 CHAPTER 6

The *Stasis* in Alexandria in 38 CE and Its Aftermath

1    Summary of the Stasis in Alexandria from 38 to 41 CE

1.1    The Alexandrians’ Decree Concerning Synagogues

In *In Flaccum*, Philo plainly sees Herod Agrippa’s visit to Alexandria in the summer of 38 CE as the decisive turning point in relations not only between the Judeans and Flaccus but also between the Judeans and the Greeks.¹ His willingness to cast Agrippa in an unflattering light, even if he planned to exculpate him, suggests that his evidence should be taken seriously, as most writers have done.²

Philo clearly believed that a plot had been entered into by some Alexandrians even before Agrippa’s visit. They had managed to change Flaccus’s early favor of the Judeans to opposition, as was evident, to Philo at least, in certain lawsuits that Flaccus had overseen in which Judeans lost their suit against Gentiles without exception (*Flacc.* 24). According to Philo, Agrippa’s public display, with his spear-bearing bodyguard armed with shields richly ornamented with silver and gold, roused Flaccus’s envy (*Flacc.* 30). Philo’s only evidence for Flaccus’s anger is his failure to intervene in subsequent demonstrations against Agrippa, which leaves us no real confirmation (*Flacc.* 33). Whatever we think of Flaccus’s role in the disturbances, Philo saw tensions in Alexandria as deep-seated and long-lasting, and subsequent actions against the Judeans as part of a plot between some powerful Alexandrians and Flaccus (*Flacc.* 29).

Philo’s attention in *In Flaccum* then shifts to “the city’s lazy and shiftless mob” (τῷ γὰρ ἀργοῦντι καὶ σχολάζοντι τῆς πόλεως ὄχλῳ) (*Flacc.* 33), when some Alexandrians began to publicly ridicule Agrippa within the gymnasium (*Flacc.* 34). At last, they brought a harmless imbecile, Carabas, who spent his life on the streets, into the gymnasium and dressed him with the diadem, robe and scepter of a king, in mockery of Agrippa. Philo mentions twice that some youth pretended to be his spear-bearing bodyguard. Carabas is put at the center of the crowd (ἐν κύκλῳ πλήθους) and hailed as “Marin” or “Lord” in Aramaic

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¹ A consistent narrative only begins with Agrippa’s visit (*Flacc.* 25ff.). But his castigation of Flaccus for not intervening in the gymnasium demonstration and the connection he draws between the gymnasium demonstration and the vote together establish that he saw Agrippa’s visit as indirectly leading to the vote on the images (*Flacc.* 35, *Flacc.* 41).

² Though Philo does try to put the blame on Flaccus (*Flacc.* 25, *Flacc.* 27–28).
(Flacc. 36–9). This crowd about Carabas suggests that the actual reception that Agrippa received was substantial in the Alexandrians’ eyes. Philo says as much when he tells us that Flaccus’s advisors had warned him that all eyes were being focused on Agrippa as a result of the king’s showiness (Flacc. 30). The Alexandrians in the gymnasion were mocking Agrippa’s pageantry, his status as king, and the foreign character of Agrippa and his many admirers.

But the scene was meant to contrast with Roman power, as well. The setting itself was an important symbol because the gymnasion was likely used as a venue for the prefect to make public appearances or hold assizes. He was placed above those around him, simulating the elevated position of the governor or emperor, on the bema in the gymnasion’s great court. Philo’s description (Flacc. 38) suggests that the crowd treated Carabas, the mock Agrippa, as if he were the prefect or the emperor on his visit, holding an assize and deciding on public business: “Some came to salute him, others to have a court case heard, and others to meet with him concerning public business.”

After paying this mocking tribute to Carabas, the “crowd” (ὁ ὄχλος) rushed into the theater at dawn. They shouted out a proposal “to dedicate images in the prayer houses, introducing a breach of custom dangerously novel and never before done” (συρρυέντες εἰς τὸ θέατρον ἐξ ἑωθινοῦ...ἀνεβόησαν ἀφ’ ἕνός συνθήματος εἰκόνας ἐν ταῖς προσευχαῖς ἀνατιθέναι, καὶ κατὰ τὸν και ἠπελπὶν πραγματεύειν εἰσηγούμενοι παρανόμημα) (Flacc. 41). Philo elucidates this in Legatio, by revealing that the Alexandrians were in effect “also dedicating the synagogues (προσευχαῖς) as new sacred precincts (τεμένη) for Gaius” (Legat. 136–7). In the execution of the decree, some synagogues were burned in the process, while others, including the largest, received images (Legat. 134–5). In mentioning the effect of the decree (psephisma), Philo repeatedly says that the synagogues were “seized” (ἁρπάζειν), “taken away” (ἀφαιρεῖσθαι) or “destroyed” (κατάλυσις), indicating that the installation of images was intended to convert them into

3 See Flacc. 38. See Fabienne Burkhalter’s discussion of the uses of the gymnasion in Alexandria and, in particular, her analysis of this scene described by Philo (Burkhalter 1992, passim and p. 352 in particular).

4 In what follows, I will be following the order of events given in the In Flaccum, if it is in fact at odds with the order presented in the Legatio. In the former work, he is quite clear that the attack on the synagogues was followed by the expulsion of the Judeans. In the Legatio (Legat. 132ff.), Philo hastily presents the material leading up to the Judean ambassadors’ arrival in Rome and does not give nearly the amount of attention to those events as he did in the In Flaccum, pace Barclay 1996, 53, n. 14.

5 See Flacc. 53: αὐτῷ τὰς προσευχὰς ἁρπάσαντι καὶ μηδὲ τὸν ὑπολογίμων ἀναφεύγειν at Flacc. 49 and ἀφῄρητο at Flacc. 122; the effect of which action is also described by Philo as “a dissolution of the synagogues” (τὴν κατάλυσιν τῶν προσευχῶν) (Flacc. 45).