



[Philo, On the Embassy to Gaius 153-158](#)

Augustus's policy toward the Jews

Name of the author: Philo of Alexandria

Date: 41 CE to 42 CE

Place: Alexandria

Language: Greek

Category: Jewish

Literary genre: Apologetic, History and Theology

Title of work: On the Embassy to Gaius

Reference: 153-158

Commentary:

(For a short introduction to Philo, his family and their connections with Rome, as well as to the events of 38 CE and the embassy to Rome, see [Philo, On the Embassy to Gaius 8-10.](#))

In this passage, Philo continues to discuss the fact that the Alexandrians did not erect statues of Gaius' predecessors (Augustus and Tiberius) in the synagogues. He explains that by doing so, they would in fact have run against these emperors' will, because the latter did not want to alter the traditional laws of the peoples they ruled. Philo's goal is again to contrast Augustus' policy with that of Gaius.

He first praises Augustus for resisting the temptation of being called a god (§154), a characteristic that distinguishes him from Caligula, who, on the contrary, is described in the *Embassy* as demanding not only to be called a god, but to be considered and worshipped as such (§§76-116). Admittedly, Augustus did not object to the imperial cult that developed in the East, where it was a continuation of the cult of the Hellenistic kings. This tradition was originally foreign to the West; there, as Mary E. Smallwood recalls, "Augustus allowed temples to be erected to himself in the provinces only if they were dedicated to Rome also, and refused to have any temple in Rome itself" (Smallwood, *Philonis Alexandrini Legatio*, p. 233, referring to Suetonius, *Life of the Deified Augustus* 52; according to [CIL XIII, 1664](#), an altar was dedicated to Roma and Augustus in Lugdunum in 12 BCE, for example). Philo, who lived in the East, was well aware of the imperial cult, but praises Augustus for limiting himself to receiving honors "in accordance with the dignity of his great empire" (§153). Augustus' restraint was imitated by Claudius (see Claudius' letter to the Alexandrians, in *CPJ* II, no. 153, lines 28-29, 48-51: "I have gladly received the honours you have given me, although I have no great taste for such things. [...] But the establishment of a high-priest and temples of myself I decline, not wishing to be offensive to my contemporaries and in the belief that temples and the like have been set apart in all ages for the gods alone"; translation by Victor Tcherikover, *CPJ* II, p. 42). As Philo wrote his treatise under Claudius, it is possible that his praise of Augustus' policy also represented an indirect message to the ruling emperor (on the importance of Claudius' reign as the context of the *Legatio*, see Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria*, p. 41-43).

Philo's general point in §153 concerning the respect shown by Augustus toward the traditional customs and laws of the various peoples living within the Roman empire, is above all meant to highlight that he did not force the Jews to honor him in ways that would have contradicted their traditional laws. In *Against Apion*, Josephus writes in a similar vein, to refute Apion's slander against the Alexandrian Jews, that "he ought rather to have admired the magnanimity and moderation of the Romans, since they do not compel their subjects to transgress their ancestral laws, but accept such honors as it is pious and legitimate for their donors to offer" (*Against Apion* II.73, translation by John Barclay, *Flavius Josephus, Against Apion*, p. 208). Philo even asserts that Augustus was particularly pleased by the Jews' traditional refusal to worship human beings, the very quality that made them so hateful in Caligula's eyes (see §§117-119). Again—this time in relation to the Jews—Augustus and Gaius are clear opposites. For Philo, Augustus's "approval of the Jews" (§154) manifested itself both through what he refrained from doing and through positive acts of benefaction. Philo first asserts that under Augustus, the Jews of Rome were not expelled from the city. He passes over in silence the fact that under Tiberius, in 19 CE, some of them were expelled from Rome (see Rutgers, "Roman Policy towards the Jews," p. 60-65). In addition, both Acts 18:2 and Suetonius (*Life of Claudius* 25.4) mention an expulsion of the Jews from Rome under Claudius; yet Cassius Dio states that Claudius abandoned the idea because they were too numerous, and merely forbade their gatherings (LX.6.6). Cassius Dio gives the date of 41 CE, whereas Orosius (*Adv. Paganos* VII.6.15) refers to an expulsion in 49 CE, referring to Josephus as his source (but no such passage exists in Josephus's work). Supposing Cassius Dio is right about the dating, Philo may have witnessed Claudius's policy. His praise of Augustus's decisions



concerning the Jews in the *Legatio* could then be a way to exhort Claudius to follow the path of his illustrious predecessor (Smallwood, *Philonis Alexandrini Legatio*, p. 239; Rutgers, “Roman Policy towards the Jews,” p. 65-66).

Most importantly, Philo states that under Augustus, the Jews were not deprived of their Roman citizenship (whereas, Philo implies, Alexandrian Jews were deprived of their Alexandrian citizenship; see Honigman, “Philon, Flavius Josèphe, et la citoyenneté alexandrine, p. 77-78); their synagogues were not threatened in any way; they were allowed to gather and freely discuss their Law (their “traditional philosophy,” §156); they had the right to collect money (from their “first-fruits”) and send it to Jerusalem (§157; on this point in particular, see also Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XVI.162-165, quoting a decree of Augustus confirming the rights of the Jews; Smallwood, *Philonis Alexandrini Legatio*, p. 238-239). Last but not least, the princeps and his family treated the Jerusalem temple with exemplary piety, sending beautiful offerings and funding daily sacrifices in the name of the emperor (§157; see also *Legat.* 317). Philo writes that these sacrifices were to endure forever. At that time he could not imagine that roughly twenty years later, in 66 CE, the interruption of these daily sacrifices would mark the beginning of the Great Revolt against Rome in Judea (see **Josephus, *Jewish War* II.409**). Philo ends this list of benevolent imperial decisions by mentioning that the Roman Jews also enjoyed the right to benefit from the imperial distributions of money or food on a different day than the other citizens if the distribution was performed on a Sabbath (§158). These distributions are described by Philo as a manifestation of the emperor’s *philanthr?pia*, an important virtue for rulers in general, which Philo also attributes to God and exemplary characters like Moses. In this context, however, the notion is closer to that of the *philanthr?pa* of the Hellenistic kings (benefactions, and especially tax exemptions, in a Ptolemaic context) (see Berthelot, *Philanthr?pia judaica*, p. 20-24).

Before enumerating Augustus’s decisions in favor of the Jews, Philo recalls that the emperor had direct knowledge of their customs because of the Jewish population living in Rome. According to Harry Leon, inscriptions from the catacombs even suggest that Augustus was the patron of one of the Jewish communities in Rome (Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome*, p. 142). Philo states that the Jews lived in the area known today as the Trastevere, on the west bank of the Tiber, and that most of them came to the city as prisoners of wars, but were later manumitted by their masters (§155) (according to Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* I.3.3, there were Jews in Rome already in the second half of the second century BCE; some Jewish prisoners must have arrived in Rome in the wake of Pompey’s victory in Judea in 63 BCE, and later wars such as the conflict with Mattathias Antigonus in 40–37 BCE). What Philo writes in §157 about the Roman citizenship of these Jews indicates that they had been manumitted in accordance with Roman law—formal manumission could be performed either by the rod (*vindicta*) before a magistrate, or by will, or through the census. Augustus restricted the possibility for freed slaves to become citizens by requiring that the slave be at least thirty years old, by limiting the total number of slaves that could be manumitted by the same master, and by excluding certain categories of slaves, who had executed degrading tasks, from the possibility of receiving citizenship. Slaves who had not been freed in accordance with Roman law or did not fall into the right categories became “Junian Latins,” a kind of personal status modelled on the Latin right (see further Lavan, “The Foundation of Empire?” p. 23; and Rutgers, “Roman Policy towards the Jews,” p. 59-60). Mary E. Smallwood wonders whether all the manumitted Jews had indeed become Roman citizens, or whether some of them were in fact Junian Latins (*Philonis Alexandrini Legatio*, p. 235). Philo’s argument suggests that at least a significant number were citizens.

In §157, Philo writes that Augustus did not deprive the Roman Jews from their Roman citizenship (*t?n Rh?maik?n aut?n politeian*) on the pretext that “they cared about their Jewish [citizenship] as well” (??? ??? ??? ?????????? ?????????? / *hoti kai t?s loudaik?s ephrontizon*). Even though the word *politeia* is not repeated twice, it is the implied noun that the adjective *loudaikos* characterizes, because *loudaikos* clearly parallels *Rh?maikos*. In Philo’s discourse, “Jewishness” (the fact of belonging to the people of Israel) is thus conceived of as a “citizenship” (see also *Legat.* 194, where Philo states that Jewish “citizenship” is more universal than Alexandrian citizenship). Moreover, Philo suggests that it is comparable to Roman citizenship, and that the two can be put on an equal footing.

Sylvie Honigman proposes yet another interpretation of this passage, arguing that for Philo, Roman citizenship plays the role of a local citizenship comparable to those of Alexandria, Ephesus or Antioch, whereas “Jewish citizenship” is a universal one. According to her, Philo replicates the Ciceronian model of two *patriae* and the distinction between one’s city of *origo* (where one was born) and Rome, that is, a distinction between a local and a universal citizenship (even though Cicero actually considered that Roman citizens held one citizenship only), but also modifies Cicero’s model by positing that the *politeia* of Moses is the Roman Jews’ universal citizenship, whereas Rome is their city of residence and local citizenship (Honigman, “Philon, Flavius Josèphe, et la citoyenneté alexandrine,” p. 75-76; **[Cicero, On the Laws II.3-5](#)**).

Keywords in the original language:



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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Augustus](#)
- [honor](#)
- [imperial benevolence](#)
- [imperial generosity](#)
- [imperial piety](#)
- [Jerusalem Temple](#)
- [Jewish citizenship](#)
- [Jewish customs](#)
- [Jewish Law](#)
- [Jewish privileges](#)
- [Jewish rights](#)
- [Jews](#)
- [piety](#)
- [Roman citizenship](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [sabbath](#)
- [synagogue](#)

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Text

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On the two *patria*e

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Text

[Philo, On the Embassy to Gaius 8-10](#)

Description of the empire at the time Caligula became emperor

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Text

[Philo, On the Embassy to Gaius 143-147](#)

Praise of Augustus and the peace he brought to the world

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