Philo, On the Embassy to Gaius 8-10

Description of the empire at the time Caligula became emperor

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: 8-10

Commentary:
Philo of Alexandria lived from roughly 20 BCE to 50 CE (his exact dates are unknown). He was a renowned Jewish philosopher and commentator of biblical texts, well-versed in both Greek culture and Jewish Scriptures and traditions. (Josephus mentions Philo in laudatory terms in A.J. 18.259.) Philo came from a prominent and wealthy family in Alexandria. His brother Alexander was alabarch (that is, in charge of the customs of the city), and had received Roman citizenship, probably in return for the help he had provided to Antonia Minor, daughter of Mark Antony, mother of Claudius, and grand-mother of Caligula (Hadas-Lebel, Philon d’Alexandrie, p. 51 and 53). Alexander was well-connected with king Agrippa I, and even married his son Marcus to Agrippa’s daughter, the famous Berenice, then 13 years old. Alexander’s eldest son, Tiberius Julius Alexander, who was a Roman citizen by birth, pursued a brilliant career in the Roman administration, including as procurator of Judea under Claudius in 46–48 CE, and as prefect of Egypt in 66–69 CE. Philo therefore belonged to a Jewish family that was closely connected to Rome and the Roman elites. This explains the role played by Philo in the embassy to Rome that followed the Alexandrian riots of 38 CE.

The events of 38, followed in 40 CE by Caligula’s project to have a statue of himself erected in the Jerusalem temple, are known mainly through Philo’s so-called historical treatises Against Flaccus (Flacc.) and The Embassy to Gaius (Legat.), as well as Josephus’ account in Jewish Antiquities (18.257-309 for the description of the episode related to Caligula’s project, and 19.278-292 for the events after the emperor’s death, and Claudius’ decrees). To put it briefly (for a more detailed account, see Smallwood, Philonis Alexandrini Legatio, 11-36, and Gambetti, The Alexandrian Riots), after Tiberius’ death and Caligula’s accession to power, the prefect of Egypt, Flaccus, felt that his political position was fragile, and searched the support of the Greek citizens of Alexandria. Among the Alexandrians there was a deep hostility toward the Jews, the causes of which are still debated: they may have resented the fact that some Jews tried to obtain Alexandrian citizenship (we may infer this point from Claudius’ letter sent to the Alexandrians in November 41 [CPJII, no. 153, p. 36-55]); they were also probably unhappy with the loss of political sovereignty following Actium, and may have seen the Jews as allies of the Romans, because of the help provided to Cesar, and later Octavian, by Antipater and Herod, and the connections between the Herodians (especially Agrippa I) and Rome more broadly (Smallwood, Philonis Alexandrini Legatio, 11-12).

The documents known as the Acts of the Alexandrian Martyrs show that from an Alexandrian perspective, Claudius was considered a friend of the Jews (CPJ II, nos. 154-159, p. 55-107, especially no. 156, p. 76). Be that as it may, in the summer of 38 CE, during Agrippa I’s visit in Alexandria on his way to Judea, violent anti-Jewish riots occurred. Flaccus did not intervene to stop the riots; on the contrary, he passed a decree depriving the Jews of their rights and declaring that they were “foreigners and aliens” in the city (Flacc. 54). As a consequence, synagogues were destroyed, Jewish homes and shops were pillaged, and numerous Jews were tortured and murdered. In October 38, Flaccus was arrested, brought to Rome and then banished to Andros, where he was eventually killed (Flacc. 108-191). In Against Flaccus, Philo narrates Flaccus’ fate at length and interprets it as an example of divine justice. In the wake of the events of the summer 38 and Flaccus’ arrest, two embassies left for Rome, an Alexandrian one and a Jewish one, the latter being headed by Philo himself. He probably stayed in the Urbs until Claudius’ settlement of the conflict in 41 CE (Niehoff, Philo of Alexandria, 3).

Philo’s account of the events during the summer of 38 CE is less developed in the Embassy than in Against Flaccus. The Embassy focuses on Caligula’ personality, and his attitude and policy toward the Jews. Most importantly, in the Embassy, Philo blames the emperor himself for the events in Alexandria, considering that Gaius’ hostility toward the Jews (who, he claims, were the only people that refused to worship him as a god) triggered the agression by the Alexandrians, because they were confident that they would not be punished (Legat. 114-122).
The *Embassy* was written after Caligula’s death and Claudius’ settlement of the conflict between the Alexandrians and the Jews, maybe as early as 41 CE, when Philo was still in Rome (*Legat.* 206; Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria*, 3-4). It is generally considered to have been composed of five parts, the last one being now lost. The first part (§§1-113) deals with Caligula’s accession to power, the initial state of happiness within the Roman empire (the topic of the extract presented here), and the deterioration of the situation due to Gaius’ madness. The second part (§§114-161) expounds the events in Alexandria, which, as stated above, are explained by the fact that Caligula’s anger against the Jews encouraged the Alexandrians to attack. The third part (§§162-348) deals with the events outside Egypt and Caligula’s project to have a statue of himself set in the Jerusalem temple. The fourth part (§§349-373) describes the second meeting between the Jewish ambassadors and the emperor in 40 CE, which was far from successful, the former barely catching the attention of the latter. The fifth and lost part, often called the palinode because of the use of the term *palin*?dia in *Legat.* 373, probably dealt with Gaius’ death and the restoration of the rights of the Jewish community in Alexandria (Bilde, “Philo as a Polemist and a Political Apologist,” 107-108). However, the omission of this part may not be casual, but rather result from Philo’s cautious decision not to mention the murky circumstances surrounding Claudius’ accession to power (see Pelletier, *Legatio*, p. 20, who points to *Spec.* 2.78-92 as an example of Philo’s political prudence).

The passage under consideration here starts a bit abruptly. Most editors of the *Legatio* admit that there is a lacuna between §§7 and 8 (see, e.g., Pelletier, *Legatio*, p. 19). The preposition ??/?gar, “for,” does not make sense as a connection between the two paragraphs. The beginning of the treatise (§§1-7) in fact consists in a philosophical reflection on the intellectual mistakes that humans frequently do, such as considering Fate (*tyche*) as more important that Nature (*physis*), and casting doubt on God’s providence for Israel, “the people who sees God” according to Philo’s definition (§4). This *incipit* reveals that Philo’s purpose in the *Legatio*, as in *Against Flaccus*, is not to report the events in a faithful and accurate way, but rather to answer the theological questions raised by these events (in *Against Flaccus*, see, e.g., §§170, 191). They are not historical works, but rather theological readings of history with apologetic and polemic overtones (see also Bilde, “Philo as a Polemist and a Political Apologist”).

After the general considerations in §§1-7, the treatise opens with a panegyric, in which Philo praises the state of affairs within the Roman empire at the beginning of Caligula’s rule. We must keep in mind, however, that this passage is highly rhetorical, and aims (together with other sections of the book) to contrast Gaius’ disastrous rule with that of his predecessors. In this text, Philo heavily draws on *topoi* conveyed in Roman and pro-Roman writings, or other media meant to communicate Roman imperial ideology, such as coinage and inscriptions. First comes the claim that Roman dominion (*h*?gemonia) extends on the whole “land and sea” (*pas*’s g*?s kai thalass*’s), that is, the whole universe. This expression, which goes back to the Hellenistic period (Momigliano, “terra Marique”), was widely used in Roman and pro-Roman sources in connection with the affirmation of the universal dimension of Roman victories and peace (in Latin: *victoria* or *pax terra marique*; for an example of the corresponding iconography on coinage, see RIC I (rev. ed.), no. 256, p. 59, minted between 32 and 29 BCE). The phrase is found several times in *Augustus’ Res Gestae* (3.1; 4.2; 13.1). At §13.1, Augustus recalls that “our ancestors wanted Janus Quirinus to be closed when peace had been achieved by victories on land and sea throughout the whole empire of the Roman people ([i]lanum Quirinu[m, quem cl]aussum ess[e] maiores nostri voluer[unt], cum [p]er totum [i]mperium [p]ol[p]uli Rom[a]ni terr[a] marique es[s]et parta victoris p[a]x),” and that whereas this had happened twice before his time, it was ordered three times during his reign (Cooley, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 72). The Latin text of the *Res Gestae* associates peace with victory on land and sea throughout Rome’s *imperium*, whereas the Greek version of this passage omits the notion of victory and emphasizes only the idea of peace. Yet, as Hannah Cornwell has argued in her book *Pax and the Politics of Peace: Republic to Principate*, from Augustus onward the notion of peace on land and sea was tantamount to the establishment of Roman universal domination. In *Legat.* 8, Philo echoes Roman language, yet we must keep in mind that in other passages of his work he also criticizes the domination over land and sea acquired by military means, and undermines its significance (see, e.g., *On Drunkenness* 113).

In §8 Philo emphasizes not only the universal dimension of Roman rule, but also its effectiveness in establishing order and peace, two central themes of Roman imperial ideology. He uses the adjective *eunomos* to refer to the idea that the empire is ruled by good laws, something the Romans were particularly proud of (see, e.g., Cicero, *On the Orator* I.44.195-197). He also insists on the concord established between the different populations of the empire (Greeks and barbarians), and between different groups such as soldiers and civilians. Such an ideal picture of unity and concord is found in the writings of Greek authors as well (see in particular *Aelius Aristides’ Roman Oration* in the 2nd century CE, especially §§29, 69-71). In short, Philo echoes the Roman discourse about the benefits of the *Pax Romana*. Moreover, in the rest of the *Legatio*, Philo repeatedly asserts that Caligula destroyed peace, therefore undermining the work of his imperial predecessors (*Legat.* 100-102, 108, 113). By contrast, the Jews are presented as a naturally peaceful people, whose only request is to be allowed to live according to their ancestral traditions (see especially *Legat.* 161, which attributes this opinion of the Jews to Tiberius himself; and *Legat.* 230).
Jews are thus naturally in harmony with good Roman emperors, and in opposition to bad ones. Peace goes along with prosperity, and in §9 Philo also mentions the extraordinary wealth accumulated by the imperial house, as well as the military strength of the empire, which by then must have had twenty-five legions and probably as many auxiliary troops (Smallwood, Philonis Alexandrini Legatio, 159; see Tacitus, Annals 4.5). We must note, however, that in many passages of his works, Philo opposes material to spiritual wealth, as well as military power to the power of the virtuous mind who seeks God (see especially On Abraham 220, and the commentary on On Abraham 209-216). In the incipit of the Legatio itself, in §4, Philo clearly contends that the greatest wealth is the vision of God, which is the privilege of Israel.

Finally, Philo returns in §10 to the theme of the universal dimension of the Roman empire, stating that it extends “from sunrise to sunset”. Again this is a topos, also found under the pen of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who writes: “But Rome rules every country that is not inaccessible or uninhabited, and she is mistress of every sea, not only of that which lies inside the Pillars of Hercules but also of the Ocean, except that part of it which is not navigable; she is the first and the only State recorded in all time that ever made the risings and the settings of the sun the boundaries of her dominion” (Roman Antiquities 1.3.3, translation by Earnest Cary, LCL, p. 11). Philo’s statement in Legat. 10 is both similar and different: he indirectly refers to the Pillars of Hercules as well (“an empire stretching from the sunrise to the sunset and comprising lands both within and beyond the Ocean”), but in comparison with Dionysius, who further affirms that “there is no nation, as I may say, that disputes against being ruled by her” (Rom. Ant. 1.3.5, ibid.), Philo appears much more realistic. He simultaneously joins in the praise of the unequalled geographical extent of Roman dominion, and recalls that it is in fact limited by the existence of two foreign powers, the German tribes in the North, and the Parthians in the East. As Mary E. Smallwood notes, from a geographical point of view it is difficult to understand how the Euphrates could separate the inhabitants of the Roman empire from the Sarmatians and the Scythians (Philonis Alexandrini Legatio, 161). In my opinion, Philo’s reference to these peoples is meant to categorize all the peoples living beyond the borders of the Roman empire as savage and uncivilized, and to emphasize that the oikoumen?, the civilized world, is equal to Rome (again reflecting a Roman perspective). Interestingly enough, as Maren Niehoff notes, “Augustus had in his Res Gestae elegantly passed over the fact that the Germans and Parthians had not been truly conquered” (Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture, 114). Augustus merely wrote: “Cimbri and Charydes and Semnones and many other tribes of Germans sought through embassies my friendship and that of the Roman people” (Res Gestae 26.4, translation by Cooley, Res Gestae Divi Augusti, 91). By reminding the reader of the very concrete limitations of Rome’s universal rule, Philo may have surreptitiously suggested that the universal hegemony of the Romans was not so universal after all. At the very least, it is possible to read this passage as both echoing conventional praises of Rome and slightly subverting them (see further Berthelot, “Philo’s Perception,” especially notes 11 and 59).

In my opinion, Philo’s use of so many Roman or pro-Roman topoi in a few paragraphs indicates that in the Legatio, he was addressing at least in part a Roman audience, or had this potential audience in mind. By ostensibly showing his adhesion to Roman imperial values (whether such an adhesion was sincere or not is another matter), he made clear that his criticism of Caligula was aimed at the personality of the late emperor, and not at Rome’s imperial rule in general. This was a wise and cautious decision, considering his position of leader of the Jewish Alexandrian embassy.

Keywords in the original language:
Thematic keywords in English:

- barbarians
- Caligula
- Germans
- Greeks
- legion
- panegyric
- Parthians
- Pax Romana
- prosperity
- Roman peace
- Roman power
- Roman rule
- universal domination
- universalism
- wealth

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