

Excerpts from Philo of Alexandria

Questions and Answers on Genesis, Book 3

11. What is the meaning of the words, “But thou shalt go to thy fathers with peace, nourished in a good old age” (Genesis 15:15)? Clearly this indicates the incorruptibility of the soul, which removes its habitation from the mortal body and returns as if to the mother-city, from which it originally moved its habitation to this place. For when it is said to a dying person, “Thou shalt go to thy fathers,” what else is this than to represent another life without the body, which only the soul of the wise man ought to live? And (Scripture) speaks of “the fathers” of Abraham, meaning not those who begot him, his grandfathers and forefathers, for they were not all worthy of praise so as to be a source of pride and glory to those who reach the same rank, but in the opinion of many it seems that “the fathers” indicate all the elements into which the dissolution (of the body) takes place. To me, however, it seems to indicate the incorporeal Logoi of the divine world, whom elsewhere it is accustomed to call “angels.” Moreover, not ineptly does (Scripture) speak of “being nourished with peace” and “in a good old age.” For the evil and sinful man is nourished and lives by strife, and ends and grows old in evil. But the virtuous man in both his lives—in that with the body and in that without the body—enjoys peace, and alone is very good while no one of the foolish is (so), even though he should be longer-lived than an elephant. Wherefore (Scripture) has accurately said, “Thou shalt go to thy fathers,” not in a long old age but in a “good” old age. For many foolish men linger on to a long life, but to a good and virtuous life only he who is a lover of wisdom.

Allegorical Interpretation, Book 1

33. And further he says, “In the day that ye eat thereof, ye shall die the death” (Genesis 2:17). And yet after they have eaten, not merely do they *not* die, but they beget children and become authors of life to others. What, then, is to be said of this? That death is of two kinds, one that of the man in general, and the other that of the soul in particular. The death of the man is the separation of the soul from the body, but the death of the soul is the decay of virtue and the bringing in of wickedness. It is for this reason that God says not only “die” but “die the death,” indicating not the death common to us all, but the special death properly so called, which is that of the soul becoming entombed in passions and wickedness of all kinds. And this death is practically the antithesis of the death which awaits us all. The latter is the separation of combatants that had been pitted against one another, body and soul, to wit. The former, on the other hand, is a meeting of the two in conflict. And in this conflict the worse, the body, overcomes, and the better, the soul, is overcome. But observe that wherever Moses speaks of “dying the death,” he means the penalty-death, not that which takes place in the course of nature. That one is in the course of nature in which soul is parted from body; but the penalty-death takes place when the soul dies to the life of virtue, and is alive only to that of wickedness. That is an excellent saying of Heracleitus, who on this point followed Moses’ teaching, “We live,” he says, “their death, and are dead to their life.” He means that now, when we are living, the soul is dead and has been entombed in the body as in a sepulcher, whereas, should we die, the soul forthwith in its proper life, and is released from the body, the baneful corpse to which it was tied.