rome*, the *Memorable Words and Deeds* of Valerius Maximus, or Roman and Greek interpretations of Homer.<sup>11</sup> More attention, however, should be paid to Abraham as a specific type of soul and an exemplar as one who is self-taught, one who is inspired and instructed by God and by nature, in terms of the unwritten laws as the source for the virtues to be emulated: that is, one who attained virtue and perfection by instruction from God. Most recently, scholars such as Ellen Birnbaum and John Dillon, as well as Daniel Lanziger, have commented on this issue. Thus, Birnbaum and Dillon in their commentary on *De Abrahamo* highlight the problem that “it may seem contradictory to maintain that teachers are unnecessary and at the same time to present the patriarch as a model of one who is taught.”<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Lanziger claims: “es sei die Kernthese des Werks, dass Abraham für den Tugenderwerb durch Belehrung stehe . . . Umso erstaunlicher ist es deshalb, dass diese These

8 Cf., e.g., Seneca, *Ep.* 88, for the distinction between these concepts of “wisdom” (*sapientia*) and “virtue” (*virtus*) applied to philosophy over against *artes liberales*. Philo seems to presuppose and reflect such a discussion and conflict; for a comparison of this text with *Mut.* 253–263, see Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo*, NovTSup 10 (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 102.

9 I think Zurawski is correct to claim that “Most studies related to Philo and *paideia* have focused exclusively on his relationship to the encyclical or preliminary *paideia*” (“Mosaic Torah as Encyclical *Paideia*,” 288 n. 8).

10 Mendelson, *Secular Education in Philo of Alexandria*, 62.

11 Reed, “The Construction and Subversion of Patriarchal Perfection: Abraham and the Exemplarity in Philo, Josephus, and the *Testament of Abraham*,” *JSJ* 40 (2009): 192–95, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006309X355187>.

12 Birnbaum and Dillon, *Philo of Alexandria, On the Life of Abraham: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, PACS 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 210.

in der Schrift kaum entfaltet wird.”<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, these scholars do not try to solve the problem and explain the reason for such apparently contradictory conceptions about Abraham on Philo’s part. On the other hand, it is commendable that Hindy Najman, without discussing this particular problem, nevertheless provides a reasonable solution by pointing to Abraham, Isaac, and Moses as sages and models of the self-taught: “What is remarkable about them is that they don’t require an external teacher in order to reach their end. Instead, they follow the nature within themselves... it is not that the self-taught person needs no teacher at all—rather, the self-taught person has an *internal teacher*.”<sup>14</sup> At this point Najman rightly suggests the solution to the conundrum of why Philo still can posit Abraham as an exemplar, who learns through instruction, namely as self-taught, obtaining the lessons of nature. It is a weakness of Najman’s study, however, that she does not further draw out how Abraham was self-taught and learned. As I shall suggest, a closer scrutiny of this motif of being self-taught indicates that to Philo, the patriarch is “a law and unwritten statutes” himself and taught by God, and this might explain why Philo avoids emphasizing Abraham’s learning process and presenting as a model of one who is taught by a human agency. Further, against the background of Philo’s claim that the instruction obtained from nature is available to *anyone* (cf. §61),<sup>15</sup> it becomes pivotal to examine the concept of Abraham as paradigmatic for anyone, Jews and non-Jews alike, who may learn to be guided in an “untutored” way by the unwritten laws, by virtue of the right reason of nature.<sup>16</sup>

Philo’s description of the relationship between the life of Abraham and the particular Mosaic laws in *De Abrahamo* has been another much-discussed matter. Thus, for example, Najman maintains that “since the lives of the patriarchs embody the law of nature, it follows that the enacted laws of Moses also embody the law of nature.”<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, the Mosaic legislation encompasses all the parts of the Pentateuch, including the narratives about the patriarchs, so that the laws of Moses are seen as a reminder and expressions of the actual words and deeds of the sages. On this basis, Najman regards the study of the Mosaic torah as the textual guide and path to perfection.<sup>18</sup> Birnbaum and Dillon take a different approach and suggest “that Philo

13 Lanzinger, “Einführung in die Schrift,” in *Das Leben des Weisen: Philon von Alexandria*, “*De Abrahamo*,” ed. Daniel Lanzinger, SAPERE 36 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 16.

14 Najman, “Text and Figure in Ancient Jewish *Paideia*,” in *Authoritative Scriptures in Ancient Judaism*, ed. Mladen Popović, JSJSup 141 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 259 [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004190740\\_015](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004190740_015).

15 At this juncture, Najman’s claim that “those who are not born with this gift of being self-taught ... may take as a model those who *are* self-taught,” seems somewhat confusing, and is unable to explain the universalistic dimension to Philo’s statement here that *anyone* can obtain the lessons of nature (“Text and Figure,” 259–60).

16 In his first treatise of the exposition, the *De opificio mundi*, Philo outlines the framework of the law and the response to it by human beings. According to Philo, human beings are created with reason, as λογικός, and so able to respond to the rational structure embedded in the cosmos and identified with the law of nature; *Opif.* 3, 16–25, 142–144. I hold *Abr.* 61 to fit such a line of thought. See also, for a similar interpretation, Runia, “Place of *De Abrahamo*,” 146–48.

17 Najman, “Text and Figure,” 261.

18 Najman, “Text and Figure,” 262–64.

views Abraham as himself a law because he achieves in his life the very same *virtues* that the particular laws are designed to promote.”<sup>19</sup> At this juncture, they seem to blur the distinction Philo made between two sets of law in their suggestion that Abraham, embodying the unwritten laws and their inherent virtues, accords with the particular laws of Moses, and not vice versa, with Abraham seen as the legal norm. The observations by Najman, Birnbaum, and Dillon are viable and should be taken further in order to explore more exactly the relationship between Abraham as a “himself a law and unwritten ordinances” and the particular laws within the encompassing law of Moses, and within the context of Greek educational ideas. Such a study may demonstrate that the distinction and interconnectedness between two sets of law, the unwritten and the written law, and the virtues that these elicit, helps Philo to delineate the aim of Mosaic *paideia* as founded on the unwritten laws embodied in Abraham, in contrast to Greek education.

More research needs to be done into Philo’s appropriation of Greek educational ideas relative to Abraham (and the patriarchs) and applied to his own Jewish setting. Let me offer some brief comments on earlier work relevant to the aim of this study. Scholars such as Peder Borgen and David T. Runia have made observations that may corroborate the view that the expository writings such as *De Abrahamo* should be examined in the context of the historical writings. In particular, one should ask whether educational motifs are brought into Philo’s interpretation of Abraham and may subsequently echo social and political circumstances or the daily life of the Jewish people in his own time or environment.<sup>20</sup> Thus, for example, Borgen has demonstrated that Greek educational ideas are intertwined with Philo’s interpretation of the laws of Moses and appropriated to the discussion of the relationship between the encyclical education and Jewish *paideia* that takes place in Jewish synagogues, which Philo labels *schools* of wisdom and virtues.<sup>21</sup> On the basis of the passage in *Mut.* 259–263, Borgen comments on this relationship, which is particularly appropriate with a view to the aim of this study: “The basic difference between these two schools, according to Philo, is that the encyclical uses human teaching as its basis, whereas the philosophy of the laws of Moses studied in the synagogues has its basis in self-taught wisdom brought forth by nature itself.”<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, Borgen does not refer to *De Abrahamo* at this point. As I shall suggest, this treatise provides more support for such an observation.

In a detailed study of the opening section of *Legatio ad Gaium*, §§1–7, Runia draws on *Abr.* 57–59 as a background to elucidate the idea of Israel explained as “he

19 Birnbaum and Dillon, *On the Life of Abraham*, 397 (emphasis original).

20 On passages in *De Abrahamo* that in general may reflect circumstances from the life of the Jewish people in Philo’s own time or his environment, see Birnbaum and Dillon, *On the Life of Abraham*, 17–20.

21 Borgen has highlighted this observation in several studies, see Borgen, *Bread from Heaven*, 99–121; Borgen, “Greek Encyclical Education,” 63–65; Borgen, “Alternative Aims and Choices in Education,” 259–64.

22 Borgen, “Greek Encyclical Education,” 67.

who sees God,” as applied to the Jewish nation as a visionary people.<sup>23</sup> Runia fails, however, to show how the latter text might be relevant to advance our understanding of the statement in *Legat.* 5, in its historical context, about Israel that has been “schooled to see” (ὁρᾶν πεπαίδευνται) what is ungenerated and divine. The present essay aims to draw out the implications of such an observation.

### 3. Abraham as Self-Taught by the *Paideia* of God and Nature

As I have mentioned above, more attention should be paid to the idea of Abraham as self-taught, the one who is inspired and instructed by nature, as the source of his virtues. Thus, as I am about to show, Philo makes a distinction between being self-taught in terms of being taught by God and nature in contrast to receiving instruction from a human teacher or school. It is worth noting that alongside these concepts we often find a set of satellite words and phrases that expound and elaborate the meaning of these key concepts. Thus, for example, on the side of the concept of “self-taught” (αὐτομαθής) are ranged such phrases or words as “nature” (φύσις), “virtue” (ἀρετή), “wisdom” (φρόνησις), “complete” (ὀλόκληρος), “perfect” (παντελής), “easy/toilless” (ἄπονος), and “unwritten” (ἄγραφος, in terms of nature or laws). On the opposite side are associated phrases like “learn” (by instructors; μανθάνω), “toil” (of teaching and learning; πόνος), “strength”/not “weakness” (ἀσθενής), and “written letter/text” (γράμμα).<sup>24</sup> With regard to the referential background for these concepts, I shall commence with a succinct comparison with some Greek educational traditions. At this point, to illustrate such educational ideas and contrasts, I shall draw on data offered, for example, by Plutarch and Pindar, from whom I quote:

ὥστε, ὅπερ ἔφηρ, τῆς εὐμαθείας λογικωτέραν εἶναι τὴν αὐτομάθειαν ἐν αὐτοῖς.

I conclude, as I said before, that self-instruction implies more reason than does readiness to learn from others. (Plutarch, *Mor.* 973E [Helmbold, modified])<sup>25</sup>

οὐκ ἀμαθὴς οὐδ’ ἀπαιδευτος, αὐτομαθὴς δέ τις μᾶλλον οὐσα καὶ ἀπροσδεής, οὐ δι’ ἀσθένειαν ἀλλὰ ῥώμη καὶ τελειότητι τῆς κατὰ φύσιν ἀρετῆς, χαίρειν ἐῶσα τὸν παρ’ ἐτέρων διὰ μαθήσεως τοῦ φρονεῖν συνερανισμὸν.

It is no uninstructed or untrained faculty, but rather self-taught and self-sufficient—and not for lack of strength. It is just because of the health and perfection of its natural virtue that it is indifferent to the contributions to its intelligence supplied by the instruction of others. (Plutarch, *Mor.* 992A)

23 David T. Runia, “Philo of Alexandria, *Legatio ad Gaium* 1–7,” in *Neotestamentica et Philonica: Studies in Honor of Peder Borgen*, ed. David E. Aune, Torrey Seland, and Jarl H. Ulrichsen, NovT-Sup 106 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 362–63, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004268241\\_017](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004268241_017).

24 Philo makes use of these concepts in several passages in which he draws a distinction between those who are self-taught and perfect and those who acquire knowledge and improvement progressively, and learn it laboriously; cf. *Migr.* 27–33; *Fug.* 166; *Congr.* 36–38.

25 Unless otherwise specified, all translations are taken from the Loeb Classical Library editions.

τὸ δὲ φυᾷ κράτιστον ἅπαν; πολλοὶ δὲ διδασκᾶσι ἀνθρώπων ἀρεταῖς κλέος ὄρουσαν ἀρέσθαι. . . .

What comes by nature is altogether best. Many men strive to win fame with virtues that are taught. (Pindar, *Ol.* 9.100)

The similarities in phraseology and concepts between these texts and Philo's picture of Abraham (and the patriarchs) in *Abr.* suggest that Jewish *paideia* in this treatise might be read in contradistinction to, and against the background of, such Greek educational ideas. Thus, in the translation of the following Greek texts, the words in **bold type** mark the protestations about what Philo envisages as the kind of instruction Abraham (and the patriarchs) did *not* receive, while the words in *italics* explain which education they actually achieved, that is, becoming virtuous by means of the self-taught instruction and the unwritten law in nature.

ΦΙΛΩΝΟΣ ΒΙΟΣ ΣΟΦΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΚΑΤΑ ΔΙΔΑΣΚΑΛΙΑΝ ΤΕΛΕΙΩΘΕΝΤΟΣ Η ΝΟΜΩΝ ΑΓΡΑΦΩΝ <ΤΟ ΠΡΩΤΟΝ> Ο ΕΣΤΙ ΠΕΡΙ ΑΒΡΑΑΜ

Of Philo, the Life of the Wise Man Made Perfect through Teaching, or the First Book on Unwritten Laws. (*The Title*)

ένός μὲν βουλόμενος ἐπιδείξει, ὅτι τὰ τεθειμένα διατάγματα τῆς φύσεως οὐκ ἀπάδει, δευτέρου δὲ ὅτι οὐ πολὺς πόνος τοῖς ἐθέλουσι κατὰ τοὺς κειμένους νόμους ζῆν, ὅποτε καὶ ἀγράφῳ τῇ νομοθεσίᾳ, πρὶν τι τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀναγραφῆναι τῶν ἐν μέρει, ῥαδίως καὶ εὐπετῶς ἐχρήσαντο οἱ πρῶτοι; ὡς δεόντως ἂν τινα φάναι, τοὺς τεθέντας νόμους μηδὲν ἄλλ' ἢ ὑπομνήματα εἶναι βίου τῶν παλαιῶν, ἀρχαιολογοῦντας ἔργα καὶ λόγους, οἷς ἐχρήσαντο. ἐκεῖνοι γὰρ οὔτε γνώριμοι καὶ φοιτηταὶ γενόμενοι τινῶν οὔτε παρὰ διδασκάλους ἄχρη πρᾶττειν καὶ λέγειν ἀναδιδαχθέντες, αὐτήκοοι δὲ καὶ αὐτομαθεῖς. . . .

First he [Moses] wished to show that the enacted ordinances are not inconsistent with nature; and secondly that those who wish to live in accordance with the laws as they stand have no difficult task, seeing that the first generations before any at all of the particular statutes was set in writing followed the unwritten law with perfect ease, so that one might properly say that the enacted laws are nothing else than memorials of the life of the ancients, preserving to a later generation their actual words and deeds. For **they were not scholars or pupils of others, nor did they learn under teachers** what was right to say or do: *they listened to no voice or instruction but their own.* (*Abr.* 5–6)

. . . ὁ δ' ἄνευ παραινέσεως δίχα τοῦ κελευσθῆναι γενόμενος εὐελπὶς ἀγράφῳ μὲν νόμῳ δὲ πάλιν αὐτομαθεῖ τὴν ἀρετὴν ταύτην πεπαίδευται, ὃν ἡ φύσις ἔθηκε.

. . . but he who gains this virtue of hopefulness **without being led to it by exhortation or command** has been *educated into it by a law* which nature has laid down, *a law unwritten yet intuitively learnt.* (*Abr.* 16)

θεώμενος γὰρ τις τὴν ἐν τῇ φύσει τάξιν καὶ τὴν παντὸς λόγου κρείττονα πολιτείαν, ἣ χρήται ὁ κόσμος, ἀναδιδάσκειται, φθεγγομένου μηδενός, εὐνομον καὶ εἰρηνικὸν βίον ἐπιτηδεύειν εἰς τὴν τῶν καλῶν ἐξομοίωσιν ἀποβλέποντα.

For anyone who contemplates the order in nature and the constitution enjoyed by the world-city whose excellence no words can describe, **needs no speaker to teach him to**

*practice a law-abiding and peaceful life* and to aim at assimilating himself to its beauties. (*Abr.* 61)

ἐποίησεν ὁ ἀνὴρ οὗτος, οὐ γράμμασιν ἀναδιδραχθεὶς, ἀλλ' ἀγράφῳ τῇ φύσει σπουδάσας ὑγιαινούσαις καὶ ἀνόσοις ὄρμαϊς ἐπακολουθῆσαι; ... τοιοῦτος ὁ βίος τοῦ πρώτου καὶ ἀρχηγέτου τοῦ ἔθνους ἐστίν, ... νόμος αὐτὸς ὢν καὶ θεσμὸς ἀγραφος.

He did them, **not taught by written words**, but *unwritten nature gave him the zeal to follow* where wholesome and untainted impulse led him.... Such was the life of the first, the founder of the nation,... *himself a law and an unwritten statute.* (*Abr.* 275–276)

A succinct analysis of these passages from *De Abrahamo*, including its title, suggests that Philo draws on Greek educational ideas. A few observations may be offered to corroborate this assumption. Although Plutarch makes a distinction between “nature” and “teaching” as regards the animal world, the agreements with Pindar and Philo show that the same conceptions might be applied to human beings as well. Thus, in a similar vein as Plutarch and Pindar, Philo refers to “nature” (φύσις) and draws a contrast to teaching that emerges from an external source (Philo, *Abr.* 6, 16, 275; Plutarch, *Mor.* 973E, 992A; Pindar, *Ol.* 9:100). Both Plutarch and Philo emphasize nature as the source of being “self-taught” (αὐτομαθής) in contrast to the use of instruction by a teacher (Philo, *Abr.* 6, 16; Plutarch, *Mor.* 973E, 992A). They both seek to corroborate the claim that there is no need for a teacher by the assertion that nature is “perfect” (cognates of τέλειος) and self-sufficient, thanks to the completeness of virtues in the first place (Philo, *Abr.* 5, The Title; Plutarch, *Mor.* 992A). In this context, the adherence to the laws of Moses is emphasized as not very laborious (οὐ πολὺς πόνος), since Abraham and the earliest human beings easily (ῥαδίως) obeyed the unwritten legislation before any one of the particular laws was written down at all (*Abr.* 5). Here, Philo seems to presuppose the idea that the obedience to the law of Moses is a toilless achievement, in contrast to the toil of encyclical learning and teaching. This idea is expressed explicitly in his work *Leg.* 3:

But the man on whom God bestows in overflowing measure his good things in perfection is free from toil... For, as toiling [πονέω] itself falls short of the toilless [ἄπονος] achievement and is inferior to it, so does the imperfect [ἀτελής] fall short of the perfect [τέλειος], and that which learns [μανθάνω] of that which is self-taught [αὐτομαθής]. (*Leg.* 3.135)

Moreover, according to Plutarch, Pindar, and Philo, the self-taught instruction obtained from “nature” (φύσις) seems to be the norm, which has precedence and ranks higher than learning from others (Philo, *Abr.* 276; Plutarch, *Mor.* 973E; Pindar, *Ol.* 9:100.<sup>26</sup>

At this juncture, I make a brief remark on the meaning of the title of *De Abrahamo*. As I mentioned above, the question has been raised whether Philo’s presentation of Abraham as one who is *not* taught by any external teacher undercuts his portrayal of

26 Cf. *Mut.* 258; see Borgen, “Greek Encyclical Education,” 63–65.

him elsewhere as a model of one who is taught.<sup>27</sup> In order to explain what seems contradictory, I suggest that the reference to instruction in the title pertains to the intuitive talent and internal mode of teaching (*διδασκαλία*) that the sage (Abraham) received from God and nature. Thus, Philo presupposed a distinction between the two schools to which Abraham belonged. The true state of perfection and the virtues Abraham obtained were not achieved by the progress of knowledge through the teaching offered in the encyclical education, based on human instruction, but rather by means of the “real” *paideia* that was attained through the self-taught instruction received from God and nature itself. From the words in italics in the quotations from *De Abrahamo* above, the view emerges that Abraham made a solitary study of the unwritten laws in nature, that is, as one self-taught, and thus was not taught by written words or instruction provided by an external teacher. These protestations about Abraham and the other ancestors are rather emphatic, and I suggest that the most logical explanation for some of them may be that Philo presupposed the opposite view, corresponding to that of the encyclical education, namely that Abraham was studying with help of a teacher.<sup>28</sup>

Against such a background, it makes sense that Philo insists on the opposite, namely, that Abraham’s *paideia* into the virtues was promoted by unwritten laws independent of any exhortations or commands based on instructions from external teachers (cf. the **bold type** in *Abr.* §§6, 16, and 61). Moreover, although Philo in general regarded Abraham as one who did not require formal apprenticeship or learning from an external source, this did not mean that he needed no instruction at all.<sup>29</sup> Instead, Philo in the *inclusio* of the whole treatise (*Abr.* 1–6 and 275–276) gives prominence to Abraham as a self-taught person who “did” the divine law under the inspiration of nature as an internal teacher. In *Abr.* 5, Philo offers two reasons why Moses included the biographies of the patriarchs as legislation within the Mosaic law. First, Moses wished to show that the enacted laws “are not at variance with nature,” and second, that it was not difficult to follow the particular laws, since they “before any at all of the particular statutes were set in writing followed the unwritten law with perfect ease.” This rationale is also corroborated by the elaboration and

27 Cf. Birnbaum and Dillon, *On the Life of Abraham*, 152–53, 162, 199–200, 210; Lanzinger, “Einführung in die Schrift,” 15–16.

28 Pace Birnbaum and Dillon, who fail to emphasize the function of nature as a teacher of Abraham, when they claim that “By emphasizing that all of these early biblical figures listened to and learned from themselves, Philo somewhat undercuts his portrayal of Abraham as a wise man who attained virtue or perfection through instruction. In fact, despite references to this characterization of Abraham in §§ 52–54 and the long Greek title of *De Abrahamo* . . . , Philo does not in this treatise allude to Abraham as someone who learns from another source” (*On the Life of Abraham*, 152–53).

29 Cf. Ellen Birnbaum, “The Biblical Interpretations of Philo: On the Life of Abraham,” in *Outside the Bible: Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture*, ed. Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2013), 947 n. 3: “Philo does not explicitly address the role of teaching in Abraham’s life in this work, possibly because Philo emphasizes that the early figures of Genesis were able to follow the written laws *without* instruction from others (e.g., *Abraham* 6, 16, 61), and it may thus have been awkward for him to highlight Abraham as someone who was taught” (emphasis original).

the terminology used in *Abr.* 6.<sup>30</sup> At this point, Philo refers to “school associates” (γνώριμοι), who might help and assist the “pupils” (φοιτηταί) with the teaching. Accordingly, such terminology might “provide useful evidence that such a system was in place” in Philo’s own time, and thus probably indicates Philo’s acquaintance with Hellenistic philosophical schools.<sup>31</sup> In *Abr.* 6, such a school system served the aim of underscoring the point that Abraham and the patriarchs were not instructed by teachers (διδασκάλοι) and listened only to themselves (αὐτήκοοι) and were self-taught (αὐτομαθεῖς). Further, in *Abr.* 275–276, Philo summarizes the preceding account and here again praises Abraham as one who is not taught, but rather as one who kept the law by virtue of nature, since he was “as my account has made clear, himself a law and an unwritten ordinance.” Moreover, in *Abr.* 16, Philo pointed out that the need of external teachers was superfluous, since Enos as a representative of these biblical figures acquired the virtue of hope by the unwritten laws in nature, as one self-taught (αὐτομαθής).

Let me once more emphasize what I have pointed out above, namely, that Philo adds an important qualification of what it means to be self-taught by nature, namely, that he often understands by *nature* God and his activity. In the case of Abraham, therefore, the concept of self-taught should be taken as an expression of Philo’s literary interpretation of the biblical text. Although Abraham did not have any human teacher, and in this sense was self-taught, this did not mean that he was without a teacher. He was self-taught taken to mean *God-taught*, that is, in terms of obeying the commands of God revealed to him through nature: “He . . . was eager to follow God and to be obedient to His commands, understanding by commands . . . also those made manifest by nature.” (*Abr.* 60). Moreover, in other texts God is explicitly said to be Abraham’s teacher. Thus, for example, in an ethical interpretation of Abraham’s change of name (Gen 17:5), Philo took it to refer to the wisdom that Abraham acquired, “having God as his teacher and leader in obtaining knowledge of things and attaining to their causes” (*QG* 3.43).<sup>32</sup> At this point, Philo is not wholly innovative, since concepts of nature and being self-taught were already understood in Greek traditions as divine inspiration, but Philo is distinctive in his stress on this as solely the action of the grace of God (cf. *Abr.* 54).<sup>33</sup>

It is noteworthy, that according to some rabbinic texts Abraham came to learn the torah in a schoolhouse setting by one of two modalities, either by a self-taught study of the torah under the guidance of an internal teacher, or by learning the torah under

30 Note the conjunction γάρ introducing *Abr.* 6.

31 Birnbaum and Dillon, *On the Life of Abraham*, 152.

32 At this juncture, Philo follows a Stoic definition of wisdom. See Cicero, *Off.* 2.2.5, and *SVF* 2:35–36. For a further reference to the notion of God as Abraham’s teacher, cf. *Somm.* 1.173.

33 See Borgen, “Greek Encyclical Education,” 64; Erwin R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935; repr., Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1969), 50–52; Harry A. Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), 2:197–200.

the tutelage of an external teacher.<sup>34</sup> The former view finds expression in several rabbinic texts that emphasize Abraham's autonomy. For example, Gen. Rab. 95.3 refers to Abraham's solitary study of the Torah independently of any external teacher: "Abraham *learned* the Torah *from himself*, for it is said, 'and a good man shall be *satisfied from himself*.'"<sup>35</sup> The modality of being "self-taught" is also attested by Gen. Rab. 61.1, which depicts Abraham as engaged day and night in the study of the Torah under the tutelage of his kidneys as divinely appointed teachers: "whence did Abraham learn the Torah? God had arranged for his two kidneys to be as two rabbis to him, and they taught him wisdom."<sup>36</sup>

As we shall see in the next section, Philo's emphasis on Abraham as the self-taught and legal norm, which has its basis in the unwritten laws, served to delineate Abraham as the exemplar for instruction and virtues. As one who received God's instruction by obeying God's commands, Abraham achieved a virtuous life. This made him the model for imitation by a broad audience of Jews, proselytes, and non-Jews.

#### 4. Abraham's Education in Relationship to the Aim of Mosaic *Paideia*

We have seen that Philo has presented Abraham as self-taught, one who needs no instructions from a human agency, but instead has God as a teacher in terms of obeying God's commands and intuiting the unwritten laws in nature. To what extent did Philo conceive of Abraham's *paideia* and this end as applicable to others? And How is Abraham's intuitive adherence to unwritten laws related to Mosaic *paideia* and legislation as such? Part of Philo's answer seems to have been indicated in the introduction to the treatise, which I shall render in full:

Let us postpone consideration of particular laws, which are, so to speak, copies [εἰκόνες], and examine first those which are general and may be called the originals [ἀρχετύποι] of those copies. These are such men as lived good and blameless lives, whose virtues stand permanently recorded in the most holy scriptures [ὧν τὰς ἀρετὰς ἐν ταῖς ἱερωτάταις ἐστηλιτεῦσθαι γραφαῖς συμβέβηκεν], not merely to sound their praises but for the instruction of the reader and as an inducement to him to aspire to the same [ἀλλὰ καὶ ὑπὲρ τοῦ τοὺς ἐντυγχάνοντας προτρέψασθαι καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν ὅμοιον ζῆλον ἀγαγεῖν]; for in these men we have laws endowed with life and reason, and Moses extolled them for two reasons. First he wished to show that the enacted ordinances are not inconsistent with nature; and secondly that those who wish to live in accordance with the laws as they stand have no difficult

34 For these modalities, see Steven Wilf, *The Law before the Law* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 120; Christine Hayes, *What's Divine about Divine Law? Early Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 342–45.

35 For translations of *Genesis Rabbah*, see James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 706–7. For Abraham's study of the Torah, see also Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 282–84.

36 Cf. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 706–7.

task, seeing that the first generations before any at all of the particular statutes was set in writing followed the unwritten law with perfect ease, so that one might properly say that the enacted laws are nothing else than memorials of the life of the ancients, preserving to a later generation their actual words and deeds. (*Abr.* 3–5)

In these paragraphs, Philo presents Abraham and the patriarchs as exemplars to be emulated. Three features underscore this aim of the whole treatise. In the first place, in Greek education, the imitation of the hero of a biography was a conventional feature.<sup>37</sup> In the introduction to his biography of Abraham, therefore, Philo claims that Moses had written his books not just as a recounting of ancient history, but rather as a protreptic (προτρέπω) to virtue and the emulation of Abraham and the patriarchs, in order to elicit the very same virtues recorded in the most sacred writings (§4), that is, in all the parts of the Mosaic law. This appeal and this aim to induce the readers to emulate their virtues accord well with the way in which the whole treatise is structured around Abraham's virtues, and with the emphasis on Abraham as "the first and founder of the nation" (§275).<sup>38</sup> The adjective "first" (πρῶτος) in association with the noun "founder" (ἄρχηγέτης) here is indicative of Abraham's role as a paradigm to be imitated, since both these terms together imply the expectation that Abraham's virtues will continue in the life of the Jewish nation.<sup>39</sup>

Second, this protreptic to virtue after the manner of Abraham as a forerunner was based on the claim that the conduct of Abraham and the patriarchs was elicited by the unwritten laws as embedded in the written laws of Moses. In fact, Philo argues that the Mosaic legislation contains two legal systems or jurisdictions, that is, the general or unwritten law and the particular or written law of Moses. The former pertains to the unwritten laws in nature embodied in the virtuous life of Abraham, while the latter are memorials (ὑπομνήματα) or legal images (εἰκόνες) of the former. Thus, Philo claims that the general and unwritten laws are seen in men who "lived good and blameless lives, whose virtues stand permanently recorded in the most sacred writings" (*Abr.* 4). Furthermore, Philo may claim that by virtue of the lives of such

37 See Henri I. Marrou with reference to Plato, *Phaedr.* 245a. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956; repr., Wisconsin Studies in Classics; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 12–13.

38 The whole treatise is structured to display the virtues exemplified by Abraham; thus, Abraham's conduct when he leaves his family and land in Chaldea and sojourns in Egypt illustrates his piety (§§60–207). The remainder of the text outlines his virtues of justice, courage, wisdom, moderation (§§208–261), and trust in God (§§262–276). Throughout the treatise, his "love of humanity" is also commented on (see §§107 and 208). Cf. Sandmel, *Philo's Place in Judaism*, 106; Cristina Termini, "The Historical Part of the Pentateuch according to Philo of Alexandria: Biography, Genealogy, and the Philosophical Meaning of the Patriarchal Lives," in *History and Identity: How Israel's Later Authors Viewed Its Earlier History*, ed. Núria Calduch-Benages and Jan Liesen, DCLY 2006 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 285–87, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110186604.265>; Birnbaum and Dillon, *On the Life of Abraham*, 24, 52, 397–98.

39 For this idea that Abraham's virtues and blessings were expected to live on and be conferred upon his descendants, see *Spec.* 4.179–182; *Praem.* 166–167; *QG* 4.180. Cf. Per Jarle Bekken, *Paul's Negotiation of Abraham in Galatians 3 in the Jewish Context: The Galatian Converts; Lineal Descendants of Abraham and Heirs of the Promise*, BZNW 248 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 58–61.

men, these laws were antecedent to, and inherent in, the specific laws promulgated at Sinai by Moses, “seeing that the first generations before any at all of the particular statutes was set in writing followed the unwritten law with perfect ease, so that one might properly say that the enacted laws are nothing else than memorials of the life of the ancients” (*Abr.* 5). In sum, according to this paragraph, not only is the specific Mosaic jurisdiction consistent with the unwritten law (ἄγραφος νόμος), but since the laws of Moses are founded on the lives of Abraham and the patriarchs as unwritten laws or a legal system (ἄγραφος ἢ νομοθεσία), they may promote and replicate the very same virtues that Abraham and the ancients achieved through their distinctive words and deeds in their self-taught and untutored way. The intersecting linkage between Abraham and the particular Mosaic law was, then, the unwritten law and the virtues that it elicited as the means of acquiring a perfect and happy life.<sup>40</sup>

Third, as a corollary of this argument, Philo points out for his broad audience, including both Jews and non-Jews of his own and later times, that adherence to the specific laws of Moses as a protreptic to virtue is not a difficult task, but is in fact easy, since they are in accordance with nature and already exemplified by Abraham and the patriarchs. When Philo here envisages “that the first generations before any at all of the particular statutes was set in writing followed the unwritten law with perfect ease,” he draws the corollary that it was possible for any human being to follow and live by that law. This is exactly why the lives and virtues of Abraham and the other patriarchs are recorded in the most sacred laws of Moses, according to Philo: “These are such men . . . , whose virtues stand permanently recorded in the most holy scriptures, not merely to sound their praises but for the instruction of the reader and as an inducement to aspire to the same” (§4, emphasis added).

Let me add one final comment on the addressees of *De Abrahamo* in relation to Abraham as an exemplar for instruction and virtues. According to Philo, as we have seen, the Mosaic law contains two sets of laws, the unwritten and more general being the source of the written and particular, and that these respectively exemplify two distinct law systems with the goal of promoting the very same virtues that are embodied in the lives of Abraham and the patriarchs. Thus, since modern scholarship maintains that the treatise *De Abrahamo* was written for different readers, we seem to find a broader significance of Abraham beyond the Jewish nation.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, Philo’s claim in *Abr.* 61 that “anyone (τις) can contemplate the order of nature and . . . can ‘better learn’ [ἀναδιδάσκω] to live a law-abiding and peaceful life even though no one speak to him,” that is, without someone offering external instruction, seems to be directed at such a broad audience, with a universalistic dimension to it.<sup>42</sup> At this point, Philo seems to pick up the line of thought from §5 that the Mosaic laws

40 Cf. also *Virt.* 194, where Philo explicitly says that these virtuous ancients are actually unwritten laws: “the lives of those who have earnestly followed virtue may be called unwritten laws.”

41 For a discussion of the intended audience for *De Abrahamo*, see Birnbaum and Dillon, *On the Life of Abraham*, 26–29.

42 Furthermore, see §75: “Anyone [τις] who reflects on these things and learns from no distant source, but from one near at hand, namely himself and what makes him what he is, will know for certain that the world . . . is a work of the primal God and Father of all who, though invisible, yet brings all things to light, revealing the natures of great and small.” Philo then explains in *Abr.* 77 that Abraham was

are consistent with the unwritten laws, and therefore easy to observe, as Abraham and the patriarchs demonstrated even before the particular laws were promulgated at Sinai. Moreover, the claim that this “better instruction” can take place independent of any human agency draws on the role model of Abraham as self-taught without any need of other teachers except God’s teaching and revelation through nature. It is significant, then, that at the beginning (§5) and the end (§§275–276) of *De Abrahamo*, Abraham is presented as the “founder of the nation” and the “first” who was taught by nature to obey such an unwritten law, before this divine law was revealed in written form to Moses. Similarly, at the beginning of *De decalogo*, in which Philo sums up his accounts of the patriarchs, including *De Abrahamo* and the lost treatises about Isaac and Jacob, he refers to them as “those who are set before in the Sacred Books as founders of our nation and in themselves unwritten laws” (*Decal.* 1). From this concept of Abraham’s life and virtues as promoted by the unwritten laws recorded in the laws of Moses, the line of thought emerges that any well-informed Jews or potential converts (proselytes) who want to live in conformity with the laws of nature must at the same time obey the law of Moses.<sup>43</sup> This was no difficult task, Philo assured his audience, since Abraham as the founder of the Jewish nation and the paradigm of proselytes (cf. *Virt.* 219) was the first who obeyed the unwritten laws with ease (cf. *Abr.* 5).<sup>44</sup> Thus, the characterization of Abraham and the patriarchs as the “founders of the nation” (*Abr.* 276) and their identification as the “first” exemplar who observed the unwritten laws are given particular prominence in contexts in which Philo constructs the identity of the Jewish nation based on the patriarchs and their observance of the unwritten law before it was written down and given to Moses.

## 5. Abraham as Model of Mosaic *Paideia* in the Jewish Setting

In this final section, I shall ask how Greek educational traditions and the portrayal of Abraham in *De Abrahamo* might bear on Philo’s descriptions of the *paideia* in the Jewish setting. We learn from several passages in Philo’s writings that the synagogues functioned on the Sabbath as centers for prayer as well as for instruction among the Jews in Alexandria and were located in each section of the city (*Legat.* 132). The evidence seems to support the view that Philo considers these

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the first to whom “God was seen” (Gen 12:7), and in this way turned away from an erroneous view of the universe toward the discovery of its creator and first cause, the one, true God.

43 Pace Sami Yli-Karjanmaa, who claims that Philo held the view that the path of God-inspired learning of the law of nature was open to all, not just Jews, independently of the Mosaic legislation. See Yli-Karjanmaa, “Individualism, Universalism, and Mysticism: Observations on Philo’s Views of Virtue,” *SPhiloA* 35 (2023): 35–66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.8784677.6>.

44 The many similarities between Philo’s description of Abraham’s migration in *Abr.* 60–88 and *Virt.* 212–219 with regard to Abraham’s religious, social, and ethical conversion as “the standard of nobility for all proselytes” (*Virt.* 219), might also be an indication that Jewish proselytes were among Philo’s intended readers of *De Abrahamo*. This is an observation that needs more scrutiny, and is beyond the framework of this essay. Cf. the view of Martina Böhm that the treatise is aimed at proselytes (“Abraham und die Erzväter bei Philo,” 390).

synagogal gatherings as “schools of virtues”: “Each seventh day there stand wide open . . . schools of good sense, temperance, courage, justice, and the other virtues” (*Spec.* 2.62).<sup>45</sup> Thus, applying a Greek educational term, Philo apparently conceived of the synagogues as schools, centered on the study of the sacred laws (*Decal.* 40), the philosophy of the fathers, and the inherent virtues (*Legat.* 311–312). In contradistinction to encyclical education, which had progress by human teaching and knowledge as its basis, it seems that the synagogal schools were founded on the perfection of self-taught wisdom and virtues brought forth by God’s command and creation, such as was exemplified by the educational role models of Abraham and the patriarchs.

In *Abr.* 52–53, Philo states that “teaching” (Abraham) must go together with the “self-taught” by nature (Isaac) and “practice” (Jacob). At this point, Philo builds upon ideas from Greek traditions that relate this triad of educational components not only to the topic of the acquisition of virtue, but also to the development of skills in educational fields such as medicine, poetry, and oratory.<sup>46</sup> In this regard, however, he emphasizes that all three patriarchs qualify for each of these characteristics:

But indeed we must not fail to note that each possesses the three qualities, but gets his name from that which chiefly predominates in him; for teaching cannot be consummated without nature or practice, nor is nature capable of reaching its zenith without learning and practicing, nor practice either unless the foundation of nature and teaching has first been laid. (*Abr.* 53)

In the context of *De Abrahamo*, this modification on Philo’s part seems to be necessary in order to apply the concept of being self-taught not only to Isaac, but also to Abraham, as one who, like Isaac, learned from nature as an internal teacher.<sup>47</sup> It is noteworthy, then, that the pedagogical triad of nature, learning, and practice is identified with Abraham and the patriarchs and further applied to the virtues acquired in the study that takes place in the synagogues conceived as “schools of wisdom, justice, and piety”:

45 Cf. Gregory E. Sterling, “‘The School of Sacred Laws’: The Social Setting of Philo’s Treatises,” *VC* 53 (1999): 154–58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1584545>.

46 On this triad of learning, see Birnbaum and Dillon, who refer to Greek authors such as Plato (*Meno* 70a), Aristotle (*Eth. nic.* 1.9.1099b; 2.1.1103a; 10.9.1179b; *Eth. eud.* 1.1.1214a), Diogenes Laertius (5.18), Isocrates (*Antid.* 186–189), Xenophon (*Mem.* 3.9.1–3), and the Latin writers Horace (*Ars* 408–411), Cicero (*Arch.* 1.1), and Quintilian (*Inst.* 1.26–27; Birnbaum and Dillon, *On the Life of Abraham*, 194).

47 It is a fact that in Philo’s writings Isaac is consistently referred to as “self-taught” (αὐτοδίδακτος; thirteen times), and not Abraham, albeit *Abr.* 53, cited above, claims that Abraham and Jacob too had this quality. On the level of Philo’s allegorical exegesis, Isaac did not need any teacher, since he was born in the land of virtue (cf. *Migr.* 29; *Somn.* 1.160) and possessed the virtues already from his birth. One way to differentiate between Isaac and Abraham as self-taught is that Philo, on the level of the concrete and literal interpretation of the biblical text, applies this term in such a way as to encompass Abraham, since he had no father and no teacher to lean on for his instruction other than God and nature, as I have argued above. I thank Katell Berthelot for reminding me of how we might conceive Philo’s differentiation between Abraham and Isaac as “self-taught.”

This soul, through the triple goods of nature [φύσις], learning [μάθησις], and practice [ἄσκησις], becomes the plenitude of virtues [πλήρωμα ἀρετῶν]. . . . This is the household, which kept safe from harm, perfect and united both in the literal history and in the allegorical interpretation, received for its reward, as I have said, the chieftaincy of the tribes of the nation. From this household, increased in the course of time to a great multitude, were founded flourishing and orderly cities, schools [διδασκαλεῖα] of wisdom, justice and religion, where also the rest of virtue [ἀρετή] and how to acquire it is the sublime subject of their research. (*Praem.* 65–66)

Here, Philo brings together the allegorical level of the Pentateuchal narrative, in which he saw each of the three ancestors as a certain type of soul that could obtain education and virtue, with the literal meaning of the biblical story about the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who in due course of time flourished and became a great nation with the emergence of towns and synagogal schools. In the context of *Praem.* 57–66, Philo argues that the true lineage of Abraham was passed down not only through the bloodline to Isaac and Jacob and his descendants, but also through the virtuous characteristics of each of the founding fathers. Thus, Philo seems to apply the Greek pedagogical concepts of nature, learning, and practice to a patrilineal ideology, in which the virtues of the founders of the Jewish nation were passed on through the instruction in the schools of the synagogal gatherings, with the aim of leading to the same virtues that were displayed by these biblical ancestors.

At this juncture, I quote another of Philo's descriptions of the synagogal gatherings of the Jews, reflecting a school setting and a practice retained in Philo's own time:

for it was customary on every day when opportunity offered, and preeminently on the seventh day, as I have explained above, to pursue the study of wisdom with the ruler [Moses] expounding and instructing the people what they should say and do, while they received edification and betterment in moral principles and conduct. Even now this practice is retained, and the Jews every seventh day occupy themselves with the philosophy of their fathers [πάτριον φιλοσοφίαν], dedicating that time to the acquiring of knowledge and the study of the truths of nature [τὸν χρόνον ἐκεῖνον ἀναθέντες ἐπιστήμη καὶ θεωρίᾳ τῶν περὶ φύσιν]. For what are our places of prayer throughout the cities but schools [διδασκαλεῖα] of prudence and courage and temperance and justice and also of piety, holiness, and every virtue [φρονήσεως καὶ ἀνδρείας καὶ σωφροσύνης καὶ δικαιοσύνης εὐσεβείας τε καὶ ὁσιότητος καὶ συμπάσης ἀρετῆς], by which duties to God and men are discerned and rightly performed? (*Mos.* 2.215–216)

There are close similarities between the terminology in this passage and *De Abrahamo*, which suggest that the curriculum and paradigm represented by Abraham and the ancestors were part of the instruction on the Sabbath. Thus, the references to the philosophy of their fathers (πάτριον φιλοσοφίαν), and the description of how the Jews in Philo's own time dedicated their study to the knowledge and contemplation of nature (ἀναθέντες ἐπιστήμη καὶ θεωρίᾳ τῶν περὶ φύσιν), and thereby to acquiring the virtues, resemble the characteristics of Abraham in terms of the very same virtues, first in relation to God and then relative to human beings, which also structured the

treatise of *De Abrahamo*.<sup>48</sup> So, as we have pointed out above, throughout this work Philo displays the way in which Abraham's life illustrates particular virtues such as piety and trust toward God (*Abr.* 60–207; 262–276), as well as virtues toward other people in terms of justice, courage, wisdom, moderation, and love of humanity (*Abr.* 208–207).<sup>49</sup> Further, *Prob.* 80–83 also accords well with this picture. In this passage, Philo describes the studies of the Essenes on the Sabbath, based on the laws of their fathers and their emulation of the past and training in the virtues:

taking for their trainers *the laws of their fathers*, which could not possibly have been conceived by the human soul without divine inspiration. In these they are instructed at all other times, but particularly on the seventh days... For most of their philosophical study takes the form of allegory, and in this *they emulate the tradition of the past*. They are trained in piety, holiness, justice, domestic and civic conduct, knowledge of what is truly good, or evil, or indifferent, and how to choose what they should and avoid the opposite, taking for their defining standards these three, love of God, love of virtue, love of men. (*Prob.* 80–83, emphasis added)

Furthermore, Philo's interpretation of Exod 16:4 in the context of *Mut.* 252–263 about the “bread from heaven” is of special interest. In many ways, this passage corroborates many of our observations so far in this essay.<sup>50</sup> Here, Philo interprets the “manna” to mean the “wisdom” (σοφία) of philosophy that elicits “virtue,” in contrast to the school of encyclical education:

And indeed, it says “Behold I rain upon you bread from heaven” (Exod. 16:4). Of what food can he rightly say that it is rained from heaven, save of heavenly wisdom which is sent from above on souls which yearn for virtue by him who sheds the gift of prudence in rich abundance, whose grace waters the universe, and chiefly so on the holy seventh, which he calls the Sabbath? (*Mut.* 259–260)

There are close similarities between the phraseology in *Mut.* 260 and the statements in *Mos.* 2.215–216 and *Prob.* 81 about the study of the laws of the fathers and the acquiring of virtues on the Sabbath.<sup>51</sup> However, since the statement in *Mut.* 260 that the “manna” was chiefly sent on the Sabbath might undercut what Philo says elsewhere (namely, that it did not fall on the Sabbath: *Mos.* 1.205; 2.263–264), the explanation must be that Philo here interprets the “bread from heaven” to mean the heavenly

48 See, e.g., other passages like *Decal.* 50–52, 106–121; *Spec.* 2.62–63; 4.133–135; *Mos.* 2.216; *Her.* 168, 172.

49 Cf. Termini, “Historical Part,” 285–86; Birnbaum and Dillon, *On the Life of Abraham*, 52, 61, 397.

50 For a detailed analysis of this passage in the context of Greek educational ideas and the relationship between encyclical education and *paideia* in the Jewish synagogues, see the seminal study by Borgen, *Bread from Heaven*, 99–121.

51 Cf. *Mut.* 260 (“heavenly wisdom which is sent from above on souls yearning for virtue,... and chiefly so on the seventh, which he calls the Sabbath”) and the statements in *Mos.* 2.215–216 (“on the seventh day ... to pursue the study of wisdom.... The Jews every seventh day occupy themselves with the philosophy of their fathers [πάτριον φιλοσοφίαν]”) and *Prob.* 81 (“taking for their trainers the laws of their fathers.”).

wisdom inherent in the laws of the fathers, which had its place in the Mosaic *paideia* provided on the Sabbath in the assemblies of the synagogues. Moreover, in *Mut.* 258–263 the contrast to the encyclical education is emphasized in the way in which the manna as the God-given wisdom and virtue is conceived as “perfect and complete from the first” (§258), associated with the self-taught by nature (§263), “needing no controlling hand” (§258), and characterized as “strength” and not “weakness” (§263). Thus, Philo here makes use of the very same concepts and terminology applied in the texts cited above from *De Abrahamo*, with parallels in the writings of Plutarch and Pindar. It is even possible to go one step further and argue that Philo, in the context of *Mut.* 253–263, interprets *manna* to mean the virtue conceived as a fulfillment of the promises of blessing to Abraham about the son (Isaac) brought forth by Sarah, in distinction from the son (Ishmael) granted to him through Hagar: “Learn then, soul of man, that Sarah also, that is virtue, shall bear thee a son, as well as Hagar, the lower instruction. For Hagar’s offspring is the creature of teaching, but Sarah’s learns from none other at all than itself” (§255). Abraham, again seen as a type of the soul, asked God for one thing, but God gave him two (§253). According to Philo’s allegorical interpretation, both these gifts and sons promised by God to Abraham are in turn taken as types of two distinctive schools and virtues (§255–257), namely, between the self-taught wisdom and *paideia* offered in the Jewish synagogues on the Sabbath and the encyclical *paideia* that is based on human teaching. To Philo, Abraham should be interpreted within the framework of both these schools of education, with their distinctive aims of acquiring virtue:

Thus both forms of virtue, one where the teacher is another, one where teacher and learner are the same, will be open to human kind. And where man is weak he will claim the former, where he is strong the latter which comes ready to his hands. (*Mut.* 263)

Such a picture of the Jewish school in contrast to the encyclical education fits with the portrait of Abraham offered by Philo in *De Abrahamo*, which suggests that the patriarch here was presented as a model of virtue in the Mosaic *paideia* offered in the synagogues, himself an unwritten law, yet self-taught. This might also explain why Philo in the *De Abrahamo* avoided emphasizing Abraham, the founder of the Jewish nation and embodiment of the unwritten laws, as a model of one who is taught in the encyclical education that the Jews share with their pagan surroundings in Alexandria.

Let me add one final observation concerning the schooling in the laws of Moses in relation to Abraham (and the patriarchs) as a model for the Jewish nation to emulate. In *Legat.* 4–5, the Jewish nation is identified as Israel, understood as “he that sees God,” and further formulated as follows: “how firmly based is the virtue and nobility of conduct which we may expect to find in souls whose vision has soared above all created things and schooled [παιδεύω] itself to behold [ὁράω] the uncreated and divine, . . . the happy [εὐδαίμων], . . . more happy than happiness itself, and any perfection there may be greater than these” (*Legat.* 5).<sup>52</sup> This introduction of the *Legatio*

52 On the *topos* of εὐδαιμονία as the consummation of the perfect and virtuous life of the sage in Stoic, Aristotelic, and Philonic literature, see, e.g., Anthony A. Long and David N. Sedley, *Die Hellenis-*

*ad Gaium* has been related to the rest of the treatise. Thus, the words about the Jewish nation in terms of their ascent and contemplation of the divine served to strengthen its trust in the existence of the one true God and, on this basis, to oppose the claim of the Emperor Gaius Caligula to be deified, since the Jewish people were to regard him as a counterfeit god. It is noteworthy that in *Legat.* 5, Philo intersects the vision of the divine and the virtues and nobility of conduct it leads to as promoted by education. At this point, it has been asked to what this concept of *paideia* more specifically refers. Borgen rightly suspects that it refers to being schooled in the law of Moses.<sup>53</sup> Runia corroborated this assumption on Borgen's part by pointing to two further texts from this treatise. In *Legat.* 115, when Philo refers to the resistance of the Jews to Gaius's plan for deification, the emperor "looked with disfavour on the Jews alone because they alone opposed him on principle, trained as they were we may say even from the cradle, by parents and tutors and instructors and by the far higher authority of the sacred laws and also the unwritten customs, to acknowledge one God who is the Father and Maker of the world." Moreover, according to Philo, Petronius, the Roman governor in Syria, was more sensible than Gaius, when he recognized that "all men guard their own customs, but this is especially true of the Jewish nation. Holding that the laws are oracles sent by God and having been trained [παιδεύω] in this doctrine from their earliest years, they carry the images [εικόν] of what has been commanded them enshrined in their souls" (§210). These passages accord well with the picture we have drawn above, of Philo's descriptions of Abraham as a model to emulate, and of the training of the Jews in the setting of the synagogue gatherings, which also enabled them to transmit the knowledge of their laws to the setting of Jewish family life.<sup>54</sup>

Since, however, Philo in *Legat.* 4–5 conjoins his concepts of education with the vision of the divine and its outcome of a virtuous life, we should ask what it more specifically may mean when he says that the Jewish nation has been "schooled [παιδεύω] to see." At this juncture, I suggest, it is possible to advance our understanding of these passages in the *Legatio ad Gaium* by pointing to the portrayal and model of Abraham (and the patriarchs) in *De Abrahamo*. In this treatise, he is particularly characterized by means of his vision of the divine, trust in the true God, and it is on this basis that he was enabled to achieve the perfection of a virtuous and noble conduct of life. Let me offer some brief remarks in addition to what has already been said above about Abraham as a role model for the *paideia* of the Jews.

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*tischen Philosophen: Texte und Kommentare* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2000), 476; Julia Annas, "The Sage in Ancient Philosophy," in *Anthropine sophia: Studi di filologia e storiografia filosofica in memoria di Gabriele Giannantoni*, ed. Francesca Alesse (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2008), 14–22; Daniel Maier, *Das Glück im antiken Judentum und im neuen Testament: Eine Untersuchung zu den Konzepten eines guten Lebens in der Literatur des Zweiten Tempels und deren Einfluss auf die frühchristliche Wahrnehmung des Glücks*, WUNT 2/552 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 153–54.

53 Peder Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete for His Time*, NovTSup 86 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 241; Runia, "Philo of Alexandria," 364.

54 Cf. also *Hypoth.* 7.13–14, where Philo sees the synagogue as the point of departure and in a continuum with the instruction of the laws of Moses in the family setting.

With regard to Philo's elaboration of "Israel" in *Legat.* 4–5, only one other case in addition to *Praem.* 36 refers to this interpretation of Israel, and it occurs in *Abr.* 56–57. It is especially of interest to note that in *Abr.* 57 it is applied to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were parents of the one species of that race which is called "royal" and "priesthood" and "holy nation" (Exod 19:6). In light of the context of the treatise as a whole, this status of being Israel, explained as "he who sees God," refers to the contemporary Jewish nation, and especially to Abraham, who was the first of the one house and one family (§50) and "the founder of the nation" (§276). Furthermore, if we add to this picture of Abraham being among those "men who have lived irreproachable and noble lives, whose virtues happen to have been recorded in the holy writings" (§4) and who recognized and came to trust in the one true God (§§50, 262–276), we begin to perceive what it meant for the Jews to be educated as the nation "who sees God." In sum, against this background, I suggest that, according to Philo, the law of Moses, *in casu* Abraham (and the patriarchs) entitled *Israel*, provided the foundational model of Jewish *paideia* offered to Jews and proselytes to emulate, in order that they might attain to the same vision of God and thus advance to the highest point of happiness (cf. the description of God as the source of happiness in *Legat.* 5) and hence be enabled to live according to the same virtues. With such a status as Israel, and characterized by the virtue of trust in the one God on the basis of their founding ancestor Abraham, the Jews were able to resist and respond with stamina to the threat of being subjected to Gaius's claim to be god—in Philo's view, a counterfeit god and thus no god at all (cf. *Legat.* 114–118).

## 6. Conclusions

1. In *De Abrahamo*, Philo negotiates Abraham in the context of Greek educational concepts and distinctions between the self-taught by nature and instruction/learning by another (human) source. In this way, Philo presents Abraham as self-taught, as one who obtained instruction from God and nature in contrast to any human teaching or written sources, such as those available in the encyclical education. The self-taught character, then, was the mode in which he acquired the perfection of virtues and happiness elicited by his adherence to God's commands, as these also came to expression in the unwritten laws in nature.
2. According to Philo, *anyone* can emulate Abraham as a model of being self-taught, since the written laws of Moses not only encompass the legislation of what Abraham said and did (the book of Genesis), but also contain particular laws that reflect this legislation and are able to reproduce and replicate Abraham's virtues in harmony with the unwritten laws in nature. To obey and study the philosophy embedded in the law of Moses was thus the means of acquiring the virtues exemplified by Abraham in his observance of the unwritten laws, and was as easy as Abraham, in his untutored way, obeyed the unwritten laws before the written torah was promulgated.
3. For Philo, the distinction within the Mosaic laws of two legal systems or jurisdictions, between unwritten laws in nature embedded in the life of Abraham and

the particular written Mosaic legislation, served the aim of legitimizing the law of Moses in the light of Hellenistic education and culture. Thus, it appealed not just to well-informed Jews, including proselytes, but also to a broader audience of potential converts to the Jewish nation. According to Philo, adherence to the written law of Moses and emulating the exemplar of Abraham provide the best possible approximation for any human being to the unwritten laws in nature.

4. Philo's representation of Abraham's life served as a type of the Jewish *paideia* and as a scriptural undergirding of the community assembled in the schools of the Jewish synagogues. Evidently, Abraham as the founding ancestor of the Jewish nation and the forerunner of proselytes was a paradigmatic figure of identification for "the study of the philosophy of the fathers" and the acquisition of virtues, which took place each Sabbath in the synagogues.

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