CHAPTER EIGHT

THE RIOTS OF 38 C.E.

In the Theater

While the mockery of Agrippa was confined to the gymnasium, what followed in the theater had major consequences for the city’s Jewish community. Philo states that after three days of celebration over Flaccus’ reappointment, as argued above, the lazy mob ran together from the gymnasium into the theater at dawn1 and called for the installation of images in the Jewish meeting-houses (Flacc., 41–42).2 Given the Jewish prohibition of images of any kind (Ex., 20, 4; Deut., 4, 16–18), it goes without saying that the religious offense was serious. Such an action also breached the religious privileges that had been granted to the Jews by the Roman authorities. Thus, Philo’s outrage is justified (Flacc., 43–50).

Let us by no means underestimate the fact that the call for images in the Jewish meeting-houses occurred in the theater (Flacc., 41). Certainly, the theater was a place of entertainment, but it was not only that. Evidence reveals that, like for the rest of the Hellenistic world, Alexandria’s theater was the venue for political meetings (cf. Jos., B.J., 2.491–498).3 Therefore, we must consider the hypothesis that no impromptu sunrise mob called for images in the meeting-houses, as Philo seems to

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1 A meeting at dawn was not exceptional in the ancient world, particularly during the summer months, when the daytime heat would have made staying in an open space under the sun unbearable.

2 Barclay, Mediterranean Diaspora, 53 dubious on the chronology of this event in particular due to the inconsistency of Philo’s accounts in In Flaccum and Legatio; that Flaccus proposed the erection of the images as in Mélèze Modrzejewski, Jews of Egypt, 169 is unsupported by the available evidence.

3 The theater was the place for political meetings in the Greek and Hellenistic world; see Delia, Alexandrian Citizenship, 121; Blouin, Conflit judéo-alexandrin, 113. It is probably to the theater that Philo himself refers when he condemns the politician who, thirsty for fame, speaks to the audience from the βῆμα (De Jos., 35: ὁ μὲν γὰρ δημοκόπος καὶ δημιουργὸς ἀναβὰς ἐπὶ τὸ βῆμα, κτλ.). It was in the amphitheater that the Alexandrians were holding an assembly in 66 C.E. when the Jews broke in, prompting a reaction that would develop into the riots quenched with blood by the Prefect T. Iulius Alexander (Jos., B.J., 2.490). See also Adriani, Repertorio, C I–II, 205–206.
indicate, but quite another kind of public meeting. The combination of all these circumstances—the public location, the delivery of the mandata, the honors to Flaccus—transform the erection of images in the Jewish meeting-houses into a political act.

The first question to answer concerns the nature of the desecration, particularly the kind of images that the Alexandrians set in the meeting-houses. Philo calls them eikones, cultic imperial images. This episode has sometimes been connected with the development of the imperial cult and Gaius’ willingness to be considered a god, one of the most controversial issues of modern historiography on Gaius. Suetonius and Dio monopolize the available information on the subject and describe the emperor’s religious manifestations as whimsical, using them to support and sell the very popular idea of Gaius’ insanity. Philo’s Legatio openly denounces Gaius’ willingness to be a god, which spelled certain ruin for the Jews. Modern scholars have questioned the ancient authors’ approach, but have reached no consensus concerning what Gaius hoped to achieve when he dressed like a god or built temples to himself (Legat., 78–85; 86–92; 99–102; 103–110; 111–113).  

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4 The basic terminological discussion is in L. Robert, Opera minora selecta. Épigraphie et antiquités grecques (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1969), 832–834: “le term εἴκονες s’applique techniquement aux “images” des empeureurs, à leur portraits, exactement à leur bustes honorés d’un culte.” Philo seems to make a distinction between eikon and andrias, whereby the two are typologically different; andrias is a statue (consistently used for the statue that Gaius ordered to erect in his own likeness in the Temple of Jerusalem in 39), while eikon also represents a human being, but is clearly not a statue (Legat., 134; 138; 188; 203; 207; 220; 238; 246; 260; 265; 306; 308; 336; 337). Both of these terms carry the same divine content; both of them are used by Philo to substantiate his accusation that Gaius claimed to be a god, in the awareness of which the gentiles filled the Jewish sacred places with figurative representation of his likeness (Legat., 334; 346). The distinction drawn by modern scholars between the content and function of agalma and eikon, the first being the representation of a god, the second the likeness of a divine mortal, probably does not apply to Philo’s vocabulary (I. Leisegang, Philonis Alexandrini. Opera quae supersunt. Indices ad Philonis Alexandrini opera (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1926) s.v. agalma and eikon).  