CHAPTER SIX

SPRING 38 C.E.

As the background of the riots has been outlined in a way that openly contradicts Philo’s rosy picture, we now turn our attention to those months in the spring of 38 C.E. when the unthinkable began to take shape. The previous chapters of this work have recommended reading Philo’s version critically, not discarding what he says, but evaluating both his words and his silences against the background of external evidence. The next section follows this methodology as well. The consequences of the embassy, Gaius’ sentence and his letter open the discussion to a different reading and understanding of the riots.

Before the Riots

No evidence indicates when the two delegations returned from Rome to Alexandria. P. Yale II 107 is hopelessly broken or lost at the end of the fragment containing Gaius’ letter and no external evidence recalls the event. Philo does not describe life in Alexandria for the year 37 C.E., save for the news, reported only in Legatio, of Gaius’ illness and recovery. The last sailors from Rome brought this news to Alexandria in the fall of that same year before the close of the season of nautical travel (Legat., 18–21).¹

¹ Dio places his illness soon after the end of his first consulate [59.7, 9; cf. Philo, Legat., 14–15 for some months later, in the fall; discussion in Barrett, Caligula, 73–74; see also Baldson, Gaius, 35], which Gaius held for two months and twelve days starting from July 1, 37 C.E., as the Fasti ostienses record [A. Degrassi, I Fasti consolari dell’impero romano (Roma, 1934) = Smallwood, Documents, #31; Baldson, Gaius, 35, Barrett, Caligula, 74; Smallwood, Legatio, 165–166.] Modern scholars have discussed the nature of Gaius’ disease; see summary in Barrett, Caligula, 73, to which should be added P. Schroembges, “Caligulas Wahn. Zur Historizität eines Topos,” Tyche 3 (1988): 171–190; J. Pigeaud, “Caligula, l’empereur fou,” L’Histoire (Paris) 73 (1984): 26–30; D.T. Benediktson, “Caligula’s Madness. Madness or Intercital Temporal Lobe Epilepsy?” CW 82 (1988–1989): 370–375; D.T. Benediktson, “Caligula’s Phobias and Philies: Fear of Seizure,” CJ 87 (1991–1992): 159–163, for Gaius’ recovery later in the fall. The disease abated after a month or so, as the news of the emperor’s recovery arrived in Alexandria when the seas were still open for navigation, therefore no later than the beginning of November (Philo, Legat., 18; Veg., 4, 39); for the navigation
Unfortunately, Gaius’ healing also bore gloomy omens. According to Philo, the new course of Roman politics in the aftermath of the emperor’s convalescence affected Alexandria negatively. Gaius’ responsibility in the deaths of Tiberius Gemellus, Macro, and Silanus receives much attention in *Legatio*, where they are Philo’s most effective examples of the emperor’s cruelty, a necessary character trait in one who allowed the persecution of the Jews (*Legat.*, 28–73). In *In Flaccum*, those same deaths are the background of the Alexandrian political situation, and provide Philo with evidence for his construct against the prefect. Philo states that in exchange for the support of the anti-Jewish faction, Flaccus allowed them to have their way with the Jews, in order to avoid incurring Gaius’ wrath and to gain standing in Gaius’ eyes (*Flacc.*, 10–16; 20–23).

Philo lists a series of growing concerns that Flaccus felt jeopardized his position. Immediately following Tiberius’ death, the prefect allegedly feared the new emperor’s enmity because he had been among those who had accused Agrippina, Gaius’ mother, and had supported Tiberius Gemellus, Tiberius’ grandson, who was originally Gaius’ co-heir of the emperor’s estate, but whom later Gaius adopted and possibly co-opted to the throne (*Flacc.*, 9). In the spring of 38 C.E., Gaius ordered the death of Gemellus (Dio, 59.3; 8, 1ff.; Sue., *Gai.*, 23, 3; Philo, *Legat.*, 23ff.) and of Macro, the praetorian prefect and the designated Prefect of Egypt (Dio, 59.10, 6; Philo, *Legat.*, 32ff.). Following their deaths, Flaccus thought that he had no protection in Rome (*Flacc.*, 16; 22) and asked for the help of the Alexandrians.

While many modern scholars accept this construct, others dispute the historical viability of the agreement between the prefect and the Alexandrians that Philo alleges. The main points of criticism concern the reason for Flaccus’ personal worries before and after Gaius’ illness