

ABSTRACT

Caligula in Jerusalem: The Hostile Relationship between Emperor Gaius and his Jewish Subjects

Michael Sturdy, M.A.

Thesis Chairperson: Kenneth R. Jones, Ph.D.

This thesis examines the relationship between Gaius (Caligula) and his Jewish subjects via unrest in Alexandria and the emperor's decree that the Jerusalem Temple be converted into a pagan shrine. It is concluded that Gaius was a competent leader who intentionally asserted his power over the region of Judea based on his knowledge of the Jewish people based on their history and his relationship with Agrippa I. It is also concluded that the Jewish authors' view of the emperor was tainted predominately by the Temple incident, which has shaped how historians have studied Gaius by focusing on his madness and immorality.

Calligula in Jerusalem: The Hostile Relationship between Emperor Gaius
and his Jewish Subjects

by

Michael Sturdy, B.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of History

Jeffrey S. Hamilton, Ph.D., Chairperson

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Approved by the Thesis Committee

Kenneth R. Jones, Ph.D., Chairperson

Jeffrey S. Hamilton, Ph.D.

William L. Pitts, Ph.D.

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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

When one hears the name Gaius, it is perhaps difficult to picture much of anything outside of a generalized Roman personality. Even the addition of the title Emperor might not elicit much of a response from any other than Roman historians. The name Caligula, on the other hand, brings to mind the stories of an insane madman who used his power for his own sick amusement. Almost immediately, images come to mind of the man who named his favorite horse as consul, or the emperor who commanded his troops to gather seashells on the French coast as symbols of victory over the British isles – isles that Caligula did not actually invade – or perhaps one remembers the film *Caligula* and has little more than a vague sense that Caligula was nothing more than a sex-crazed maniac. But Gaius Caligula was an actual person, not simply a caricature from a play. And while many of the stories attributed to Gaius do originate in the primary source material, there is much still that has been left woefully understudied.

In a reign that covered less than four years, there are four major ancient sources on the imperial rule of Gaius. In two of these sources – Philo of Alexandria and Josephus – a subject is covered that has perhaps been undervalued by Roman historians: that of the relationship between the emperor and the Jews living in the Roman empire. Gaius' reign saw numerous incidents of strife and conflict between Jews and Greeks in the empire, and Gaius met with an embassy from the Jews of Alexandria, including Philo himself. After one of these clashes, Gaius even went so far as to decree that the Jerusalem Temple be transformed into an imperial shrine and a divine statue be placed inside. While the order was never fulfilled, the events that transpired had a profound effect on the relationship between Gaius and the Jewish people.

After reading through the basic outline of the events, which will be covered thoroughly in the following chapter, a number of problems present themselves. The first relates to the issue of sources. The two sources that mention the Temple incident happen to be Jewish sources. In fact, Cassius Dio and Suetonius, two Roman sources on the reign of Gaius, make no mention whatsoever of the events in Jerusalem. Tacitus briefly mentions the altercation in one sentence, but moves on because it does not seem to have been much of an issue to him. As a result, we are forced to ask what effect the Jewish sources have had on the historical reading of Gaius' reign. Having been insulted religiously and culturally, do the Jewish sources describe a Gaius that is different from the one present in the Roman source material?¹ Is the Gaius of the Roman sources a madman or merely an eccentric leader? Equally important is the question of whether history has read the Roman accounts through the lenses of the Jewish accounts, misinterpreting the intent of the Roman authors. This first chapter will conclude that historians' traditional view of Gaius as madman and tyrant is a result of the dominance of Philo and Josephus on the subject.

The second chapter will deal with the question of whether Gaius truly understood the impact his actions would have on the Jewish population. In an empire known for religious syncretism, is it unusual that Gaius would not expect fierce opposition to a decree that would convert the Temple of Jerusalem into a pagan shrine? Did the Jews in the empire have a connection with the emperor who could possibly relate to him the importance of the Temple to the Jewish nation? In dealing with these questions, Agrippa I appears to be a central figure. Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, was a close associate of the emperor. It was Gaius who had named Agrippa king; the Jewish sources also tell us that Agrippa took a personal interest in the plight of the Jewish people in both Alexandria and Jerusalem. What role did Agrippa play in defusing the situation between

¹ Though Cassius Dio wrote in Greek, it is important to remember that he was a Roman consul.

Jerusalem and Rome? Additionally, what role did Agrippa play in informing Gaius, directly or indirectly, about Jewish beliefs and culture? Is it possible that Gaius' decree stemmed from a knowledge of the Jewish people that he gained from his friend Agrippa? This chapter will support the conclusion that Agrippa's relationship with Gaius was pivotal to the events in Alexandria and Jerusalem.

Chapter three will deal with the question of why exactly the Jews in Alexandria and Jerusalem reacted as they did. Why do the Jews treat Roman incursion differently from, say, the Greeks? It is easy to assume simply that the Jews would naturally rebel against such a decree. But what are the underlying causes of such a negative response to the emperor? I will present an historical perspective on why the Jews felt they had the right to expect religious and cultural tolerance from a foreign empire, based on their dealings with the Romans and the Hellenistic empires before them. If rulers before Gaius had shown beneficence to the Jews, how could the Jews expect anything less from the current emperor? This chapter will also deal with the motivations behind why Philo describes the situation the way he does and will conclude that Philo is misleading in his retelling of the events – specifically the conversations and negotiations between Gaius and Agrippa – so as to positively portray Agrippa as defender of the Jews while overlooking the evidence that suggests a more nuanced political wrangling between Gaius and Agrippa. As in chapter two, the answers to aforementioned questions will shed light on whether or not Gaius knew the impact his decision would have on the Jewish population. If previous rulers had indeed supported the rights of the Jews, it would not be unreasonable to expect Gaius to know that.

There is much left to be studied regarding Gaius, and it is possible that the following chapters may present more questions than answers; the relationship between Gaius and the Jewish people presents a unique look into both the character and legacy of an emperor who has been understudied. Given the volatile nature of the Jewish population to the Romans in the late first century AD, and given the layperson's

fascination with the outrageous stories surrounding the dreaded Caligula, it is surprising that Gaius' dealings with the Jews have not caught on in the public consciousness. The following chapters will hopefully rectify that gap in some small fashion.

CHAPTER TWO

Jewish and Greek Sources on the Rule of Gaius

Anthony A. Barrett's *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* brought attention to the fact that the reign of Emperor Gaius (Caligula) had been left uncritically studied for most of history.² The same narrative of the promising young leader overcome by his own deteriorating mental health and abusive tendencies had been retold for centuries. While other emperors had been studied every decade, there were few critical studies of Gaius between 1940 and the 1990s.³ Barrett did not discover new sources regarding Gaius, but rather saw the need for a reevaluation of the source material that sought to read between the lines and determine who exactly Gaius was. In the style of perhaps an earlier age of historical study, Barrett was not seeking a metanarrative to explain the events surrounding Gaius' reign. Rather, he rejected the way in which classical study had simply accepted the conclusions of those who had written on Gaius – including Suetonius, Cassius Dio, Josephus, and Philo. In Barrett's words, the aim of his work was "to attempt a reconstruction of events."⁴ What follows is an excellent re-portrayal of the events surrounding the life of Gaius. At every turn Barrett paints a picture of an emperor who, though perhaps not a good person, was at least a competent ruler who knew exactly what he was doing, from his decision not to invade Britain to his order to convert the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem into an imperial shrine. Barrett provides an alternative to the question of *what*, but provides no explanation for the *why* of history's overall negative interpretation of the emperor. It is true that the sources are less than kind to him, but

² Anthony A. Barrett. *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* (New York: Touchstone, 1991), xv.

³ Herbert W. Benario, "Review: *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* by Anthony A. Barrett; *Claudius* by Barbara Levick," *The Classic Journal* 86 (1991), 285.

⁴ Barrett. *Caligula*, xviii.

sources throughout history have been interpreted in ways their authors did not intend. But the issue of why Gaius has been portrayed as he has is tied up not only in what the ancient authors believed, but also which authors believed what about Gaius.

Nearly any discussion of Gaius must take into consideration the account of Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher who met the emperor near the end of his reign. For Philo, the problems with Gaius begin with imperial negligence. When Gaius came to power in AD 37, A. Avilius Flaccus was the prefect of Alexandria. According to Philo, Flaccus had been a fine prefect before the rise of Gaius and had been fair and just with both Jews and Greeks in Alexandria – not an easy task considering the tense relations between both groups, which stemmed in part from the fact that the Jews, an ethnic and religious minority, had readily welcomed Roman rule while the Alexandrian Greeks despised the lack of autonomy that came with subjugation.⁵ After five years of excellent rule, as Philo’s account describes, Flaccus turned against the Jews and began to support the anarchist Greek powers in the city (Philo, *In Flaccum*, 19-20).⁶

According to Philo, there are two reasons for this change of behavior. Philo explicitly names the first – Flaccus believed that he was in a dangerous position, having been favored by Tiberius, who was now dead, and Macro, a former confidant of Gaius who had fallen from the new emperor’s grace.⁷ As a result, Flaccus found himself on the wrong side of a complicated situation and needed to endear himself to the emperor. The answer came from the Greek rabble-rousers, including the inflammatory Isidorus, who suggested that the Greeks be allowed to show their support of Gaius at the expense of the Jews, killing two birds with one stone: appealing to the emperor and attacking an easy

⁵ Arther Ferrill. *Caligula: Emperor of Rome* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1991), 143.

⁶ Considering the fact that the source is Jewish, it is entirely possible that Flaccus’ reign was quite stable; from Philo’s point of view, however, Flaccus clearly changed policy with regard to the Jewish people, foregoing his relatively positive attitude towards Jews in the first years of his rule in Alexandria.

⁷ M. Gwyn Morgan, “Caligula’s Illness Again,” *The Classical World* 66 (1973), 328.

target in the Jewish people. What began as judicial prejudice against the Alexandrian Jews soon became an outright attack, physically and culturally, by the Greeks. Soon enough the Greeks were placing images of the emperor – a man known to enjoy his position as the focal point of his own cult – in the synagogues of Alexandria.⁸ Philo asserts that while Flaccus may have permitted this attack on Jewish religion due to his hope that it would endear him to Gaius, the Greeks most certainly were using the imperial cult to shield themselves from condemnation for attacking the Jews, who claimed equal status as Alexandrian citizens (*Philo, IF*, 42). After the appearance in Alexandria of Agrippa, who was on his way to his newly appointed kingdom in the east, the Greeks instigated an all out attack on the Jews. Greeks could be found killing Jews, beating members of the Jewish ruling council, forcing female Jews to eat pork, and corralling the Alexandrian Jews into the Jewish quarter of the city. Ferrill notes that the Jewish quarter had originally been given to the Jews as an honorific distinction and that, prior to this time, the Jews had been allowed to live wherever they pleased in the city.⁹ During the riots, however, the Jews were forced into the cramped quarter, creating the world's first ghetto. After numerous counts of mismanagement, Flaccus was removed from his position.¹⁰ The violence and conflict continued sporadically until an edict demanding toleration arrived in Alexandria from the emperor Claudius.

The second reason for the change in Flaccus' policy is implicitly wrapped up in the first: the Alexandrian Greeks were under the impression that Gaius was an emperor who might find such action agreeable. While Philo gives us little in the way of Gaius' character in the *In Flaccum*, we are privy to his thoughts on the emperor in his account

⁸ David Noy, "'A Sight Unfit to See': Jewish Reactions to the Roman Imperial Court," *Classics Ireland* 8 (2001), 70.

⁹ Ferrill, 144.

¹⁰ It remains unclear if Flaccus' removal was directly related to the strife between Greeks and Jews in Alexandria.

describing the Jewish embassy to Gaius, of which Philo was a member. Philo begins the account praising the unprecedented peace experienced in the empire prior to Gaius' rise to power. Philo paints a picture of peace and prosperity that border on utopian:

In these days [those of Gaius' assent] the rich had no precedence over the poor, nor the distinguished over the obscure, creditors were not above debtors, nor masters above slaves, the times giving equality before the law. Indeed, the life under Saturn, pictured by the poets, no longer appeared to be a fabled story, so great was the prosperity and well-being, the freedom from grief and fear, the joy which pervaded households and people, night and day, and lasted continuously without a break through the first seven months. (*Legatio* 13)¹¹

Hardly the view of man who sees an emperor who might find pleasure in the anarchy of a major city, or racially and culturally motivated attacks by a majority on a minority – as Philo seems to perceive the emperor in his other writings. In fact, he does not give Gaius the credit for the stability of Rome, attributing it instead to Tiberius and his predecessors, arguing that Gaius began to destroy all they had created once he recovered from his illness – though Philo also believes that prior to his illness, Gaius had simply hidden his madness and depravity. As a religiously devout Jew who viewed pagans with disdain, Philo had reason to believe that Gaius would approve of the religious attacks on the Jews. He notes that Gaius, known for impersonating the gods in Rome, cared more for being seen as a god, rather than being known for the virtues that the gods embodied (*Leg.* 81). The emperor's weakness for praise gave Philo ample reason to believe that Gaius might indeed prefer to have the Greeks in Alexandria worshiping him rather than having the city live in peace. At the same time, Philo's religious beliefs certainly affect his interpretation of Gaius' views on divinity and the imperial seat, a problem that may not have affected a pagan such as Flaccus in the same way. The rest of Philo's assumptions regarding Gaius come from his own interactions with the emperor, whom he visited as leader of the Jewish embassy from Alexandria, an experience that will be examined in greater detail after a brief look at Josephus' account of the emperor. And if, in fact, Gaius

¹¹ All translations of non-biblical ancient sources taken from the Loeb Classical Library.

had already shown a propensity for being worshiped, it is not unreasonable to conclude that Flaccus believed he was positioning himself as a faithful servant of the emperor via his actions against the Jews, a group of people whose religion forbade such worship.

Josephus provides a similar account of the beginning of Gaius' reign, with one glaring exception. Instead of praising Tiberius, as Philo had done, Josephus writes that the people of Rome rejoiced when they learned that the emperor had died and Gaius had taken his place (Josephus, *Antiquitates*, 18.225). After a brief mention of the people's disdain for the reign of Tiberius, Josephus confirms Philo's assertion that Gaius started off with promise. He sets the scene much like Philo, praising Gaius' early reign and bemoaning his move toward the imperial cult:

As for Gaius, he administered the empire quite highmindedly during the first and second years of his reign. By exercising moderation he made great advances in popularity both with the Romans themselves and with their subjects. But as time went on, he ceased to think of himself as a man and, as he imagined himself a god because of the greatness of his empire, he was moved to disregard the divine power in all his official acts. (*Ant.* xviii.256)

Josephus, as Philo before him, would have been appalled at the gall of the emperor to make such claims to divinity. The Jews' monotheistic beliefs, which had come to blows with other cultures before, could not support a man claiming to be a god.

Josephus mentions Philo's embassy to Gaius, though little else is mentioned regarding the tumult in Alexandria. Josephus also gives the tale of Apion, a member of the Greek embassy, who alleged that the Jews of the city neglected to honor Gaius properly upon his succession and during his reign, due to their refusal to erect statues of the emperor or receive him as a god – a point on which Apion is quick to point out that the Greeks are more than happy to oblige. (*Ant.* 18.257). While it was indeed true that the Jews did not worship the emperor or condone the erection of statues to him, Josephus points out that the Jewish people were in the habit of making sacrifices to God on behalf of the emperor, praying for his continued health and the continued prosperity of the Roman people (Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum*, 2.197). Such prayers and sacrifices might

not have been enough to protect the Jewish subjects from perceived slights and threats against them.

While the riots in Alexandria certainly appear to have been atrocious, they were only the prologue to Gaius' relationship with the Jews. Indeed, it seems that, at least initially, the Jews had gotten what they desired from Gaius. As Michael Grant has pointed out, Flaccus had been recalled to Rome before the Jewish or Greek embassies from Alexandria had left.¹² While it may be surmised that Flaccus was removed for his role in supposed plots against Gaius rather than for specifically targeting the Jews and causing instability in Alexandria,¹³ Philo points out that many who had been confidants of Flaccus during the pogrom turned against him as witnesses at his trial, including Isidorus, perhaps in an attempt to save himself from blame. Isidorus would avoid punishment for his role in the Alexandrian turmoil under Gaius, though the emperor Claudius would not be as kind as his predecessor.¹⁴ Rather than draw a dichotomy between the two, it is perhaps more likely that both circumstances played a role in Flaccus' ouster – Gaius would be hard-pressed not to remove from power a man who had been unable to maintain the stability in Alexandria and also been implicated in treasonous plots against the emperor.

Whether Flaccus had been removed for his role in the Alexandrian troubles or not, Philo seems to have originally felt that such action could only help the Jews in the city, perhaps allowing them to return to their normal lives. The fact that both Jews and Greeks sent embassies to Gaius, however, seems to suggest otherwise. In addition, Philo notes that when the centurion Bassus was sent to bring in Flaccus, he sailed into port under the cover of night, ostensibly to avoid early detection (*In Flaccum*, 110). It is possible that

¹² Michael Grant. *The Jews in the Roman World* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 126.

¹³ JPVD Balsdon. *The Emperor Gaius (Caligula)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 134.

¹⁴ Pieter W. van der Horst. *Philo's Flaccus: The First Pogrom* (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2003), 110.

the Roman authorities sought to quell the situation quietly in the hopes of avoiding a public confrontation. Flaccus was recalled, but the tensions in Alexandria continued. In fact, it was not until the reign of Claudius that things settled down in Alexandria, and even then only after a declaration from Claudius himself demanding that the Jews be treated tolerantly and equitably.¹⁵

Therefore, the Jews sent an embassy to Gaius when the troubles did not end after Flaccus had been removed from Alexandria. Two important events occurred during the embassy's stay in Rome that had a profound effect on Philo, who was in Rome, and Josephus, who relied either on the writings of Philo or reports from other sources on the matter. The first is the actual meeting of Gaius and the Jewish embassy. When Philo arrived in Rome, he quickly learned that one of Gaius' inherited slaves, Helicon, had a tendency to belittle the Jews whenever he was in the presence of the emperor (Philo, *Leg.*, 171). While Philo and the other Jews tried to placate Helicon in the hopes that he would speak kindly to Gaius on their behalf, the slave continued to pour insults on them.¹⁶ Given the nature of the embassy's actual meeting with Gaius, however, Helicon's machinations may not have been necessary at all.

Throughout the embassy's meeting with Gaius, the emperor wavered between appearing curious about their beliefs and showing them little to no respect whatsoever. Gaius asked the Jews how they could call themselves worshipers of god when they clearly did not worship him or offer up prayers to him. The Jews in turn responded that, as they had done for many years, the Jews offered sacrifices on Gaius' behalf – sacrifices that Gaius clearly found to be inadequate (Philo, *Leg.*, 353, 357). Philo tells us that

¹⁵ Balsdon, 113.

¹⁶ This is not an uncommon theme in Jewish literature and calls to mind the tales of Esther and Daniel in the courts of foreign rulers and their courtly adversaries. By equating the situation with Gaius and Helicon with the Biblical narratives, Philo impresses upon his readers the importance of the situation at hand. At the same time, he leads his Jewish leaders to a specific view of the emperor and his court as one that threatened the very livelihood of the Jewish people.

throughout the entire meeting Gaius led them around his palace, showing disinterest by critiquing the décor in the palace as they talked and intermittently insulting the Jewish people. At one point he asks the Jews why they do not eat the flesh of pigs, a seemingly innocuous question to the modern ear, but one which apparently contained some sort of insult, as Philo informs his readers that the Greek delegation immediately burst into peals of laughter (*Leg.*, 361). Even when Gaius would appear to be genuinely interested in the Jews, asking them what principles of justice they recognized as part of their beliefs, he would run into various rooms in the palace, telling them of the windows and the works of arts as they attempted to answer him (*Leg.*, 363-5). It quickly became clear to Philo that the Jews were not in the presence of an impartial judge, but rather the subjects of a manic and possibly unstable ruler.¹⁷ The only way Philo could put a good face on the encounter was to point out that Gaius eventually came to the conclusion that the Jews were not truly wicked, but rather were simply foolish for not worshiping him as a god (*Leg.* 367). Needless to say, Philo and the rest of the Jewish delegation did not leave the emperor's presence as satisfied subjects whose pleas had been dutifully attended to. Leaving with such a view would have been enough to dampen anyone's spirit, but the Jews realized that there was a much more serious situation brewing away from the city of Alexandria.

The second event that occurred while the Alexandrian Jews were in Rome had a profound effect on Philo. It began with a small conflict in the town of Jamnia, an imperial estate in Palestine. The Greeks of Jamnia had erected a pagan altar in the city that apparently offended the Jews of the town, who promptly destroyed it. The incident at Jamnia, combined with the unrest in Alexandria, led Gaius to make what the Jews would consider the most heinous decree imaginable.¹⁸ Gaius decreed that a statue of Zeus be placed in the Temple in Jerusalem and that the Temple be converted into an imperial

¹⁷ Again, his instability could very possibly have been Philo's attempt to justify the way the emperor embarrassed the Jewish embassy.

¹⁸ Balsdon, 142.

shrine.¹⁹ What follows in both Philo and Josephus varies depending on both the author and the different works by the authors. According to both Jewish sources, Gaius commanded Petronius, governor of Syria, to make sure that a statue of Gaius was placed inside the Temple. Petronius prepared at least two legions as a precaution for any uprising that might come from the zealous Jewish population. The Jews refused to fight the Romans while simultaneously declaring that the statue could only be erected after the Jews in the region had been slain, because they could not bear to see their holiest site desecrated. The project took a considerable amount of time, which could be seen as a narrative embellishment on the part of Philo, or a sign that perhaps the emperor was testing the Jewish population in order to gauge their reaction to the decree. During this impasse, Gaius was assassinated in Rome before the decree could be carried out, though some of the sources claim that Gaius may have already rescinded the order.²⁰

Philo and Josephus provide differing scenarios regarding the proposed desecration of the Temple, implying either embellishment on the part of Josephus, or that he relied on other sources in addition to Philo; each account presents interesting information that provides a look into the authors' views of Gaius. Philo's report is considerably less detailed than Josephus' due to the fact that he was receiving information from sources while he was in Rome; news was slow to come and sparse when it did. As a result, Philo's account reflects less the events in Jerusalem and more what transpired in Rome as a result. It is Philo who tells us of the importance of Agrippa, a man of Jewish descent who was extremely close to the emperor and had been since childhood. Agrippa, whom Gaius had named king of the areas around Judaea, saw himself as a protector of the Jews. He had earlier attempted to help the Jews of Alexandria – an attempt that ultimately

¹⁹ Philo and Josephus have interpreted this statue as an homage to Gaius, equating the emperor with Zeus, as the same god or at least as equals.

²⁰ While the exact details are obviously suspect due to the very common narrative devices involved, the decree regarding the Temple and the fact that the statue was never actually erected are generally accepted.

worsened the situation.²¹ According to Philo, when Agrippa received the news of the imperial statue to be erected in the Temple of Jerusalem, he fainted and was bedridden for over a day. Playing the role of selfless defender of the Jews, Agrippa pleads with Gaius in Philo's account, begging that Gaius reconsider and offering to be cast down into his formerly low position rather than play a party to such an atrocious act against his people and religion (*Leg.*, 327). Gaius, at first angered by Agrippa's pretension to consider himself worthy of changing the emperor's mind, was more impressed by the magnanimity of Agrippa's request to halt construction. In Philo's narrative, Gaius decided against finishing the statue, but made clear that the Jews were not allowed to destroy the images of the pagans in Judaea, not an unfair compromise by any means.²²

Josephus provides a slightly different story. In Josephus' retelling, Gaius still demands that a statue of himself be erected in Jerusalem, but it is Petronius, the governor, who plays perhaps the most important role in the matter. In both the *Antiquitates* and the *Bellum*, Josephus describes a tense situation brewing in Syria and Judaea. Petronius knew that if he did not do as the emperor commanded, he would most likely be removed from his post. On the other hand, the establishment of an imperial cult in the Jerusalem Temple would possibly lead to armed conflict with the Jewish population. According to Josephus, Petronius cunningly stalled communications with both the Jews and with Gaius; the Jews were told that Petronius had to follow orders, but that he would also send a letter to Gaius urging him, in light of the Jews' defiance at the desecration of their customs, to reconsider his decree (*Ant.*, 18.261-278). Josephus informs us that the Jews were exceptionally grateful for Petronius' willingness to help them and that, after he had promised to help them, a miraculous rain poured out over the land (*Ant.* 18.285). Yet, as

²¹ H.I. Bell, "Anti-Semitism in Alexandria" *The Journal of Roman Studies* 31 (1941), 5.

²² This is, at least, how Philo viewed the events that transpired. Whether or not this was a case of an emperor changing his mind or of the fact that Gaius had a better understanding of the Jews than he let on will be discussed in the next chapter.

the *Antiquitates* describes it, Petronius was almost the undoing of the entire affair. According to that account, it was Agrippa who made the greatest plea for the Jews in Jerusalem. In what must surely be seen as a literary embellishment, Gaius, overcome with Agrippa's generosity and friendship, offers Agrippa anything he would ask, a common plot device stretching back to Esther in the Jewish tradition. Agrippa tells Gaius that being in his presence is all the gift he can ever truly desire; his only request being that Gaius renege on his decree regarding the Temple. Gaius, impressed with Agrippa's previous fidelity to him and Agrippa's concern with the public peace, consents (*Ant.*, 18.289-304).

It sounds as though all is well, except that, according to Josephus, once Gaius received Petronius' letter, which not only asked that the Jewish customs be respected, but that the Jews also threatened to throw the region into famine by refusing to work the harvest, he flew into a rage and demanded that the statue be moved to the Temple immediately and that Petronius be brought to answer for his insolence. As Josephus tells it, the news that Gaius had been assassinated reached Syria before Gaius' letter to Petronius, saving his life and the lives of countless Jews. Josephus paints a picture of Gaius as a petulant tyrant who could only be swayed by reason for short periods of time before he returned again to his madness, rather than a man who listened to his governors. In both Philo and Josephus, the reader is left wondering what other terrible fates awaited the Jews had Gaius not been killed, a death that both authors saw as God's divine punishment.²³

While the Jewish authors view Gaius as a tyrannical ruler, their view, as Barrett points out, may not be the only one that makes sense of the data. What Barrett does not address, however, is that the Roman and Greek authors seem to take a slightly different tack with regards to the emperor. For one, our two primary non-Jewish authors, Suetonius

²³ Solomon Zeitlin, "Did Agrippa Write a Letter to Gaius Caligula?" *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (vol. 56, 1965), 29.

and Cassius Dio, make absolutely no mention of the decree concerning the Temple or any other troubles the Jews may have had with Gaius. While it would be easy to argue that the Jews were on the periphery, both in geography and importance, and thus were not worth addressing, Balsdon points out that there may have been as many as seven million Jews living in the Roman empire, or seven percent of the empire's entire population.²⁴ Even more importantly, it was obvious that Jews lived in every part of the empire, from Jerusalem to Alexandria to Rome itself. While it is true that some gentile populations may have misunderstood the Jews and may have even hated them – as may have been the case in Alexandria – it seems that it would be difficult to ignore events that risked a major uprising, as one might assume the news of the Temple's desecration could provoke.²⁵ Yet in spite of this, the only Roman author who even mentions the event is Tacitus, who mentions in passing that the Jews took up arms against the threat of the statue, but that it came to nothing due to the assassination of Gaius (Tacitus, *Annales*, 12.54).

What then, did non-Jewish authors have to say regarding Gaius? Cassius Dio presents Gaius much as he would other emperors, presenting known facts about his life and pointing out where the emperor went right and where he made missteps. Dio's history of Gaius begins with his generosity. He was known to spend lavishly on games and other pleasures in Rome, many of which were accepted gratefully by a population that had lived through the thrifty years of Tiberius. The problem for Rome was that, within two years Gaius had apparently spent all the funds Tiberius had saved, leaving him in need of vast sums of money to continue his opulence (Cassius Dio, 59.2.6). After noting this, Dio goes into some detail on the good Gaius accomplished, especially during

²⁴ Balsdon, 121.

²⁵ Philo and Josephus seem to make this assumption, though the fact that the Jews do not revolt against Roman rule for another two to three decades would suggest that perhaps the idea of an uprising was not seen as a real possibility at the time.

the early portion of his reign. Gaius, again in an attempt to win over the people of Rome, published the accounts of the public funds, a move Tiberius had not chosen to make. Dio also mentions Gaius' illness and notes that the people of the empire prayed earnestly for Gaius' health to return again.

Despite these early gestures and the apparent support of the populace, Dio's Gaius is not without a twisted sense of justice; after his recovery from illness, he had a number of men who had promised their lives in exchange for Gaius' health killed so as not to break their oaths (Dio, 59.8.3). In addition, Gaius held many bloody gladiatorial contests that perhaps went further than Dio would have deemed appropriate. The way that Gaius had his former confidant Macro kill himself also impressed itself on Cassius Dio as being overly harsh. Yet after describing these events, Dio presents Gaius as a sad, nearly tragic figure simply unfit for the office to which he had risen. He had run out of money and was forced to sell off imperial assets in the hopes of raising funds to continue his lifestyle. He wavered between desiring the official approval of the Senate and despising the fact that they felt entitled to the power that he considered his alone.

Regarding Gaius' claim to divinity, Dio, as a pagan author, paints a very different picture of the emperor than do Philo and Josephus. Dio writes about a man who seems overly focused on proving that he is not, in fact, a man. Dio writes that Gaius was eager to be seen, not as a human or an emperor, but rather as one equal to the gods (59.26.8). He had a temple to Apollo in Miletus converted into an imperial shrine, had two temples built to himself in Rome, and supposedly wanted the famous statue of Olympian Zeus brought to Rome and remodeled to look like him. Gaius never followed through with the latter, but the fact that it is mentioned may suggest that, at least in Dio's mind, Gaius was the kind of emperor who would – Gaius did not want simply to be worshiped as a god, he wanted to be a god. Dio records that in his own time there were documents that had survived in which Gaius was referred to as Jupiter. Dio sums up the tragic life of Gaius with an account of his assassination, writing, "Thus Gaius, after doing in three years, nine

months, and twenty-eight days all that has been related, learned by actual experience that he was not a god.” (59.30.1). Dio succinctly points out how short-lived the emperor who claimed divinity really was. Dio’s Gaius is hardly an evil maniac bent on destroying the institutions of religion, but instead a sad man whose attempts to live as the gods led him to die as the gods could not.²⁶

Suetonius provides our third and final interpretation of Gaius. It is Suetonius who provides many of the famous stories related to Gaius’ madness, from his bridge to Puteoli that surpassed Xerxes’ crossing of the Hellespont (*Gaius*, 4.19), to speaking to a statue of Jupiter as an equal (4.22), to the various irony-laced murders committed on his command, to his incestuous relations with his sisters (4.24). Barrett points out throughout his book that Gaius has been misunderstood for centuries partly because of his dark sense of humor.²⁷ It is possible that a similar argument could be made regarding Suetonius’ work.²⁸ In fact, Suetonius’ life of Gaius reads almost like a comedy of errors or a farce. Suetonius begins not with the story of Gaius, but with the tale of his father, the universally beloved Germanicus, a military leader so loved that, when he died:

Even barbarian peoples, so they say, who were engaged in war with us or with one another, unanimously consented to a truce, as if all in common had suffered a domestic tragedy. It is said that some princes put off their beards and had their wives’ heads shaved, as a token of the deepest mourning; that even the king of kings suspended his exercise at hunting and the banquets with his courtiers, which among the Parthians is a sign of public mourning. (4.5)

Suetonius begins with the exploits of Germanicus and writes that the empire was ecstatic at Gaius’ rise to power, even finding it difficult not to show their pleasure at Tiberius’ funeral. During Gaius’ illness, it is recorded that Artabanus, king of Parthia, offered unsolicited friendship and paid homage to the Roman standards in Syria.

²⁶ G.J.D. Aalders, “Cassius Dio and the Greek World,” *Mnemosyne* 39 (1986): 300. Aalders notes that Cassius Dio was somewhat aloof regarding the imperial cult, believing that immortality was gained by an emperor through his deeds, rather than his demands.

²⁷ Barrett, 216-217.

²⁸ It has already been seen that Philo certainly did not find the emperor’s sense of humor amusing.

Suetonius also mentions the publishing of the imperial budget and adds that Gaius abolished the taxes on the Italians, restored kings to thrones – as he would with Agrippa – and that even the festival celebrating the founding of Rome was moved to the date of Gaius’ accession. (4.16).

Soon after, however, Suetonius moves to the more shocking stories. Yet these stories seem more to mock Gaius than show him as an evil figure. According to Suetonius, the emperor liked to cause ruckuses in the theater, when he could, by scattering gift vouchers and money in the seats, hoping to cause confusion. He was fond of staging mock fights between old men and decrepit animals; as one solution to the economic crisis, he cut costs by feeding criminals to the animals used in the games, rather than purchasing them food. In Suetonius, it is Gaius himself who throws a man who had pledged his life in exchange for Gaius’ health into a river. Where his father had been a brilliant and beloved military leader, Gaius claimed to have subdued “Gallo-Graecia” after having a number of Gauls and Greeks executed. The list runs the gamut from scalping men with full heads of hair because of his own baldness to tripping on his own robe as he attempted to descend some steps. And whereas Cassius Dio truly believed that Gaius would have named Incitatus, his favorite horse, as a consul, Suetonius seems to have seen this as jest (4.55). While many of the events that Suetonius describes would be truly shocking to experience, the overall tenor of the account reads much more like a farce.

It seems that perhaps the view of Gaius that has been accepted for centuries has been skewed in favor of the Jewish sources over those of the Greco-Roman authors. While every author writes of Gaius’ pretensions to divinity, it is from Philo and Josephus that the narrative has taken its overtly dark tone with regards to the story. As Grant notes, Gaius’ declaration that he is a god, while perhaps going further than previous emperors had, was also possibly an attempt at unifying the empire under one common religious

system.²⁹ This is not difficult to understand when read in light of support for the worship of *Sol Invictus* or Christ in later reigns.³⁰ And while Gaius' treatment of the Jewish Temple may have been harsh, the rest of the empire seems not to have had too much trouble with his imperial decrees. Thus Gaius has been viewed as a maniacal madman and not a tragic emperor or a bumbling fool – and perhaps he was neither, as chapter 2 will suggest. It is the acceptance of Philo's and Josephus' assessment of Gaius' character that has kept both scholarship and laity from interpreting the life of Gaius in the ways that Cassius Dio and Suetonius did. It is very possible that our entire understanding of Gaius is directly related to his treatment of his Jewish subjects, which begs two questions: Did Gaius understand the impact his decree would have on the Jews? and, if so, why do it?

²⁹ Grant, *Jews*, 128.

³⁰ A direct correlation between Gaius and later emperors is to be avoided. However, it is helpful to keep in mind the fact that attempts at unifying the people under a single religion did appear during the imperial era.

CHAPTER THREE

Agrippa and Gaius

It is not a stretch to state that the Jewish population of the Roman Empire had perhaps the greatest reason to despise the emperor Gaius. As Josephus, Philo, and Tacitus relate, he was remembered by the Jewish people as the man who claimed divinity and decreed that a pagan statue be placed inside the Temple in Jerusalem. Additionally, Gaius did little to assure the Jews in Alexandria that they were valued citizens of the empire when he all but ignored their petitions regarding the pogrom that had begun in their city, treating their envoys with little more than a passing interest. Understandably, both Josephus and Philo came to the conclusion that Gaius not only cared little for the plight of the Jews or for respecting their religious and cultural autonomy, but in fact despised the Jewish people. Both were convinced that, had Gaius not been assassinated early in his reign – a sign taken to be God’s judgment on Gaius and protection of the Jews – tens of thousands of Jews would have died as a result of his decree to have the Jerusalem Temple converted into an imperial shrine to himself. In the views of Philo and Josephus, Gaius viewed the Jews with nothing less than malevolent contempt. Yet there is one figure in the tales of Gaius who seems to stand against this interpretation: Agrippa I. Agrippa’s relationship with the emperor is well documented. More importantly, the fact that he had the ability to thrive in both Roman and Jewish culture in the highest echelons of both societies allowed him to be taken seriously by both parties. The ancient authors state clearly that Agrippa took a key role in the conflict, and the following chapter will come to a similar conclusion based on the relationship Agrippa and Gaius had and Agrippa’s role in the Jerusalem decree itself. Without an in-depth look at Agrippa’s life and connections with Gaius, a proper understanding of the conflict can never be obtained.

Luckily for the historian in this and related areas, the Herodian line has been well documented, spanning from the second century BC to the second century AD, due in large part to numismatic evidence and the writings of Josephus.³¹ Antipater, father of Herod the Great, was in many ways the primary mover of the Herodian dynasty. During a time of Jewish patriotism and anti-Hellenic polemics, Antipater saw the rising power in the west and seems to have realized that the road to an independent or at least relatively autonomous Jewish state led through Rome. He aided Julius Caesar in Egypt and for his help was granted Roman citizenship.³² Antipater used his influence to name his son Herod as governor over Galilee. Despite the fact that his father was poisoned after his support of those who had killed Caesar, Herod continued to benefit from the position Antipater had gotten him. He was named King of the Jews by the authorities in Rome, though his Idumaeen roots made him suspect in the eyes of the ethnic Jews in his kingdom.³³

It was not only Herod's ancestral past that created tensions with his Jewish subjects, but also his ongoing love affair with the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. He was versed in Greek and Roman paganism and philosophy, encouraged by his father.³⁴ He brought institutions such as Greek teaching into Jerusalem itself and is remembered also for his extensive building projects throughout his kingdom, which saw the erection of theaters, hippodromes, and other staples of Gentile cities.³⁵ Herod had been an acquaintance of the emperor Augustus and his minister M. Vipsanius Agrippa. He and his

³¹ Nikos Kokkinos. *The Herodian Dynasty: Origins, Role in Society and Eclipse* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 144 and J. Meyshan. "The Coinage of Agrippa I," *Israel Exploration Journal* 4 (1954), 187.

³² Kokkinos. 98.

³³ Kenneth Atkinson. "On the Herodian Origin of Militant Davidic Messianism at Qumran: New Light from Psalm of Solomon 17," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118 (Autumn, 1999), 443.

³⁴ Kokkinos. 122-123.

³⁵ Kokkinos. 124-125.

ruling descendents also minted coins that bore their images – a distinctly pagan practice that was deplored by the Jewish religion as a form of idolatry. The Herodians did at least have the forethought to avoid allowing this coinage in areas with predominately Jewish populations, minting money without human images for circulation in these cities.³⁶

The work that Herod accomplished in the name of the Jews, however, must not be overlooked. He is most well known for the work done to restore the Jewish Temple, a project that brought pride to the religious Jews in both Jerusalem and throughout the region. What would become known as Herod's Temple would be the defining architectural achievement of his reign. Despite this and other work ostensibly done for the Jewish people, Josephus writes that Herod related more closely to the Greeks than he did the Jews (Josephus, *Bellum*, 1.426-27). This is not to say, however, that Herod did not also see a future for his descendents as the distinctly Jewish rulers of Palestine. His son Aristobolus married Mariamne, as woman of Jewish royalty, with the express desire that their children would be the first members of a decidedly Jewish dynasty in Judea.³⁷ Their son Agrippa, in an unlikely series of events, would eventually become that Jewish Herodian ruler.

Agrippa I – referred to in the literature as Herod Agrippa or simply Agrippa – did not initially find himself in good circumstances, despite his prestigious heritage. He was born during a time of reconciliation between his father Aristobolus and Herod the Great. Aristobolus had been accused of plotting against Herod after being sent to Rome for his education. Shortly after their reconciliation, however, Aristobolus was strangled as a result of the divisions between the two men.³⁸ Additionally, Agrippa's mother Mariamne

³⁶ Stewart Perowne. *The Later Herods: The Political Background of the New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958), 60.

³⁷ Perowne. 58-9.

³⁸ Kokkinos. 215.

was executed on charges of infidelity, which would seemingly cement Agrippa's fate as little more than a casualty of a politically ambitious family.³⁹

At the same time, Agrippa found himself in a cycle of alternating good and bad fortune. Herod continued to favor Agrippa, despite his parents' shortcomings, and made sure that Agrippa was trained in the best possible environment: Rome. In fact, Agrippa grew close with Emperor Tiberius' son Drusus, after whom Agrippa would name one of his sons.⁴⁰ For a time it seemed that Agrippa was in as good a place as he could be: educated in Rome, son to Jewish royalty, confidant of the heir-apparent to the imperial throne. Yet it all seemed to come crashing down quickly after the death of Drusus. By the time he was thirty-three, Agrippa had run out of money, finding himself in a downward spiral of debt that followed him throughout the Roman world. He borrowed money where he could, including from his uncle Antipas, though he often ended up in conflict with his eventual creditors when he continued to spend extravagantly with little to show in the way of paying back his debts. After some time had passed, Agrippa finally made his way back to Rome – often under cover of night to avoid the authorities – where he eventually made contact with Tiberius, whom the sources claim had been too distraught from Drusus' death to deal with Agrippa. Once he had repaid his debts to Tiberius, he was once again allowed back into the inner circle of the imperial family. Agrippa had been appointed tutor to Gemellus, Tiberius' grandson and heir-apparent.⁴¹ It would seem that all was again well for Agrippa. What better way to ensure a safe future in the empire than being the personal tutor of the future emperor? Agrippa could easily have lived out his days in Rome comfortably in the service of the emperor.

³⁹ Perowne. 58.

⁴⁰ Kokkinos. 272-275.

⁴¹ Perowne. 63.

Agrippa, like his grandfather before him, however, had larger aspirations for personal power and prestige. Agrippa, as with other successful leaders in history, had the foresight to see that the future of the empire lay in the hands of another member of imperial family. Once he had paid off his debts – with money he borrowed from a third party – Agrippa gave the remainder of the loan to Gaius, the emperor’s nephew, as a gift. The two became fast friends, often seen riding around Rome together and conversing about the future. During one of these rides Agrippa would be overheard telling Gaius his opinion that Gaius, not Gemellus, should become the emperor after the death of Tiberius. Perhaps not the wisest words to say while the emperor is still alive to a man who is not the heir to the imperial throne, Agrippa’s assertion would play out poorly in the short run. Unfortunately for Agrippa, Tiberius died not long after the conversation. Predictably, Agrippa was arrested and imprisoned for his apparently treasonous comments. Fortunately for Agrippa, Gaius, in fact, was the one who rose to the throne. Gemellus was far too young to take the reins and it was Gaius who officially informed the senate of Tiberius’ death and his own ascendance to the throne (Josephus, *Ant.*, 18.234). While Gaius could not immediately release Agrippa for fear that doing so would cast doubt on his own innocence in Tiberius’ death, Agrippa was released from prison in a matter of months (Jos., *Bellum*, 2.181). At that point things were looking up for Agrippa. He was granted power back in the area of Palestine and he quickly began rising in prestige in the region.⁴² His correspondence with the emperor soon held greater sway than that of Antipas, who lost much of his power to Agrippa.⁴³ Agrippa must have felt he had the closest confidence of the emperor.

⁴² Dennis C. Duling. “[Do Not Swear...] by Jerusalem Because It Is the City of the Great King’ (Matt. 5:35),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (Summer, 1991), 302.

⁴³ Perowne. 69.

Numismatic evidence suggests that Agrippa modeled himself after his friend Gaius. Soon after Gaius minted a coin with his sisters on it, Agrippa minted one of his own, as his grandfather before him had done.⁴⁴ In addition, a number of coins minted by Agrippa have been found in which Agrippa named his son as the successor to his throne, a commission that could only be bestowed on the man by the emperor.⁴⁵ Any official who did not have the support of the emperor would have been risking seriously stiff penalties for such presumption.⁴⁶ Either Gaius and Agrippa had a close relationship, or Agrippa would face the wrath of an emperor known for his spiteful punishments. It would not be long before the nature of their relationship would be tested to the limit with the events in Alexandria, Jamnia, and Jerusalem.

Agrippa found himself involved in varying degrees throughout the conflicts among the Jews, the Greeks, and the imperial administration around the Mediterranean world. His presence in Alexandria during the conflict between the Jews and Greeks seems to have intensified the animosity between the two groups, with the Jews begging Agrippa to present their case to the emperor and the Greeks using Agrippa as a scapegoat for increased ethnic clashes. Despite the fact that Alexandria was not within his jurisdiction, Philo clearly states that Agrippa sympathized with the plight of the Alexandrian Jews and gave them assurances that their pleas to the emperor would not go unheard. Additionally, after the Jewish population in Jamnia had angered Gaius by destroying a Greek altar in the imperial town – the act that initiated Gaius’ call for the Jerusalem Temple to be converted into an imperial shrine – Agrippa, who as yet had no formal power in the area, took it upon himself to defend the Jewish people.⁴⁷ Philo, after

⁴⁴ Anthony A. Barrett, *Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 53.

⁴⁵ J. Meyshan, “The Coinage of Agrippa the First,” *Israel Exploration Journal* (Vol. 4, 1954), 187.

⁴⁶ Michael Grant, *The Jews in the Roman World* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973), 124.

⁴⁷ Grant, 131.

describing Agrippa's favored position with Gaius before he traveled through Alexandria, writes that the self-appointed defender of Jewish interests was once again in Rome after Gaius had demanded the transformation of the Jerusalem Temple. According to Philo's account, when Gaius told Agrippa of his decree regarding the Temple, Agrippa was overcome with sorrow and fainted (Philo, *Embassy*, 266-267).

What follows after Agrippa's recovery is an almost certainly embellished, yet no less important, letter from Agrippa to Gaius relating his deep concern over such a drastic punishment to the Jewish nation as a whole.⁴⁸ In his petition, Agrippa begins by stating his dual loyalties to the emperor and empire he loves, and the people, nation, and religion to which he belongs. Despite his internal struggles – and a working knowledge of Gaius' temper – Agrippa informs the emperor that the plight of his people takes precedence over every other devotion in his life (279). Agrippa then moves into a description of how important Jerusalem truly is to the Jewish people, describing it not only as the metropolis of Judea, but also of much of the world, considering the number of Jews living in cities throughout the empire (281-4). Surely Gaius would have known this to begin with, considering the decree concerning the Temple was made in response to Jewish violence in Jamnia, not Jerusalem itself – yet Agrippa (or Philo's interpretation of Agrippa) felt it necessary to stress how vitally important the Temple was to the Jewish religion. Indeed, it is quite possible that Gaius' knowledge of Jewish religious sentiments may have been supplemented by his relationship with Agrippa, may suggest that perhaps Agrippa's speech is Philo's attempt at showing how little the emperor truly understood the Jewish plight in the Temple situation. If the emperor knew exactly what effect his decree would have, he becomes a clever ruler attempting to test his control over a subject people, rather than the maniacally insane dictator Philo hoped to convey to his audience.

⁴⁸ All references to Agrippa's letter to Gaius come from Philo's *On the Embassy to Gaius*.

From his description of the Jewish love for the Temple, Agrippa goes on to appeal to the tradition of the Roman empire, pointing out that Gaius' imperial predecessors had also allowed the Jews to practice their religion unhindered, prominently citing Augustus' allowance of Jewish observances and Tiberius' role in keeping foreign objects out of the Temple during Pilate's tenure (298).⁴⁹ After these and numerous other examples of the religious tolerance traditionally shown the Jews by Rome, Agrippa pleads desperately with Gaius to change his mind. He writes to Gaius that it would be better for Agrippa if he should lose the status Gaius had given him than for him and his people to lose the Temple (327). Agrippa finishes the letter by declaring that it would be better for him to be thrown back into prison, as Tiberius had had done to him, than for the Jewish nation to suffer such an ignominious fate (329). After relaying the details of Agrippa's letter, Philo describes Gaius' reaction as oscillating between anger and respect. Gaius reprimands Agrippa for supporting his countrymen, despite their actions that ran counter to the emperor's wishes. However, he then praises Agrippa for his straightforwardness on the matter and his willingness to put himself in personal danger in order to confront his emperor and his friend. At the end of their conversation, as Philo relates it, Gaius decides to recall the decree regarding the erection of his statue in the Jerusalem Temple, with the stipulation that the Jews would be punished if any other such pagan structures were destroyed or hindered in the realm of Judea. Whether Philo is correct in connecting Agrippa's personal plea with Gaius' final decision to halt the construction is certainly up for debate. It seems clear that Agrippa's relationship with Gaius played a role in the emperor's decisions regarding the Jews.⁵⁰

It is important to note, however, that Josephus also credits Agrippa with taking a vital role in Gaius' reversal. According to the *Antiquities*, Agrippa's brother had

⁴⁹ Solomon Zeitlin, "Did Agrippa Write a Letter to Gaius Caligula?" *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 56 (July 1965), 28.

⁵⁰ Grant, 32.

approached Petronius, governor of Syria, in an attempt to have the project stopped or postponed, while Agrippa himself was in Rome working his way into Gaius' inner circle (Josephus, *Ant.*, 18.273, 18.289). Josephus relates the story that Gaius, during a dinner with Agrippa, was overcome with Agrippa's own generosity and friendship and offered him anything he would ask. Agrippa reportedly responded that he could not ask for anything that would benefit himself; what more could he wish for personally than to be in the emperor's good graces? Rather, Agrippa asked Gaius, "to abandon all further thought of erecting the statue which Petronius has your orders to set up in the temple of the Jews" (Jos. *Ant.*, 18.297) Gaius, impressed with Agrippa's previous fidelity to the emperor and Agrippa's concern with the public peace, consented (18.300). This kind of story is common in the ancient sources and brings to mind the tale of Saint John the Baptist's execution at the order of Herod in chapter 14 of Matthew's Gospel. Unwilling to let the story stand alone, Josephus points out that it was the emperor himself who claimed Agrippa was at the center of his decision in his letter to Petronius:

Now, therefore... if you have already set up my statue, let it stand. If, however, you have not yet dedicated it, do not trouble yourself further but dismiss the army and betake yourself to those matters for which I originally dispatched you. For I no longer require the erection of the statue, showing favour to Agrippa in this, a man whom I hold in too high esteem to gainsay his request and his bidding. (Jos. *Ant.*, 18.301)

While the precise details of such an exchange can only be guessed at, it is clear that the Jewish sources – the only sources who dwell on the Temple incident in any detail – place Agrippa at the center of the controversy and its eventually peaceful conclusion.

When Gaius had been assassinated and Claudius took the throne, Agrippa once again enters the story of the emperor. Whether because no Roman was willing to take on the task or whether Agrippa was truly Gaius' closest confidant, the charge of the assassinated emperor's funeral arrangements fell to the Jewish leader.⁵¹ In either case, it is a telling example of the relationship between the two powerful men. This, in

⁵¹ Barrett, *Agrippina*. 80.

conjunction with Agrippa's prior relationship with Gaius and the imperial family, leads to the possible conclusion that Gaius had a greater understanding of Jewish culture than is generally ascribed to him. It is unwise to assume that Gaius did not foresee the reaction of the Jews with regards to the desecration of their Temple. If the emperor did not understand the relationship between the Jews and the Temple, it stands to reason he would not have taken such a drastic step against Judaism as a whole to begin with, when the offenders were a small group of Jews in the seaside town of Jamnia. The only reason the emperor focused on the Jewish Temple is because he understood its importance within the Jewish religious system. It seems clear, then, that Gaius knew exactly what he was doing when he declared that the Temple would be converted into a pagan shrine as a punishment to the Jews.

Agrippa's and Gaius' relationship may not – and probably should not – provide the end-all solution to the tense situation between Gaius and the Jewish people, but it certainly adds depth to the picture. In some ways, Agrippa provides us with a lens through which to see the conflict between Gaius and the Jews. His presence allows for a fuller characterization of Gaius as a man who put thought into his actions rather than acting on the whim of his own maniacal fancy. Additionally, the Jewish authors may betray their own biases against the emperor when they describe the emperor as both a man who does not understand the Jewish people and who keeps company with a Jewish leader. These two presentations would seem to be at odds. Given the authors' clear bias against the emperor, a more nuanced picture of a ruler who has connections to a certain people group in his empire – and has an understanding of their culture through one of their more prominent figures – is perhaps more appropriate.

CHAPTER FOUR

Testing and Negotiating

One of the observations that inevitably presents itself during a study of the interactions between Gaius and the Jewish people is the fact that, despite the grim portrayal of the situation by Philo and Josephus, nothing actually happened. Despite the fact that pagan altars and Jewish synagogues had been destroyed in other cities, the events in Jerusalem never came to a head. The Jews did not revolt against the power of Rome; Gaius did not sack Jerusalem; a statue was never erected in the Temple. Only Tacitus mentions that the Jews took up arms against the Romans, but he waves the story away with little ceremony, writing that the conflict was resolved with Gaius' assassination (Tacitus, *Annales*, 12.54). Other than that brief mention, the conflict seems to have been a peaceful one, despite the urgent tone of the Jewish accounts and the fact that both parties appeared to have reason enough to come to blows. Gaius was dealing with a people who had trouble living with the pagan nature of the empire – as witnessed in the uproar in Jamnia, an imperial estate – while the Jewish people had been attacked in Alexandria and their most sacred religious site had been threatened with sacrilege. Given Gaius' relationship with Agrippa and the Jews' history with foreign powers taking the Temple, is it possible that Gaius knew what effect his decree would have on the Jews? If so, then it is also plausible that Gaius may have been asserting his power in the region.

The Jewish people had a history of dealing with invading forces that threatened the sanctity of the Temple, but they had certainly had positive experiences with foreign powers. The most prominent of the pre-Roman rulers of the area were the Hellenistic empires of Alexander and his successors. Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire had a profound effect on the Jewish people. Some seem to have viewed Alexander as a beneficent king to be admired; a large number of Jewish boys were given the name

Alexander after the Macedonian swept away the Persians.⁵² The ability to practice their own religion remained an important issue for the Jewish people and, under Alexander, even Jewish soldiers serving in the army were allowed to practice their religion freely.⁵³ Though his reign was short, it appears that Alexander had impressed the Jewish portion of his empire. After his empire was divided amongst his generals, Egyptian Jews continued to serve in the army under Ptolemy.⁵⁴ Indeed, a number of synagogues that were built during his reign were dedicated to Ptolemy. In Palestine, the Seleucids continued to allow the Jews their religious freedom.⁵⁵ According to Josephus, Antiochus III aided the Jews in the restoration work of the Temple after they welcomed him into Jerusalem (*Ant.*, 12.138-154). According to the passage, Antiochus III received letters from his subordinates in the area that the Jews had been accommodating and deserved to be treated favorably by the Seleucid ruler. Unfortunately for the people of Jerusalem, Antiochus' son would not take this advice.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes, son of Antiochus III, presented the Jews with their most violent clash with a Hellenistic ruler to date. Chronicled in the deuterocanonical books of 1 and 2 Maccabees, Antiochus Epiphanes represented the negative side of Jewish Hellenization. According to the author, not all the Jews in Jerusalem and surrounding areas were in favor of this relatively newfound cooperation and syncretism. 1 Maccabees sets the scene as one of internal struggle between those Jews who accepted their Seleucid rulers and those who adhered to a more traditional, orthodox religion and culture. As he writes, the former group “built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined

⁵² Louis H. Feldman & Meyer Reinhold (eds.) *Jewish Life and Thought among Greeks and Romans: Primary Readings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 2.

⁵³ Feldman & Reinhold (eds.), 3.

⁵⁴ *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, no. 24, found in Feldman & Reinhold.

⁵⁵ Feldman & Reinhold (eds.), 77.

with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil.”⁵⁶ The two groups came to blows after a rumor began to circulate that Antiochus had been killed in his war against Egypt. Jason – viewed by the author of 2 Maccabees as the rightful high priest – amassed a small army of one thousand followers to oust the reigning high priest, a man by the name of Menelaus who supported the Antiochene regime. When Antiochus, who was very much alive, learned of this, he assumed the worst and returned to quash a Jewish revolt. As the author relays, “So, raging inwardly, he left Egypt and took the city by storm.... Within the total of three days eighty thousand were destroyed, forty thousand in hand-to-hand fighting, and as many were sold into slavery as were killed.” (2 Maccabees 5:11, 14) Antiochus Epiphanes made improper sacrifices on the altar in the Temple, rendering it unclean, while at the same time outlawing many of the Jewish religious customs. As Emperor Gaius would two centuries later, Antiochus reacted strongly to perceived slights against his rule and moved against the religion of Jerusalem’s Jewish inhabitants.

Unlike the attacks on the Jewish religion in previous centuries, the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine fought back vigorously, engaging in hard-fought guerilla warfare against their Seleucid overlords. The Maccabean rebels were known for ambushing Greek battalions, who were not prepared for non-traditional attacks.⁵⁷ The Jewish rebels broke with the traditional historical reaction to ruling empires by taking matters into their own hands and eschewing traditional warfare – the capital cities of Judah and Israel had fallen before to sieges – in favor of guerilla-style combat. After a number of skirmishes against the Seleucids and Hellenizing Jews, the up and coming Hasmoneans – the orthodox Jewish rulers – fought for and took the town of Joppa, opening up a trading city on the Mediterranean and allowing for a considerably greater sense of economic

⁵⁶ 1 Maccabees 1:14-15. Quotations of deuterocanonical books can be found in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible unless otherwise noted.

⁵⁷ M. Avi-Yonah, “The ‘War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness’ and Maccabean Warfare,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 2 (1952), 4.

autonomy.⁵⁸ Long before Herod minted his own coins to show his strength, the Maccabeans issued their own currency in a show of their economic and political independence from Hellenistic forces.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the priestly family of the Maccabees were cleansing the Temple, readying it for use in a Jewish state that would claim its highest level of autonomy since before the Babylonian invasion. Indeed, the Hasmoneans would hold a considerable amount of power in Palestine for over a century, no small feat for a people known for their verbal resistance – often in the form of prophets – rather than open conflict with the regional powers.⁶⁰ The Jews in what would become Judea would live relatively peacefully with the powerful Roman Empire for decades, and the Maccabean Revolt would remain an oddity in Jewish rebellion until the revolt against Rome in AD 66.

Under Roman rule, the Jews continued to practice their religion freely. Rather than attempting to reconcile the Jewish monotheistic religion with the Roman pantheon, the empire gave the Jews special permission to practice their religion, often with the assumption that prayers and sacrifices would be made in honor of the state and the emperor – Augustus had reportedly ordered that daily sacrifices be made in the Temple at his own expense (Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*, 23.155-58) Even before Augustus' actions, which were cited by Philo and the embassy to Gaius as examples of Rome's toleration of the Jewish religion, Julius Caesar had also shown his respect for the faith of the Jewish people. After being informed of an incident which had resulted in reduced religious freedom for the Jews in Delos, Julius Caesar sent a letter ensuring that the Jews in the empire be allowed to practice their religion freely:

⁵⁸ Andrea M. Berlin, "Archaeological Sources for the History of Palestine: Between Large Forces: Palestine in the Hellenistic Period," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 60 (1997), 23.

⁵⁹ B. Kanael, "The Beginning of Maccabean Coinage" *Israel Exploration Journal* 1 (1950-51), 170.

⁶⁰ Graeme Lang, "Oppression and Revolt in Ancient Palestine: The Evidence in Jewish Literature from the Prophets to Josephus," *Sociological Analysis* 49 (1989), 337.

Julius Gaius, Praetor, Consul of the Romans, to the magistrates, council and people of Parium, greeting. The Jews in Delos and some of the neighbouring Jews, some of your envoys also being present, have appealed to me and declared that you are preventing them by statue from observing their national customs and sacred rites. Now it displeases me that such statutes should be made against our friends and allies and that they should be forbidden to live in accordance with their customs and to contribute money to common meals and sacred rites, for this they are not forbidden to do even in Rome. (Jos. *Ant.*, 14.213-215)

Given their relatively positive relationship with the Roman state, it is possible that the Jews felt their religious protection had been violated or was in jeopardy. The actions taken in Jamnia appear to be the epicenter of the outbreak of hostilities in Jerusalem, but details regarding the uproar are few. Clearly, the Jewish religion forbade its adherents from setting up altars outside of the Temple. The devout Jew at this time would not be comfortable with the presence of a pagan altar, but they would surely have come into contact with the pagan religions as subjects of a foreign empire. One possibility for the disruption could be the fact that Jamnia had at one point been held by Herod the Great, but had been passed on to the Caesars as an imperial estate. Religious zealots in Judea could have taken it upon themselves to cleanse a town that had traditionally been a part of the nation of Israel. It is also possible that a group of Jewish subjects were themselves testing the authorities with regards to what they were allowed to do based on their religious beliefs. The uproar in Jamnia could have conceivably been a test of the level of religious autonomy the Jews were afforded. While the evidence is scarce regarding the events in Jamnia – it is briefly mentioned by Philo and Josephus – the Jews clearly believed they were within their rights to tear down the Greek altar. Whatever else their motives might have been, they would certainly have seen themselves as carrying on the tradition of Mattathias, who tore down the pagan altars with his followers, leading to the Maccabean revolt (1 Maccabees 2). Whether the Jews in Jamnia expected as extreme a response from Gaius as he appeared to give is unclear.

Given the Jews' long and well documented history with the Greeks and Romans, and considering his relationship with Agrippa, it seems reasonable to assume that Gaius understood the importance of the Temple. Indeed, the fact that he chose the Temple in

Jerusalem as the place for an imperial shrine as in response to actions in the city of Jamnia supports this assertion. Due Roman historians' fascination with Gaius' perceived insanity, the idea that the emperor knew exactly what he was doing has been undervalued. Gaius was an emperor who knew the importance of asserting his power and dominion, be it in the form of crossing the seas like Xerxes (Suetonius, 4.19) or gathering seashells on the coast in a display of his having extended the empire to the sea. While these events have often been viewed as the actions of a crazed tyrant, they could also be seen as calculated displays of power to Jewish people as a reminder of who the ruler of Palestine is. The same could be said of the declaration that the Temple in Jerusalem be transformed into a pagan shrine. The emperor saw a subjugated people, some of whom had openly attacked a shrine in an imperial city, and knew exactly which buttons to press in order to get his point across.

Gaius was not satisfying some bizarre need to be seen as a god amongst the Jewish people. He knew very well that such a demand was absurd, given their history of monotheism and the special religious consideration the empire had afforded them. Rather, the emperor was using his political clout to demonstrate his power and to let the Jewish people know who had the ultimate say in all matters within the borders of the empire. Rather than deal with the dissidents in Jamnia alone, Gaius took the opportunity to assert himself in the region.

The emperor's decree could also have played a second role – Gaius' decree was an assertion of his power. He knew the importance of the Temple – if he did not he would not have gone straight to the center of the Jewish religion – and it can be reasonably assumed he had a summary understanding of the Maccabean revolt. Given the recent unrest in Alexandria and Jamnia, Gaius asserted himself by decreeing the Temple be made a shrine. His decree was a power play and a challenge. Would the Jews stand and fight? Would they rebel in a more passive way? Gaius needed to know where the Jews stood in relation to Roman rule.

As mentioned earlier, one of the more interesting aspects of the series of events is that nothing ever happens. Gaius decrees that a pagan statue be placed in the Temple, but it never is. The fact that nothing comes of the situation – the project is supposedly cancelled due to either the emperor’s assassination or his own revocation of the decree – might suggest that Gaius had no intention of seeing the decree through in the first place. From his perspective, there was little to lose. If the Jews acquiesced, Gaius would have concrete evidence that the Romans had utterly subdued the Jewish population of Judea. If the Jews rebelled in full force, the Romans could easily crush the rebellion and would have rooted out any dissenters that had been in the region. If, however, the Jews responded peacefully but forcefully, then the emperor could then come at the events as a negotiation, relieve the tension of the situation, and recall the order regarding the Temple as a sign of benevolence.

The Jews did in fact take this third route. As Philo and Josephus tell the story, the Jews approached the situation in what may be seen as a fairly modern form of peaceful protest. Despite alleged attempts by the Roman representative Petronius to goad the Jews into making the first act of war, the Jewish people continued to argue they would not start a war, but that they would be willing to die before they saw the temple turned into a pagan shrine (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.270). They argued that they already made sacrifices in the Temple for Gaius and the Roman people in order to show their acceptance and reverence of the empire. Additionally, the Jews played to their economic strengths, refusing to bring in the harvest, a move that could have long-term effects on their region of the empire. Having expressed their intentions without resorting to violence, the Jews had fortified their position. While the writings of Philo and Josephus do not interpret the discussions with Gaius as a negotiation, the outcome of the events seem to suggest just that. The statue was never built, let alone placed in the Temple. In exchange, the pagan structures erected in Judea were not to be attacked by the Jews. This kind of *quid pro quo* solution to the problem reads like the completion of a political

negotiation, while still allowing the emperor to appear to be bestowing his mercy upon his Jewish subjects. It also afforded the Jews an implicit imperial protection they desired. As Tessa Rajak describes the Jewish situation at this time, “What Jewish communities needed was not the award of a special status but, more simply, public backing with muscle behind it.”⁶¹ Caligula’s reversal on the Temple issue provided that backing.

Why then, do the Jewish sources, especially Philo, not describe the situation as a negotiation with the emperor? One might assume that a Jewish author would be more than happy to retell how his people successfully used their position in the empire to convince the emperor of Rome to change course on a decision the Jews found morally reprehensible. The problem may lie in the second half of the solution mentioned above: the fact that pagan structures were now explicitly allowed in Judea, with the implicit acceptance of the Judean Jews – or at least their leaders.

Of these leaders, Agrippa receives the greatest praise from Philo. If any Jewish leader were to come to a political solution with the emperor, it would be Agrippa. Writing after the death of Gaius and during Agrippa’s reign, it was in Philo’s best interests to describe Agrippa favorably. Philo is not only describing how a Jewish leader convinced the emperor of Rome to acquiesce, he is writing about the current Jewish ruler. A suggestion that Agrippa and Gaius engaged in political negotiations that resulted in the allowance of pagan shrines in Judea would do nothing but harm Agrippa’s reputation in the region. Philo has nothing to gain from portraying the now dead emperor as a competent leader, so he focuses his praise on the ruler who is alive at the time Philo is writing his tale.

If in fact the Jews and the emperor came to an agreement that suited both parties – as the outcome of the situation might suggest – it may then follow that Philo decided to

⁶¹ Tessa Rajak, “Was There a Roman Charter for the Jews?” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 74 (1984), 107.

intentionally describe the emperor as an insane and immoral ruler who was stopped by a Jewish king and the wrath of God via assassination. Rather than admit participation in a Jewish-Pagan tolerance agreement, it would be easier to describe the brave Jewish people who stood up to a mad emperor and won. Considering Gaius' reputation in the annals of history, it would appear Philo and the Jews won, regardless of whether they actually did or not.

CHAPTER H&G

""Conclusion

Hopefully the preceding chapters have made some progress in providing a more nuanced understanding of Emperor Gaius. His relationship with the Jewish people, and the effect that his decrees had on both the Jews and his own legacy, are truly fascinating. Further study is certainly in order. A linguistic study of the language used by the Latin and Jewish authors could shed light on the different interpretations of the emperor's reign and personality. A comparison between the writings of Cassius Dio and known comedic ancient writings could revolutionize our understanding of one of history's great maniacal figures – if Dio's writings contain traditional comedic devices, it could shine additional light on the differences between the pagan and Jewish sources. Hopefully, this look at Gaius' relationship with a man who considered himself both Jew and Roman has broadened our perspective on the emperor as well. Regardless of the authenticity of the speeches and letters attributed to Agrippa, the sources clearly agree that the Idumean king had the emperor's ear. At the same time, a recap of the Jewish situation and Gaius' desire to assert his position may have opened a new avenue for historians to travel in their study of the Temple situation and Jewish-Roman relations. It also may hopefully provide a greater appreciation for the idea that Gaius, as emperor, knew his position and was not as insane as has traditionally been perceived.

Perhaps not surprisingly, a closer inspection of the very brief reign of an emperor known for his excesses and eccentricities has properly reintroduced Gaius into both Roman and Jewish history. Rather than an abnormality worthy of little more than passing interest, Gaius now plays a role in how the Romans viewed their own emperor – still a relatively new political position – and in how the Jewish people viewed their own place within the Roman framework. What is surprising is that a closer, more serious look into

Gaius Caligula's reign has not been attempted more often. Clearly, his was a reign that deserves greater study than it has been given.

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