Abstract: The relation of philosophy to theology is notoriously ambiguous. Reading Philo of Alexandria is a case in point. Understanding the dynamics of philosophy and theology in the Philonic corpus is a key to understanding Philo’s thought. And yet, few scholars agree as to how to read Philo on this point. In this article I highlight some of the hermeneutical challenges posed by the Philonic corpus, based on two recent publications. The first book, a recently edited volume, documents the current trends in the discussion, introducing the reader to 21st century scholarship. The second book, the first translation into English of an older monograph, echoes earlier trends, reaching back to the beginning of the previous century. Both publications complement each other, together covering a hundred years of Philonic scholarship. They thus offer a sound guide to the perplexed, even though they ultimately suggest alternative ways of reading Philo. In what follows, I argue that the perennial challenge of every Philo reader is to decipher Philo’s enigmatic strategy in combining the Greek philosophical tradition with the Jewish scriptural tradition. To delve into this mystery, I submit, is the reason why Philo will continue to fascinate scholars for generations to come.

Key words: Philo – hermeneutics – biblical philosophy – handmaiden formula – first theologian – onto-theology – ressourcement theology

Reading Philo: A Handbook to Philo of Alexandria, Torrey Seland (ed.), Eerdmans,
Philonic scholarship is immense. Good Philonic scholarship is scarce. The two books reviewed below belong, for different reasons, to the better kind. Daniélou's book was written in the 1950s. The author's interlocutors are the former giants of Philonic scholarship. Seland’s *Handbook* was published in 2014. Its chapters are written by experts and leading scholars currently shaping the field. Read together - or in comparison - the two books take us on an amazing intellectual journey covering over a century of reading Philo. The aim of this short essay is not the historiographical survey of Philonic scholarship in the last 100 years. A special section on ‘bibliographies, reviews and other handbooks’ in Seland’s *Handbook* (172-7) is an excellent place to start for anyone interested in this task. Instead, I shall focus on the key question recurring in the *Handbook* - ‘why study Philo?’ (3, 157-9) - and critically discuss how two generations of scholars answer it.

Seland’s *Handbook* is a state-of-the-art introduction to Philonic studies. The book is written in a clear, almost analytic style, intended for anyone ‘just embarking on a study of Philo,’ with MA or PhD students as its primary target group (x, 3). Its place in the bibliographical landscape is between Kenneth Schenck’s *A Brief Guide to Philo* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press 2005), and Adam Kamesar’s (ed.) *The*
Cambridge Companion to Philo (Cambridge: CUP 2009). Seland’s Handbook is more nuanced - viz. ‘cautious’ (198, 225) - than the former, and suitable for a wider, less informed readership than the latter. The Handbook is divided in two parts. The first part addresses the question ‘how’ to study Philo; the second part, the question ‘why’ (14). Thus, the proper order to read the book is, first, the introduction with its rich survey of the component essays (3-16); then, the second part (155-286); and, finally, the first part (17-154). The key essay is that of the editor opening up the second part (157-179). Together with the introduction, it comprises the backbone of the book. The essay raises the two questions running like a thread through all the chapters (‘Why study Philo? How?’), and addresses methodological and bibliographical issues. It is here that the reader will find the thesis of the book, namely that ‘Philo is indeed important’ (157). This is certainly not thought provoking. Nor is the argument in support of the thesis very far reaching: ‘Today hardly any scholar of Second Temple Judaism, early Christianity, or Greek philosophy of that period sees any great imperative in arguing for his [Philo’s] relevance. It should be taken for granted’ (158). It is rather the temporal qualification ‘today’ which alerts the reader to the fact that Philo’s importance has not always been uncontested. The silence regarding the contenders - Festugière, most notably - is a sign of a past that the editor wants to leave behind. That might not be so easy, however, as the extensive discussion of E. R. Goodenough’s work (47-74) or the numerous footnote references to H. A. Wolfson throughout the book betray. In the past, Goodenough and Wolfson both contributed enormously in proving Philo’s importance.

Leaving the past behind, the four essays of the second part provide the evidence in support of the editor’s argument. They convincingly illustrate Philo’s relevance to the
study of social history (Adele Reinhartz 180-199), of ancient Judaism (Ellen Birnbaum 200-225), of the New Testament (Per Jarle Bekken 226-267), and of patristics up to 1000 CE (David T. Runia 268-286). The five essays of the first part examine Philo in his Jewish (Karl-Gustav Sandelin 19-46), political (Torrey Seland 47-74), exegetical (Peder Borgen 75-101), cultural (Erkki Koskenniemi 102-128), and philosophical (Gregory E. Sterling 129-154) context. Though the chapters of the first part are written as independent essays, each one picks up the thread of the previous chapter. They thus betray an inner design, if not an inner argument, to the book, to which I will come back later.

The Handbook’s undeniable strength is its wealth of references: it offers a first-hand guide to the most current trends and issues in Philonic scholarship. Its major drawback is that it does not discuss Philo as a theologian, nor does it explain Philo’s relevance for the study of theology or the history of philosophy. A rich section on Philo’s Judaism (Sandelin 23-46) and another on his exegetical themes and methods (Borgen 77-101) help situate Philo in his religious milieu. But that is not the same as theology. For example, there is a striking silence about Philo’s significant contribution to negative theology and the mystical tradition. Similarly, a detailed but brief section on Philo’s philosophical background (Koskenniemi 121-125) and a brilliant essay on Philo as a Jewish philosopher (Sterling 129-154) do not compensate for the absence of a chapter on Philo’s disputed relevance to the history of philosophy. The fact that the Handbook speaks of Philo as ‘a theologian’ here and there (46, 157) and then only acknowledges his importance for the study of history of philosophy (x, 158, 159) makes the omissions a bit frustrating. It is as if Philo’s importance with regard to philosophy and theology is implicitly contested. But the motives of the omission may lie elsewhere, as I will later
argue. In sum, the Handbook's answer to the question ‘why study Philo?’ is contextual: We need to study the Philonic corpus because it is a treasure trove of information about various historical disciplines. For anyone interested in Philo per se, the answer might strike one as a bit shallow. It does represent, however, the current state of affairs. And it comes in a risk-free package.

Daniélou’s book on the other hand is only for those who have the stomach for it. On the surface, everything seems to go wrong. The material is dated and surpassed by modern introductions, such as Schenck’s Guide. Messy footnotes (references to the Philonic corpus are only partially confirmed) and omnipresent typos (I spotted 35, more than half of which concerned almost every other Greek word) do not help the reader of the English edition, nor do they do justice to the author’s erudition or Colbert’s fine translation. More serious are inaccuracies in content. Daniélou, for example, is confident about Philo’s knowledge of Hebrew (28), whereas it would have been more balanced to claim that Philo was familiar with Hebrew words and names. Similarly, Daniélou speaks quite confidently and without qualification of Philo’s ‘mysticism’ or ‘spirituality’ (147-165), but the terms today are ambivalent and require further clarification. Or, again, quite curiously, if not mistakenly, and certainly misleadingly, Daniélou treats Philo’s Pythagorean number symbolism (sic!) as part of his ‘literal exegesis’ (96-98). More subtle, but crucial nonetheless, is the shift in methodology since Daniélou’s days. This change becomes apparent by means of a simple comparison between Daniélou’s and Seland’s books. For example, Daniélou's third chapter (‘The Bible at Alexandria’) is based on source analysis, a method that is now considered to be unfruitful in Philonic studies (Seland, 177-8). Chapter four subscribes unconditionally to H. I. Marrou’s
methodology and conclusions (91, 92, 98), but today’s scholars are much more cautious in their use of the French scholar’s work, if not downright skeptical of it (Koskenniemi 104, 107-8, 110 fn. 38). To give a third example, Daniélou claims that Philo's *Questions and Answers in Genesis and Exodus* contains ‘the most esoteric side of his thought’ (69). Contemporary scholars, however, think that the work was intended rather for beginning students, while the *Allegorical Commentary* was reserved for the more advanced (Seland 150, 153). These examples illustrate that from the viewpoint of recent scholarship the data in Daniélou's book are unreliable. Unlike Seland’s *Handbook*, Daniélou’s study is not suitable for the newcomer to Philonic studies.

A book, however, is not just simply a spreadsheet of data that needs to be constantly updated, but the argument moulded on the basis of the data available to the author. It is at this level that Daniélou’s approach to Philo begins to show its quality. Though the book was written almost 60 years ago, Daniélou's argument sounds strikingly contemporary. The material is divided into seven chapters - perhaps an allusion to Philo’s most holy and symbolic number. The first three chapters study Philo in context, which is the same approach as Seland’s *Handbook*. They take us through Philo’s life (1-24), his Jewish, philosophical, and political background (25-69), and the study of the Bible in a pre-Philonic, Alexandrian milieu (60-89). Philo is portrayed here as a ‘liberal rabbi’ (11). This is one of the possible images of Philo that we get from the *Handbook*, though the term ‘rabbi’ can only be catachrestically applied to Philo’s time. The next three chapters are devoted to Philo’s own thought: his exegesis (90-110), his theology (111-146) and his spirituality (147-162). The main point here is Philo’s ‘remarkable synthesis’ (111) of Greek philosophy and Jewish theology. It is the same view that we find in modern (e.g.
Sterling 129-154) and ancient readers of Philo (e.g. Runia 271). A final chapter (163-177) discusses the thorny issue of Philo’s relevance to the study of the New Testament. Any direct influence between Philo and the New Testament is excluded and only the sound hypothesis of a common background is further pursued (163, 176). This approach is in tune with the current consensus in Philonic scholarship (see Bekken 227). Throughout the book, Philo emerges as an exegete of Scripture: ‘The core of Philo’s thought is indisputably Biblical’ (26). ‘Interpretation of the Bible and almost exclusively of the Pentateuch remains the essential part of his work’ (60). This represents once more the *opinio communis* in current scholarship (for an assessment, see Sterling 130 fn. 10). Given that Daniélou writes more than half a century ago, this is a remarkable achievement. It is interesting to ask oneself how many of the current books on Philo will still be valid after fifty years. The fact that Daniélou’s name does not figure in the bibliography of Seland’s *Handbook* is not a weakness of the *Handbook* itself, but rather of current scholarship at large, which has perhaps failed to appreciate the work of the great Jesuit scholar and Cardinal for far too long. The English edition is a step towards filling this gap. It is unfortunate that the editor missed the chance of supplying an introduction situating the book in its historical context, elucidating Daniélou’s contribution to Philonic studies, and explaining to the reader why the book is still worth reading today.

To appreciate Daniélou’s study, one needs to be aware of the author’s seminal role in the French *ressourcement* movement and of his huge contribution to 20th century patristic revival. Only then does the reader become more sensitive to the rich context and subtext of the book. As regards the context, Daniélou’s explicit interlocutors are the
scholars that defined Philonic studies for the first half of the previous century: Brêhier, Goodenough, Wolfson and Völker, all of whom figure in footnotes and arguments throughout the book. As regards the subtext, Daniélou's implicit interlocutors point at a wider scope: references to Gregory Palamas and Vladimir Lossky (119-120, 172-173) echo the celebrated debates between French Catholic ressourcement theologians and their Russian Orthodox émigrés colleagues in 20th century Paris. Moreover, the last sentence of the book announces a book on Gregory of Nyssa, which would prove to be Daniélou’s swan song. Daniélou’s first book on Platonism and Mystical Theology was also dedicated to the great Cappadocian theologian. Thus, the numerous references to Nyssen (6, 67, 110, 114, 115, 123, 137, 139, 152, 161, 171) and the chapter on 'Philo’s Spirituality’ situate the study on Philo within a larger trajectory, stretching over the whole of Daniélou’s thought. The trajectory is hinted at in the fifth chapter of the book (‘Philo’s Theology’), which culminates, rather unexpectedly by Philonic standards, in a section on ‘Grace.’ It is almost impossible not to read this section without considering Henri de Lubac's criticism of the neo-Scholastic constructions on nature and grace, expressed in Surnaturel (Aubier 1946). Thus, at the heart of Philo’s theology Daniélou places the most fundamental tenet of ressourcement theology: ‘to acknowledge that everything comes from God is wisdom’ (145). The section on grace reveals the reason why Daniélou is so interested in Philo. He is, apud Harnak, 'the first theologian' (144). The reference to Harnak gives away Daniélou’s larger plan in writing his study on Philo: to re-visit the history of church dogmatics from the viewpoint of ressourcement. The plan will give birth to Daniélou’s famous final trilogy on the Pre-Nicean History of Christian Doctrines. Philo has a special place in this narrative. Since he is ‘the first theologian,’ it
is with the study of Philo that the history of church dogmatics begins. This is Daniélou’s implicit but clear answer as to why we should read Philo, not just ‘today,’ but, so to speak, ‘every day.’

At this point Daniélou’s study comes into dialogue with Seland’s *Handbook*. Some initial disagreement is in due order. Modern scholars might want to prioritise other aspects of Philo rather than his theology. Two essays in the *Handbook* explain the reasons why. Adele Reinhartz illustrates how the question of Philo’s relevance to a certain discipline - in this case, social history - can be affirmed or denied depending on the hermeneutical assumptions of the reader (181, 188). Similarly, Torrey Seland highlights how different methodologies can generate different readings of Philo - in this case, of Philo’s Jewishness. As Seland remarks, we must never forget that ‘a scholar’s social location and his or her hermeneutic might play a considerable interpretative role that should not be overlooked. None of us are socially detached readers or writers’ (73). Reinhartz and Seland are right: there cannot be just one definitive reading of Philo. All readings are hermeneutically contingent. Daniélou is no exception to the rule. His theological reading of Philo betrays something - actually, a lot - of his own social and historical context. Today’s readers may opt for a number of different approaches, such as those highlighted in the *Handbook*. Yet, there might be more in the *Handbook* than meets the eye. As already noted, the essays constituting its first part appear at first sight to be five independent studies on Philo. At second glance, however, the reader gradually becomes aware of an inner coherence suggestive of an alternative, comprehensive reading of the five essays. If one opts for the latter, alternative reading, one discovers a continuous narrative starting with Sandelin's chapter on Philo ‘as a Jew’ and finishing up
with Sterling’s essay on Philo’s ‘Jewish Philosophy.’ If one is willing to read the
*Handbook* in that way, then the two approaches to Philo, Daniélou’s and the *Handbook’s*,
actually concur.

No matter which reading of the *Handbook* one may prefer, it is worthwhile to
compare Daniélou’s and Sterling’s readings of Philo on their own. They represent two
different views on the relation of philosophy and theology - a perennial question whose
thread leads back to Philo, and beyond. Here, I jump over a number of technical
questions regarding the identification, provenance and coherence of Philo’s peculiar
blend of philosophy. In Sterling’s essay the reader will find everything she needs with
respect to the *status questionis*. What is much more fascinating is to focus on the
respective arguments. Both Daniélou and Sterling begin with the common assumption
that Philo ‘uses’ Greek philosophy in order to exegise Scripture. It is the celebrated
‘handmaiden’ formula which Philo introduces for the first time in the history of western
theology in his allegorical interpretation of the story of Sarah and Hagar (*De Congressu* §
79). What is disputed, however, is how to understand the ‘use’ of philosophy in this
context. The debate is a very nuanced one. For Daniélou, philosophy is instrumental to
scriptural exegesis (‘tools of philosophy,’ 111). But the service rendered is ambivalent.
At best, Philo ‘reforms traditional Greek philosophy by conforming it to the work of
God’ (10). At worse, ‘the Greek influence distorts Biblical thought’ (162). Thus, for
Daniélou, philosophy - the Hellenistic tradition - and theology - the Jewish wisdom
tradition - cannot be on the same par. The former is subordinated to the later, Daniélou
clearly argues, based on the ‘handmaiden’ passage from *De Congressu* (93). But the
reader can feel the tension in Daniélou’s argument. For elsewhere in his study he
concedes to the idea of philosophy and theology being fused in Philo’s thought: The aim of Philo’s project was to ‘show the superiority of Biblical “philosophy” to pagan philosophy’; Philo committed himself ‘to establish and teach this Biblical philosophy’ (10). Thus, one of the high moments of the book is when Daniélou gives a name to Philo's peculiar blend of philosophical theology: ‘It is Biblical Platonism’ (110). All this comes extremely close to Sterling’s thesis. For Sterling, 'Philo was first and foremost an exegete of Moses’ writings’ (130). But the way he interpreted Moses was ‘through the lens of Hellenistic philosophy’ (153). Sterling’s code name for the latter is ‘Jewish philosophy.’ The resemblance with Daniélou’s ‘Biblical philosophy’ is striking. But, contrary to Daniélou, Sterling does not think that philosophy was subordinate to the wisdom tradition. Instead, he thinks that both represent two equally valid approaches towards the same end. In one of the most bold passages in Seland’s Handbook Sterling argues: ‘Philo believed that Hellenistic philosophy - at least the traditions he accepted - and the Jewish faith came together at the most important juncture: the understanding of the divine’ (153-154). This gives support to the view that philosophy and theology build a unity in Philo’s thought. As Sterling argues elsewhere, ‘for Philo they were two ways of expressing a single vision of truth.’ As a result, Daniélou and Sterling represent two different versions of reconstructing Philo’s view on the relation of philosophy to theology. In spite of the differences in nuances, however, they both agree that Philo is, first and foremost, an interpreter of scripture. By integrating Greek philosophy in his exegesis Philo shapes western thought once and for all, by becoming, according to Daniélou and Sterling, ‘the first theologian’ (Daniélou 144; Sterling 154 fn 96, cf. also 157).
The latter is, of course, a huge and controversial claim. There are many contemporary thinkers working on both sides of the fence, whether in philosophy or theology, who would look down upon Philo’s project as an unlawful union of two disciplines that had better remain apart. Martin Heidegger throughout his work, and most notably in a celebrated post-war essay, gave a name to this putatively methodological error, which he thought to be characteristic of all western metaphysics: he called it ‘onto-theology.’ If Heidegger had read Philo, he would have no scruples of affirming that he was, if not the first onto-theologian (that title was reserved for Plato in Heidegger’s mind), then surely the first Jewish onto-theologian, the onto-theologian par excellence. Adolf von Harnack, before Heidegger, made a similar charge against Philo, this time from the perspective of the study of religion. In his reconstruction of the history of church dogmatics, Harnack accused Philo of advocating a new religious Judaism, one infiltrated by Greek philosophical thought. Philo’s Judaism, according to Harnack, paved the way for the Christianising of the Greeks and the transformation - viz. distortion - of the authentic gospel message. One may remain unconvinced by Harnack’s or Heidegger’s reconstruction of the history of ideas, but the methodological charge is a serious one. It accuses philosophy of distorting theology (Harnack) and, conversely, theology of distorting philosophy (Heidegger). The problem lies in the common assumption that reason is - invalidly - mingling with revelation.

It is against this very polarity (reason vs. faith) that the ressourcement theologians will strongly react. Daniélou, one of the protagonists, undertook to show that Philo’s synthesis aimed at the transformation of Greek philosophy by Jewish theology (10) rather than the other way around, as Harnack would have it. The little book on Philo is thus a
ressourcement theologian’s riposte to Harnack’s charge against the origins of Christian dogma. Daniélou does not conceal moments of tension, where the influence of philosophy seems to ‘deform that spirit [of the gospel]’ (148) or ‘distort Biblical thought’ (162). His last defence seems to be the subordination clause: philosophy is ultimately subordinate to wisdom (93), because everything comes from God (145). Rationality is the gift of grace, Daniélou clearly implies. And he would add, as an answer to Heidegger: to acknowledge that everything, including reason, is a gift from God is true wisdom (cf. 145).

In Sterling we have a different response. His approach to Philo denies the validity of the hermeneutical presuppositions of onto-theology, or Harnack’s charge, namely the initial hypothesis of a fundamental polarity between ontology and theology. In Sterling’s view, Philo rejects the antagonism between the Greek philosophical tradition and the Jewish wisdom tradition because they both aim - validly - at the same end: the knowledge of God (154). This is an intriguing view with further consequences. For once, it invites further reflection on the role of revelation in Greek philosophy - one thinks immediately of Socrates’ guiding daemon in the Apology, or of the philosopher’s inspiration as a gift from god in the Phaedrus. Secondly, it implies that Philo anticipates in his reading of Scripture the basic tenet of later Christian metaphysics: fides quaerens intellectum (faith seeking understanding). Thus, Daniélou and Sterling represent not just two generations of scholars, but also two different ways of responding to the onto-theological charge against Philo. According to the former, Philo is not an onto-theologian because, as Philo rightly perceived, ontology is a priori subordinated to theology. According to the later, Philo is indeed an onto-theologian - and it is good that he is so.
Why then study Philo today, after a century - and a couple more - of Philonic studies? In this essay, I have tried to show that reading Philo promises to be a fascinating journey through the perennial questions of philosophy of religion: its hermeneutical presuppositions, its validity and coherence, in short, the very possibility of bringing philosophy and theology under the same roof. Seland’s *Handbook* and Daniélou’s study guide the reader prudently through a minefield of questions. That is reason enough why anyone interested in this kind of venture should read them. The *Handbook*, intended for the novice, leaves a number of interpretative options available allowing the reader to decide whether or not to approach Philo as a Jewish philosopher. Daniélou’s study, on the contrary, addressed, as it is, to the initiated, does not shiver before the task of calling Philo what he is: a Biblical philosopher. Here, then, lies the rub for anyone interested in reading Philo. Philo's synthesis of philosophy and theology, undeniable as it is, must be revisited by each reader for herself as she engages with Philo’s work. If hermeneutics is a dialectical enterprise at all, truth hides silently, suspended somewhere in the middle between author and reader. Hermeneutical space is not about what the text says, but about what it merely invokes. Perhaps it is this middle space of hiddenness that Harnack and Heidegger have trespassed by trying to say out loud what should always remain just a whisper. Whether the god of the philosopher is the God of faith cannot be dictated to the reader. It must be discovered. That discovery is what hermeneutics is all about, why we still want - and perhaps need - to read Philo. Daniélou has ultimately committed the same mistake as his opponents: to the measure that he conceded to some distortion of Biblical thought by Hellenistic philosophy, he allowed himself to become part of the onto-theological language game. But, I would suggest, this is not the case with Philo, who
through multiple layers of meaning, numerous tensions, apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in his work grants us the necessary hermeneutical space - viz. constructive ambiguity - to choose for ourselves how to penetrate the mystery of his paradoxical God, a God that is at once shining through all-that-is and yet lying forever hidden behind the cloud at the top of mount Sinai. It is in this respect that the open-ended narrative of Seland’s *Handbook*, if indeed there is a narrative, leads the reader stage by stage into the telling silence of Philo's deeper mysteries.

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3 The book was published posthumously as *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse*, Brill 1970.
7 For a typology of a number of possible positions on Philo’s ‘use’ of Greek philosophy, see David T. Runia, ‘Was Philo a Middle Platonist? A Difficult Question Revisited,’ *Studia Philonica Annual* 5 (1993), 112-140, 125.