

**Reading Philo: A Handbook to Philo of Alexandria.
Edited by Torrey Seland. Grand Rapids, MI:
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0-8028-7069-8.**

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Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus and Paul, is ‘somewhat of an enigma, even to scholars who have long tried to understand him, his works, and his position in the social world of Alexandria at the beginning of our era’ (p. 4). *Reading Philo* is a practical and informative handbook that aims to make Philo less enigmatic by investigating why he is so significant for understanding ancient Judaism and early Christianity. It examines Philo as a Jewish philosopher, scholar, writer, and politician. Contributors include noted scholars such as Torrey Seland, Per Jarle Bekken, Ellen Birnbaum, Peder Borgen, Erkki Koskenniemi, Adele Reinhartz, David T. Runia, Karl-Gustav Sandelin, and Gregory E. Sterling. The handbook has a distinctive Scandinavian flavour, as many of the 11 chapters are written by Scandinavian academics, and the handbook is edited by another—Torrey Seland (who writes the Introduction, along with two further chapters). Actually, *Reading Philo* is a modified form of a proposed ‘Scandinavian project of a somewhat larger scale, initiated by the Finnish scholar Professor Karl-Gustav Sandelin’ (p. ix), which, according to Seland, was not realizable.

The handbook opens with an Introduction by Seland who outlines some of the foundational questions that the volume explores: Who was Philo of Alexandria? Why is it important to study him? How are we to study him? (p. 3). This is followed by a diverse collection of essays by Philo scholars that are grouped into two main parts, with each part containing five

chapters: (1) Philo of Alexandria in Context and (2) Why and How to Study Philo. The first part broadly treats contextual aspects often considered relevant for understanding Philo (pp. 19–154): Philo as a Jew, as a politician, as an interpreter of the Jewish Scriptures, as a classical educated Jew, and as a philosopher. Those chapters draw attention to and explore Philo’s eclectic background and context. The chapter offered by the Finnish scholar Erkki Koskenniemi—Philo and Classical Education (pp. 102–28)—is particularly thought-provoking and invites further research about the social situation and education of Jews in Alexandria at the time of Philo. The second part contains essays on how and why to study Philo (pp. 157–286). The first two chapters deal with the ‘how’ question. The first of these, written by Seland, is particularly helpful for those embarking on a study of Philo, as it offers practical advice regarding matters such as text editions, translations, indexes, lexica, and computer resources. The final three essays deal with the ‘why’ question: why scholars in the fields of Judaism, New Testament, and early church fathers should read the works of Philo. Each of the contributors to the volume approaches Philo from a specialized angle of expertise, and there is something of interest ‘for all those wanting to approach the works of Philo, whether they want to study him as a Diaspora Jew, an Alexandrian theologian, philosopher, or politician, or as a person who has had an immense influence on early Christian theology’ (p. x). Each chapter is impressive in its own way, even if the appeal of each will vary from reader to reader. Taken together, the chapters equip their reader with a good overview of Philo’s works and of the state of research in Philonic studies.

The usefulness of this handbook is enhanced by a comprehensive 36-page bibliography of secondary literature relating to the study of Philo. Furthermore, in the final chapter of the volume, David T. Runia provides a list of direct references to Philo in the patristic tradition up to 1000 CE. Runia, however, acknowledges that the list is incomplete and will hopefully be supplemented by scholars in the future (p. 274). Regarding the Philonic treatises, there is a

helpful alphabetical list in the Index of Biblical References and Other Ancient Literature (and a shorter list in the Abbreviations). In a book that displays such a manageable overview of Philo, it may seem churlish to remark on the absence of certain features. Although there is an Index of Modern Authors and an Index of Biblical References and Other Ancient Literature, there is no subject index. As a result, the reader, unfortunately, has to search the entire volume in order to locate comments regarding any particular subject. While the scope of the study is a particular strength, it somewhat lacks a clear *leitmotif* (or connecting thread) that runs throughout the chapters. Some readers might also appreciate an even more sustained analysis of Philo's exegetical method or discussion on the division of the Philonic corpus.

Reading Philo is primarily aimed at MA and PhD students who are beginning to study Philo. While introductory in tone, it is, at some points, a little too technical and challenging for the beginner. It is arguably best viewed as filling a gap between general overviews and more specialized studies on Philo. Overall, it is valuable reading for those seeking to understand better the context and writings of Philo. Seland laudably points out that, while his handbook 'is meant to be a very practical resource for reading and understanding this important Hellenistic Jewish philosopher,' 'nothing can substitute a reading of his works directly' (p. 3). *Reading Philo* is rich in content, but 'it is Philo's own texts that should be the primary focus' (p. 179) of any serious student of Philo.