Chapter 1

Life of Philo

Philo the Jew is a contemporary of Christ. But he belongs to a completely different world, although not without relation to Christ's world. The life of Christ unfolded within the environment of Palestinian Judaism, among an Aramaic speaking populace that was moved by intense national feeling. By contrast, Philo is the most eminent representative of Diaspora Judaism, specifically in Alexandria, which is the Diaspora's principal home. He was Greek speaking. His citizenship was Roman. A greater contrast is hard to imagine.

By Philo's time the presence of Jews in Egypt was not something recent. Towards the fourteenth century B.C. descendants of Abraham had sojourned there. But after the Exodus nothing seems to have remained of this first group. In fact, the Jewish emigration into Egypt began after the fall of Jerusalem in 681 [sic, translator] and during the following centuries. On the isle of Elephantine vestiges have been found of one of the colonies whose members wrote in Aramaic. But with the foundation of Alexandria, Greek speaking Judaism, properly so-called began. On Josephus's account, Alexander attracted Jews there from the beginning (*Antiquities of the Jews*, XIX, 5, 2).

The colony continued to grow in the last centuries before our era. Philo reports that in his time there were a million Jews in Egypt and one hundred thousand in Alexandria. They lived especially in the Delta quarter to the east of the city. But they were also found in other

neighborhoods. When Roman domination replaced the Lagids, the Jews received their own statute and authorization to live according to their customs. They constituted a city apart. They exhibited great loyalty to the Roman Empire. The Empire found support among them, whereas the native population often bore its loss of independence unhappily.

This situation was not unlike that of other Diaspora Jewish colonies. What gave Alexandrian Judaism its peculiar character is that the encounter between Jewish faith and Greek culture took place there. Its most eminent representative is Philo. Alexandria was the center of Greek culture in this period, replacing Athens. Alexandria was where the grammarians edited Homer, Callimacus wrote his poems, and Greek science found one of its great representatives in Euclid.

The Alexandrian Jews adopted this culture, but at the same time they remained loyal to their faith. So their problem was to give that faith Greek expression. This endeavor is embodied above all in the Bible of the Seventy, which would be the foundation of Judeo-Christian Hellenistic literature. We will come back to it. But if the translation of the Bible was the most important manifestation of Alexandrian Jewish literary activity, it is not the only one. Exegetical schools were created where methods of interpretation were applied to the Bible that the Stoics and Pythagoreans applied to Homer. We will also have to discuss that again. To Alexandrian Judaism must be attributed the *Wisdom of Solomon*, which was part of the Alexandrian canon of the Bible. We encounter philosophers like Aristobulus, dramatic authors like Ezekiel the tragedian, and poets like the authors of the Jewish *Sibylline Oracles*.

Philo unites the different aspects of this Alexandrian Judaism within himself: Hellenistic culture, loyalty to Rome, Jewish faith. He belonged to the moneyed high bourgeoisie. We know two of his brothers. The first, perhaps the elder, was an important figure mentioned by Josephus. He was named Caius Julius Alexander. The first two names are characteristic of his Roman citizenship. His birth must be placed around 13 B.C.[1] He was the Alabarch of Alexandria, that is, the person charged by the Roman government with collecting taxes. The protégé of Claudius's mother Antonia, he had ties of friendship with Claudius (Josephus, *Antiquities*, XIX, 5, 1) of whom he was an almost exact contemporary.

His fortune was enormous. Josephus tells us that he furnished the gold and silver to cover the doors of the new Temple of Jerusalem started

1. J. Schwartz, "Note sur la famille," 595–96.

by Herod the Great, but unfinished at the time of Christ's death, since the apostles speak of its construction in progress. In 35, when Herod Agrippa I grew bored of life with his uncle Antipas at Tiberiades and needed money to lead a sumptuous existence at Rome, he went to Alexandria to seek out Alexander and borrow a large sum from him. This supposes relations between the Herod family and that of Philo about which we will speak again.

Alexander the Alabarch had two sons, Tiberius Julius Alexander, the elder, is well known.[2] He abandoned the Jewish religion, entered Roman service in 40, and was epistrategus of Syria in 41 and procurator of Judea in 45. Prefect of Egypt under Nero, he repressed a Jewish uprising at Alexandria. He contributed to Vespasian's coming to power. He was second in command of the Roman army during the siege of Jerusalem in 70. Philo mentions him in one of his works, *De Animalibus*. Tiberius Julius was then a cultured young man who had already carried out a mission in Rome. The episode must be situated around 39 before his entrance into Roman service. He must have been about 25. Thus he was born around A.D. 14.

The Alabarch had a second son, Marcus Julius Alexander, undoubtedly born in A.D. 16. He died young in 44. A. Fuks connects him, rightly it seems, with a major Alexandrian exporter of the same name.[3] But Josephus has bequeathed us the most astonishing facet of his biography. He obtained the hand of the Herodian Berenice, daughter of Herod Agrippa I, his father's friend, no doubt thanks to the Emperor Claudius's support. Once more we observe the ties between the families of Philo and of the Herods. As we will explain later on, the episode takes place at Rome in 41, precisely at a time when Philo was there.

Besides the Alabarch, Philo had a younger brother, Lysimachus. He appears in *De Animalibus*, which is a dialogue between two brothers. Schwartz places his birth around 10 B.C.[4] He has often been confused with the Alabarch, as a result of errors in the manuscripts of Josephus. He surely must be identified with one Julius Lysimachus who belonged to the council of the Prefect of Alexandria, Caecina Tuscus. Philo's dialogue informs us that he had a daughter who was betrothed to her cousin Tiberius Julius Alexander.

2. See Goodenough, *The Politics of Philo*, 65–66.
3. Fuks, "Notes on the Archive," 216.
4. Schwartz, "Note sur la famille," 596.

The most interesting point is certainly the connection of Philo's family with the Herod family. The former represented major international Jewish banking, the latter an equally cosmopolitan Jewish aristocracy. The elder Herod, founder of the dynasty, was the kind of oriental kinglet who used to pass part of his life in Rome and there spend his fabulous wealth. One thinks of an Aga Khan. He was connected to Agrippa, Augustus's son-in-law. We will have to speak here especially about his grandson, Herod Agrippa I, and the latter's daughter, the famous Berenice.

For the moment, we only note that the close ties that we observe between the Herods and Philo's family suggest that the two families were related. J. Schwartz assumes this. The connection could only have been through the Hasmoneans, among whom Herod the Great's wife Mariamne was numbered. The link would confirm St. Jerome's report connecting Philo to a priestly line. From that it would follow that the family was Palestinian and that only Philo's father had settled at Alexandria. Support for this is found in the fact, emphasized by Schwartz, of the family's Roman citizenship.[5] This citizenship was impossible for Alexandrian Jews. That implies that Philo's father possessed citizenship before his arrival in the city.

All this data lets us delineate Philo's social and chronological situation with considerable certainty. His birth is often placed around 20 B.C. What we have said allows Schwartz to put it at a latter date.[6] If Alexander the Alabarch was born between 15 and 13, Philo, who came immediately before or after him must have been born around then. Philo seems rather to be the second son. Thus, we can fix his birth around 13 B.C.

Family circumstances might have steered Philo toward business. The highest aspirations were possible for him. From his family's elevated position, he gets a sense of political responsibility. But only at the end of his life do we see him play a role in this order and come into contact with government circles. His interests were directed elsewhere, and primarily toward the philosophical life. His family's position allowed him to get a full education. Frequent allusions in his writings to academic culture, as it was then organized in Alexandria, show that he had passed through all its levels.

He could have been a brilliant rhetorician, the profession at which contemporary culture aimed. But his ideal lay elsewhere. He tells us that

5. Ibid., 601–2.
6. Ibid., 599.

very young "he began to feel the sting of philosophy" (*De Congressu*, 17).[7] He first cultivates grammar, the servant of philosophy, only to prepare himself. Philo identifies with the second of the two great models offered by his contemporary culture, the rhetorician and the philosopher. For him and his contemporaries, philosophy is a conversion. It involves an ascetical effort of detachment that leads to discovering the true meaning of life in the possession of inner goods.

Philo's own testimony confirms that he lead a "philosophical" life.

> There was a time when I had leisure for philosophy and for the contemplation of the universe and its contents, when I made its spirit my own in all its beauty and loveliness and true blessedness, when my constant companions were divine themes and verities, wherein I rejoiced with a joy that never cloyed or sated. I had no base or abject thoughts nor groveled in search of reputation or wealth or bodily comforts, but always seemed to be borne aloft into the heights with a soul possessed by some God-sent inspiration [ἐπιθειασμός], a fellow-traveler with the sun and moon and the whole heaven and universe. Ah then I gazed down from the upper air, and straining the mind's eye beheld, as from some commanding peak, the multitudinous world-wide spectacle of earthly things, and blessed my lot in that I had escaped by main force from the plagues of mortal life (*De Specialibus Legibus* III, 1–2).[8]

This text might have been written by a Platonist of the time, Plutarch for example. It is completely full of Platonic echoes. The divine inspiration, ἐπιθειασμός, recalls the teaching of the *Ion*. The ascension to the heights and participation in the circular movement of the spheres recalls the *Phaedrus*. The observatory, σκοπία, from which one surveys the earthly realm comes from the *Republic* (445 C). All these expressions

7. [Translator: this is not in *De Congressu*, 17, which is on *Philo*, IV, 467, nor in other paragraphs whose numbers are likely misprints of 17. Furthermore, *De Congressu* is allegorical and exhortative rather than biographical. In any case paragraphs 17 and 18 do recommend the study of rhetoric and philosophy: "Rhetoric, sharpening the mind to the observation of facts and training and welding thought to expression, will make the man a true master of words and thought, thus taking into its charge the peculiar gift which nature has not bestowed on any other creature. Dialectic is the sister and twin, as some have said of Rhetoric, distinguishes true argument from false and combats the plausibilities of sophistry and thus will heal that great plague of the soul deceit. It is profitable to take them and the like for our early associates and for the field of our preliminary studies."]

8. *Philo* VII, 475, 477.

are found again later in Plotinus, whose resemblances to Philo are striking and still later in the Christian Gregory of Nyssa.

In Philo, as in Gregory, we must not stop at the similarities of expression. Philo gets his way of speaking from Plato. But what he puts beneath the words is different. For, Philo's God is the God of Abraham. His mysticism is the outgrowth of Jewish piety. Philo finds the source of his mysticism not only in the Greek sages he reads, but even more in his people's religious tradition. Evidently the Bible itself is this source by which he is primarily nourished. But were there spiritual teachers in contemporary Judaism who guided him on the path of contemplation?

We know from Philo himself that in his time in Egypt, on the shores of Lake Mareotis [Mariut], there was a community of Jewish monks, the Therapeutae. The picture that he gives of their life is remarkable. It is a valuable document about contemporary Jewish mysticism.

> The houses of the society thus collected are exceedingly simple . . . They are neither near together . . . nor yet at a great distance . . . In each house there is a consecrated room which is called a sanctuary or closet [μοναστήριον], and closeted in this they are initiated into the mysteries of the sanctified life . . . They keep the memory of God alive and never forget it . . . Twice every day they pray, at dawn and at eventide; at sunrise they pray for a fine bright day, fine and bright in the true sense of the heavenly daylight which they pray may fill their minds. At sunset they ask that the soul may be wholly relieved from the press of the senses and the object of sense, and sitting where she is consistory and council chamber to herself, pursue the quest of truth. The interval between early morning and evening is spent entirely in spiritual exercise. They read the Holy Scriptures and seek wisdom from their ancestral philosophy by taking it as an allegory, since they think that the words of the literal text are symbols of something whose hidden nature is revealed by studying the underlying meaning. They have also writings of men of old, the founders of their way of thinking, who left many memorials of the form used in allegorical interpretation, and these they take as a kind of archetype and imitate . . . (*De Vita Contemplativa*, 24–29).[9]

The account of their celebration of the Passover eve, which is the night before (προέορτος) the great feast, that is to say of the seven weeks of Pentecost (*De Vita Contemplativa*, 65) is quite remarkable.

9. *Philo* IX, 127, 129.

> So then they assemble, white-robed and with faces in which cheerfulness is combined with the outmost seriousness, but before they recline, at a signal from a member of the Rota, which is the name commonly given to those who perform these services . . . Their eyes and hands lifted up to Heaven . . . they pray to God that their feasting may be acceptable and proceed as He would have it. After the prayers the seniors recline according to the order of their admission . . . The feast is shared by women also, most of them aged virgins, who have kept their chastity . . . of their own free will in their ardent yearning for wisdom. The order of reclining is so apportioned that the men sit by themselves on the right and the women by themselves on the left . . . [The couches] are plank beds of the common kinds of wood, covered with quite cheap strewings of native papyrus . . . In this sacred banquet there is, as I have said, no slave, but the services are rendered by free men who perform their tasks as attendants . . . No wine is brought during those days but only water of the brightest and the clearest . . . The table too is kept pure from the flesh of animals; the food laid on it is loaves of bread with salt as a seasoning . . . (*De Vita Contemplativa*, 66–71, 73).[10]

Moreover, this is their ordinary sustenance. They only take it after sundown, having fasted all day (*De Vita Contemplativa* 34). There is no Passover lamb, because they never touch meat.

> The President of the company, when a general silence is established . . . discusses some question arising in the Holy Scriptures or solves one that has been propounded by someone else . . . His audience listens with ears pricked up and eyes fixed on him always in exactly the same posture, signifying . . . difficulty by a gentle movement of the head and by pointing with a fingertip of the right hand. . . . Then the President rises and sings a hymn [ὑμνός] composed as an address to God, either a new one of his own composition or an old one by poets of an earlier day who have left behind them hymns in many measures and melodies . . . After him all the others take their turn as they are arranged . . . When everyone has finished his hymn, the young men bring in the tables mentioned a little above on which is set the truly purified meal . . . After the supper they hold the sacred vigil [παννυχίς] . . . They rise up all together and standing in the middle of the refectory form themselves first into two choirs, one of men and one of women . . . sometimes chanting together, sometimes

10. Ibid., 155, 157, 159.

> taking up the harmony antiphonally [ἀντιφώνοι], hands and feet keeping time in accompaniment, . . . and rapt with enthusiasm reproduce . . . sometimes the wheeling and counter-wheeling of a choric dance . . . Thus they continue until dawn drunk with the drunkenness in which there is no shame . . . (*De Vita Contemplativa*, 80, 81, 83–84, see also 29, 88).[11]

Philo sees in that "a copy of the choir set up of old beside the Red Sea in honor of the wonders there wrought . . . so filled with ecstasy both men and women, that forming a single choir they sang hymns of thanksgiving to God their Savior, the men led by the prophet Moses and the women by the prophetess Miriam" (*De Vita Contemplativa*, 85, 87).[12] This connection perhaps clarifies the somewhat disconcerting Passover dances. Indeed we know by the Mishnah and already by Jeremiah 31: 3–5 that young Jews dressed in white, danced on the two great feasts of Passover and Tabernacles. Philo's narrative gives us a form of those Passover dances, surely inspired by the choruses of Greek tragedy.

All these details show that Philo had direct knowledge of the Therapeutae. But a wonderful confidence confirms this:

> For many a time I have forsaken [καταλιπών] friends and kinsfolk and country and come into a wilderness [ἐρημία], to give my attention to some subject demanding contemplation, and deriving no advantage from doing so, but my mind, scattered or bitten by passion has gone off to matters of the contrary kind. Sometimes, on the other hand, amid a vast throng I have a collected mind. God has dispersed the crowd that besets the soul and taught me that a favorable and unfavorable condition are not brought about by difference of place, but by God who moves and leads the car of the soul in whatever way He pleases (*Legum Allegoriae*, II, 85).[13]

I set aside the testimony about spiritual experience these lines contain. Two things appear in them beyond doubt. The first is that Philo did not ordinarily live away from crowds, and thus that his life ran its course in the midst of them in Alexandria. The second is that he sometimes withdrew into "solitude." Now he describes this solitude in the same terms as that of the Therapeutae. "They flee without a backward glance and leave their brothers, their children, their wives, their parents,

11. Ibid., 163, 165.
12. Ibid., 165, 167
13. *Philo* I, 279.

the wide circle of their kinsfolk, the groups of friends around them, the fatherlands in which they were born and reared . . . And they do not migrate into another city . . . Instead of this they pass their days outside the walls pursuing solitude (ἐρημία)" (*De Vita Contemplativa*, 18–20).[14] Accordingly, it seems quite plausible that Philo spent periods of time among the monks of Lake Mareotis. The exact details that he provides about the Therapeutae confirm that.

While these stays may have been prolonged during his youth, Philo later returned only from time to time. He could not absent himself from the tasks imposed by his position within the Jewish Community at Alexandria. On the one hand, his whole output demonstrates that his life was devoted to commenting on the books of Moses, the Law. The custom of interpreting the Law every Sabbath first developed in Palestine itself. The Gospels give us examples. These commentaries were the origin of the first Christian preaching. This practice spread to Alexandria. Philo alludes to these weekly homilies on several occasions.[15]

As Wolfson has noted, it is quite plausible that Philo gave such lessons: ". . . his writings have the form of sermons or homilies on verses or topics selected from Scripture."[16] The oratorical character of certain passages is evident. Later, St. Ambrose writes homilies inspired by Philo's that are subsequently assembled in continuous treatises. In particular, the collection of Philo's works constituting *Legum Allegoriae* can be included in this the literary genre.[17] They belong to the Haggadic type of moral homily where Old Testament figures are presented as models of virtue. We have similar works at the same period in Palestine in the *Testaments of the Patriarchs*. The *Book of Wisdom* itself already falls within this genre in great measure and has a long homily on Passover.

Thus Philo appears to have been a good preacher, "the founder of the art of preaching as we know it," Wolfson has written.[18] But his importance does not reside exclusively in the quality of his preaching or even in his concern to adapt it to an environment shaped by classical culture. It resides in the philosophical tone given to this predication. For Philo wanted first of all to be a philosopher. The originality of his philosophical

14. Ibid., 125.
15. *De Opificio Mundi*, 128; *De Vita Mosis*, 216, etc.
16. Wolfson, *Philo,* I:96.
17. See Thyen, *Der Stil*, 7–11.
18. Wolfson, *Philo*, I:98.

thought has often been overlooked. Wolfson has demonstrated it thoroughly. This originality consists in an attempt to reform traditional Greek philosophy by conforming it to the work of God. And that is done in a way so as to be able to show the superiority of Biblical "philosophy" to pagan philosophy.

At that moment there was a need to establish and teach this Biblical philosophy. Philo indeed found himself in a difficult position, reflected in his work. On the one hand, some Jews continued to confine themselves to completely literal exegesis that was becoming unacceptable to educated minds. But on the other hand, the invasion of Greek philosophy brought its dangers. There was risk of losing sight of the originality of the Biblical message. Philo speaks of the skeptics who identify the story of Iphigenia with that of Isaac. This could lead to apostasy. Philo had the example of his nephew Tiberius. He wanted to show that one could adopt the Hellenic mode of thinking while remaining loyal to Biblical faith.

The *Allegory of the Laws* contains an echo of this philosophical preaching. We can approximate the *Quaestiones* that constitute its survey. The method is still that of Jewish midrash. It is a sustained commentary on Scripture. But the content is philosophical. The union of these two elements is disconcerting. The fragmentary form imposed by the need to follow a historical text keeps the thought's philosophical character from being apparent. Moreover, the exegetes rejected a commentary that continually went beyond the text itself. But that commentary constituted an absolutely original creation, which perhaps made Philo the greatest preacher of his time, in Wolfson's phrase.

The setting for this teaching as well as its form continues to be the Sabbath gathering at the synagogue. Wolfson observes that Philo himself alludes to the Alexandrian Jewish practice of devoting each Sabbath to the "philosophies of the Fathers" as well as problems "related to nature" in the *didaskaleas* (διδασκαλεὶα) (*De Vita Mosis*, II, 216).[19] This last term may indicate the synagogue itself or an adjoining lecture room. Philo depicts numerous synagogues for us, surrounded by gardens, scattered around Alexandria. But the word *didaskalea* that Clement and Origen pick up is interesting. It shows us synagogue gatherings assimilated to lectures given by philosophers.

This is how Philo appears to us in his maturity: he contains the contrasts of Alexandrian Judaism within himself. He is a believing Jew who

19. Ibid., I:79.

faithfully observes the Law, whose fulfillment he defends against pure allegorists. The syncretistic religion that some try to attribute to him is not found in him. But he is not content with fulfilling the letter of that Law. He wants to extract its spirit and nourish his inner life with it. Moreover, he knows the speculations of contemporarily Jews on Genesis. This higher learning, this gnosis is what he seeks. He does so in order to nourish his confreres within the community. Furthermore, he knows how to measure out its teaching according to their level of advancement. In all this, he appears as an eminent rabbi of his time.

But he is a liberal rabbi. He is very open to Hellenistic culture. He is at the opposite pole from the sectarian particularism of certain Palestinian circles. He owes this to his family tradition. He also owes it to his astonishingly open mind. He represents the best in contemporary Alexandrian intellectual circles. He has assimilated all of Hellenistic culture and is a past master in it. He can dispute with Greek philosophers as an equal. His ambition is precisely to show that Jews can rival with Greeks in the very area of culture and thus completely earn their membership in Hellenic civilization.

But, if Jews must be open to the values of Hellenism, it is also necessary to present the eminent worth of the Jewish faith to the Greeks. So Philo's intellectual activity is two-sided. The part of his activity that we have seen is directed to believing Jews. It has an esoteric character. It is carried on within the community. On the other hand, Philo's activity has an apologetic component. He is careful to present the Jewish faith to Greeks so as to make it acceptable. This is what is expressed in other works: *Moses*, the *Explanation of the Laws*, and the *Apology for the Jews*, of which Eusebius has conserved a fragment.

This facet of Philo's activity ought to be situated within the context of Alexandrian Judaism. On the one hand, the Jews were the object of bitter hostility from the Egyptian and Greek pagan population. That hostility was social but also religious in nature. We will return to the particular manifestations of anti-Semitism in Alexandria in which Philo was deeply embroiled. But this hostility was likewise expressed in pamphlets in which the Jewish religion was presented as both crude and dangerous. The story of the patriarchs was ridiculed. The practice of circumcision was mocked. The refusal to worship the city gods was criticized.

This anti-Semitism was in full swing in Philo's time. It is encountered in the priest Cheremon, a Stoic and mystagogue, who was to be Nero's confident. It is particularly represented by the polygraph Apion,

whom Philo will encounter again in Rome and who will write a widely circulated pamphlet against the Jews. Flavius Josephus will answer him later in his *Contra Apion*. The attacks are dangerous. They threaten to stir up popular hatred and diminish the standing of the Jews with the authorities. Philo's strives to undermine them. On the one hand, he shows the holiness of the patriarch and the dignity of their customs. That is the precise object of the *Explanation of the Law*. On the other hand, he exalts the greatness of Jewish monotheism, which justifies the refusal to adore gods or emperors.

During this period, therefore, Judaism created a whole apologetic against the pagan religions.[20] In large part Christians of the next generation adopted this apologetic. They were the objects of the same attacks. Celsus will ridicule the story of Jesus. He will accuse Christians of barbaric practices. He will reproach them for disloyalty to the civic cult. Aristides, Justin, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Origen will take up much of the argumentation of Philo and the Jewish apologists. Paul's speech on the Areopagus already recalls Jewish apologetics. The Christian sibylline oracles pick up themes from the Jewish sibylline oracles.

But to see only a negative apologetic in Philo's exoteric works would be to limit their meaning. The period to which they belong certainly witnesses Jewish proselytism at its peak. The Diaspora appears as the providential measure by which Yahweh is announced to all nations. This attitude reaches its highest expression in Philo. Judaism is presented as the religion of the true God, which all men ought to adopt and which is severed from its national ties. Such cosmopolitanism is very marked in Philo. He accepts the Roman Empire. His ambition is exactly to unite the religion of Israel, Greek culture, and the Roman Empire. He was to attempt on behalf of Judaism what Christianity would achieve four centuries later.

In this matter, Philo's Alexandrian Judaism is far from Palestinian Judaism. For Palestinian Jews, nation and religion are one. The sons of Abraham are the people of God. They bear Rome's political yoke impatiently. This nationalism will grow enormously during Philo's lifetime, animated by the zealots. In the end, even the Essenes will be swept along. The culmination will be the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Philo must have had no sympathy for this particularism. It is not by chance that

20. Friedländer, *Geschichte der jüdischen Apologetik*, 10ff.; Dalbert, *Die Theologie*.

his nephew Tiberius Alexander is at Titus's side as chief of staff during of the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Thus, Philo's apologetic labor bears witness to religious universalism and a deep missionary sense. But for all that, to think he was not concerned with the interests of his people and particularly those of his own community would be to misunderstand his personality. His great moral standing, in particular in pagan circles, and his family connections as well, must have made it difficult for him to avoid involvement in political problems. This went counter to his temperament. Not that he was uninterested in political questions, but he envisaged them on the speculative level. He dreaded direct involvement in practical affairs and having to give up his inclination toward contemplation and study. An appeal to his devotion toward his fellow Jews was required to decide him.

He expressed himself on this painful matter of conscience. After having recalled, in a passage we cited above, how he withdrew into solitude in his youth, he continues:

> But, as it proved, my steps were dogged by the deadliest of mischiefs, the hater of the good, envy, which suddenly set upon me and ceased not to pull me down with violence till it had plunged me in the ocean of civil cares, in which I am swept away, unable even to raise my head above the water. Yet amid my groans, I held my own, for planted in my soul from my earliest days I keep the yearning for culture which ever has pity and compassion for me, lifts me up and relieves my pain. To this I owe it that sometimes I raise my head and with the soul's eye see—dimly indeed because the mist of extraneous affairs has clouded their clear vision—I yet make shift to look around me in my desire to inhale a breath of life pure and unmixed with evil (*De Specialibus Legibus* III, 3–4).[21]

In what period of his life did Philo begin to be introduced to political matters? The text we just quoted seems to indicate that it was fairly early. His literary work indisputably demonstrates wide knowledge of legal affairs. Moreover, this would form part of the attributions of a rabbi. Palestinian rabbis combined edifying exegesis, *Haggadah*, with legal casuistry, *Halakhah*. Whether Philo is linked to these rabbinical traditions is disputed. Heinemann thinks that Philo's legal references relate to Hellenistic law. But that has been challenged. It certainly seems that Philo is a source for the knowledge of contemporary Jewish casuistry.

21. *Philo* VII, 477.

This knowledge of jurisprudence gave Philo a competence that must have marked him for public functions. We have no proof that he exercised as a magistrate in the Jewish community. But Goodenough[22] concludes that he must have been in charge of the legal administration of Alexandrian Jews under imperial control. It may seem difficult to us to reconcile this with his taste for allegorical speculation. But that shows unfamiliarity with rabbinical mentality in which the two aspects were harmonized quite well. David Daube has shown how speculation and casuistry were combined among the rabbis. Also, Philo's complex personality must be recognized. His nostalgia for solitude does not prevent his also having a taste for social life. Perhaps it was not as painful a hardship for him as he seems to tell us.

If we have few details about the beginnings of his political career, at least we are amply informed about its principal episode, the diplomatic mission to the Emperor Caligula with which he was entrusted in order to protest against the acts of violence toward the Jewish community of Alexandria of which the legate Flaccus was guilty. This episode is the subject of two works by Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius* and *Against Flaccus*. The historian Josephus has narrated the event. It constitutes the most valuable piece of evidence about Philo's life that we possess, because it is situated in A.D. 39. Furthermore, it shows him in contact with Roman circles. It is appropriate to insist on that point.

The episode is situated within the framework of a problem we have not yet raised, the relations between Alexandrian Jews and the native Egyptian population. There was a powerful anti-Semitic current within the latter. It was reinforced by the favor the Roman authorities showed to the Jews. In particular this was the case of Philo's family. We have already mentioned his brother Alexander's relations with the court at Rome for which he was a banker. In addition, he was in charge of collecting taxes at Alexandria. That must not have made him popular among the Egyptian population. But Roman favor ordinarily sheltered the Jewish population from Egyptian harassment.

This had been the policy of Flaccus Avilius, whom the Emperor Tiberius named governor of Egypt around A.D. 32 Philo himself bears witness to Flaccus's good government during his first years. But in 37 a major event, the death of Tiberius and the succession of Gaius Caligula, put his post in danger. Flaccus was part of the entourage of Tiberius. With

22. Goodenough, *An Introduction*, 79.

Caligula, son of Germanicus, another clique acceded to power. Flaccus risked disfavor. Now, at this point something happened which must not have disposed him favorably toward Alexandrian Jews and Philo's family in particular.

This episode involved Herod Agrippa, whose relations with Philo's brother Alexander we have seen. Herod Agrippa was one of Caligula's drinking companions and part of his entourage. That had earned him the disfavor of Tiberius, who imprisoned him. Caligula's accession to the throne meant a change of fortune for Agrippa. Caligula hastened to free him, named him praetor, and gave him his uncle Philip's old kingdom, Abilene, which extends from Chalcis to Damascus in the north of the Trans-Jordan. Agrippa's uncle Herod Antipas was then tetrarch of Galilee. Antipas was also Agrippa's brother-in-law, since he had married his sister Herodias.

Eighteen months after his appointment, Herod Agrippa decided to return to his kingdom. He stopped at Alexandria and stayed at the house of his friend, Philo's brother Alexander. Philo claims Agrippa traveled with great simplicity. But that would be surprising in this personage. It certainly seems that before shutting himself up in his remote kingdom, he could not resist the temptation to dazzle with sumptuosity the Alexandrian friends who had seen his misfortune and had loaned him money. No doubt "the gold and silver buckles" with which his enemies would accuse him of equipping his guards, were not mere legend.

This must not have been at all pleasant for Flaccus. Now that he was on the edge of disfavor, Agrippa's star was rising. However little Agrippa hinted at it, it is understandable that Flaccus was completely bitter. Outwardly, he received Agrippa in the most affable way. That was good politics. But he was totally disposed to take revenge. The pagan population of Alexandria provided him with that revenge. As we have said, this population was hardly favorable to the Jews. The luxury that Agrippa flaunted and his connection to Alexander, who was not popular, were irritants.

Alexandria was the land of mimes. The mimes of Herondas came to us from Alexandria. Agrippa furnished a wonderful subject for the comic writers of his time. Philo tells us: "They spent their days in the gymnasium jeering at the king and bringing out a succession of gibes against him. In fact they took the authors of farces and jests for their instructors and thereby showed their natural ability in things of shame, slow to be schooled in anything good but exceedingly quick and ready in learning

the opposite" (*In Flaccum*, 34).[23] These manifestations were reaching their height when the mob seized an innocent lunatic named Carabas and led him to the gymnasium. There, a paper diadem was placed on his head, a mat on his shoulders, a reed in his hand, and the crowd hailed him ironically with the title of king. This scene of derision strangely recalls that of Christ in the pretorium and helps us understand it.

There is no reason to suppose that Flaccus provoked the episode, as Philo suggests. But he surely must have done nothing to prevent it. It is understandable that Philo must have resented the offense. Not only did pagans thus ridicule a Jewish prince, but also the prince was the guest of Philo's brother. The ridicule risked touching Alexander. That can be felt in the report Philo gives about the scene. It is also understandable that he was angry with Flaccus for not having prevented it. "Why did Flaccus show no indignation? . . . For it is evident that if he who could have chastised or at the very least stopped them did nothing to prevent them from acting in this way, they did it with the full permission and consent of him himself" (*In Flaccum*, 35).[24]

In itself the incident was unimportant. But it brought Flaccus close to anti-Semitic elements in the city. That was something new. Now Flaccus's situation was perilous. He could expect nothing from the Jews, partisans of his enemy Agrippa. Support from the city's pagan inhabitants might help him. Some pagan elements hostile to the Jews also saw their advantage in this. Philo names three of them. Denis, about whom we have no other information; Lampon, who was in charge of judicial affairs; and above all Isidore, an intriguer, who headed several secret societies. They pledged their support to Flaccus if he supported them in their attacks against the Jews.

Next began a series of hostile acts against the Jews. The first was a proposal to erect statues to Caligula in synagogues. The idea was astute. The populace's bad reception of his friend Agrippa might antagonize Caligula. This proposal was a clever way of courting him. For Flaccus it was an opportunity to put himself on good terms with Caligula. So he approved the proposal. But it could only be odious to the Jews. "It was," Philo says, "the most abominable infamy." It struck the Jews at their most sensitive point, hatred of idolatry. Their refusal brought closure of the synagogues.

23. *Philo* IX, 321.

24. Ibid.

At that point, Flaccus intervened with an edict in which he declared the Jews foreigners. He was taking a firm position (*In Flaccum*, 8, 53). This edict has provoked heated controversies. Does it mean that the Jews were members of the city, Roman citizens? This is Schürer's thesis. Does it only mean that their residence permits were withdrawn? It certainly seems that the latter hypothesis is correct. The *Letter of Claudius to the Alexandrians* discovered in a papyrus published by Harold Idris Bell seems to demonstrate it.[25] In any case, Flaccus's edict made the Jewish situation completely precarious and put them at the mercy of their adversaries.

Much more was to come. The city of Alexandria became the scene of a veritable pogrom at this point. Philo fixes the date with certainty, noting that it coincided with the mourning prescribed for the whole empire on the occasion of the death of Caligula's sister Drusilla, that is to say, August A.D. 38. The Jews were first driven into one neighborhood, the Delta quarter. Confined in the ghetto, they were dying of hunger. Those who tried to go out were massacred, burned alive, dragged through the streets, or crucified. Women were dragged to the theatre were they were forced to eat pork. Those who refused were put to death.

Far from preventing these abuses, Flaccus encouraged them. He ordered searches to be carried out in Jewish homes to find out whether they had arms. Philo observes that similar searches had been made earlier in Egyptian homes and had turned up results. But nothing was found in Jewish homes. Moreover, the Jews had sent Flaccus a message of congratulation for Caligula, to be transmitted to Rome. That certainly was in 37. But Flaccus, who, at this point, must have been wondering what policy to follow, procrastinated in sending the message forward. When Agrippa came to Alexandria in June 38, Philo complained to him about that and asked him to take charge of making the address reach Rome, explaining the reasons for the delay.

By these maneuvers, Flaccus intended to discredit the Jews along with Agrippa in the Emperor's mind. But he failed to take the latter's standing into account or the Emperor's tenacious grudges. Caligula did not forget that Flaccus belonged to a political clan opposed to him. The maneuvers accomplished nothing. His condemnation was to come. His mandate finished in September 38. Before he set off to give an accounting of his mandate at Rome, Caligula had him arrested at Alexandria during a banquet, by a centurion expressly dispatched from Rome for the purpose.

25. Bell, *Jews and Christians in Egypt,* 12–16.

Philo notes that it was the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. That year the Jews were not celebrating because of the persecution against them. But they spent the night in prayer and in the morning, since they no longer had synagogues, they went to the sea shore to glorify God.

Thus ended the dramatic weeks of August–September 38, the most tragic period of Philo's life. They constitute the subject of *In Flaccum*. But in spring 39 another episode in his life will start that is the subject of the *Embassy to Gaius*. The situation of the Jews continued to be precarious. Two major problems concerned them. The first was the presence of the Emperor's statues in their spaces of prayer. The Jews wanted to make it understood that this was incompatible with their faith. The second was their political status. Perhaps they ought to take advantage of the occasion to get themselves granted the rights of citizenship that might have sheltered them from events like those that had just occurred. Lastly, they wanted to give Gaius testimony of their civic loyalty.

So, a delegation was chosen, and Philo was put at its head. This is the clearest evidence of the authority he enjoyed in the Alexandrian Jewish community and allows us to conjecture that his conduct during the pogrom had reinforced his authority even more. Moreover, his family ties to Agrippa and his great culture marked him as the person to establish contact with the court at Rome. The delegation embarked for Italy at the beginning of 40. It must have stayed there until mid 41. So Philo had a long sojourn in Rome at this time. This sojourn was primarily devoted to the mission he had to carry out. But it was also the occasion for contact with intellectual circles in Rome, as we will see.

The mission was particularly difficult. Indeed, Caligula's attitude toward the Jews was in the process of being reversed. He was more and more possessed by megalomania. He demanded divine honors. Philo describes the bizarre manifestations of this state of mind at length. Consequently, Caligula was becoming increasingly hostile toward the Jews, who constituted the chief opposition to his pretensions.

The pagans of Alexandria skillfully took advantage of the Emperor's proclivities. They sent a delegation to Rome at the same time in order to present their point of view. In particular, among its members were two fanatical enemies of the Jews: Isidore, the spokesman of the secret societies, the *thiases*, and Apion, who had published a screed against the Jews to which Flavius Josephus, Agrippa II's friend and historian, would respond. The pagan delegation managed to establish contacts with Caligula's entourage, in particular the Egyptian Helico, who was the Emperor's

chamberlain and accompanied him "at hand, to the palestra, to the bath, to the table." He entertained the Emperor with his banter, whose usual butt was the Jews.

So the Jewish ambassadors found the Emperor ill-disposed toward them. After arriving in the spring of 40, they first had to await the return of Caligula, who was in Gaul. The delegates were presented to him at the Campus Martius. He greeted them favorably and had them told that he would receive them. But the audience was put off. Philo, as a person of experience, seeing one after another of the other delegations received, felt that it was a bad sign. The Jews soon understood the reason. One day, when they were at Pozzuoli, accompanying the Emperor's court, always waiting for the audience, the news broke of Caligula's decision to have a statue of himself erected in the Temple at Jerusalem. From that point, everything seemed lost. Was not one of the essential points of their petition the right not to have statues set up in their place of prayer?

Only one possibility was left to the Jewish ambassadors: the influence of Agrippa. This influence had only increased in previous years. His appointment as king of Abilene had irritated his uncle Herod Antipas, who was only tetrarch of Galilee and especially the latter's wife Herodias. They embarked for Rome in August 39. But Agrippa got wind of the matter. He dispatched one of his freedmen, who carried a letter to Caligula in which Agrippa recalled that in 31 Herod Antipas had conspired with Sejanus, who was preparing an uprising against the Emperor. When Antipas appeared, Caligula interrupted him and condemned him for treason. He dethroned Antipas and sent him with Herodias into exile at Lugdunum Convenarum,[26] far from his palace in Tiberiades. Antipas's tetrarchy and fortune were transferred to Agrippa.

Agrippa received the welcome news at Abilene. In 40 he came to see his benefactor. He was at Rome at the same time as the ambassadors from Alexandria. Philo and he met. It is certain that they reflected together on the approach to take. Unhappily, at this moment Agrippa's standing weakened. At the time of the affair of the Jerusalem statue, Caligula sought his advice. This put Agrippa in a tragic dilemma. But Agrippa was a believing Jew. He had the courage to offer the Emperor a defense of the Jewish point of view. Philo has transmitted the long letter Agrippa wrote—in which Philo no doubt collaborated. Caligula was impressed by this frankness. He ordered the statue's installation to be provisionally

26. Today Saint-Bernard-de-Comminges in Haute-Garonne.

deferred. But Agrippa's position remained delicate. His dispositions had not changed for all that. He could only give weak support.

The audience finally took place. Philo described it with all the bitterness that it must have caused his wounded dignity. The backdrop was the garden of Maecenas in the proximity of Rome. The ambassadors prostrated themselves before the Emperor. Gnashing his teeth, the Emperor responded: "Are not you those people, enemies of the gods who scorn me and prefer the cult of your nameless God to my cult?" At this he directed a blasphemy at them. Isidore, who headed the Egyptian delegation, lavishing divine titles upon the Emperor, embarked upon fanatical accusations. The Jews exclaimed that they offered sacrifices for the Emperor upon his accession. "You have offered sacrifices for me, but to another. What do your sacrifices matter to me, if they are not directed to me?" answered Caligula.

At the same time, the Emperor continued to visit the villa followed by the unfortunate Jews amid the jokes of the courtiers. After having given orders to the architects, the Emperor turned abruptly to Philo and his companions and asked, "Why do you not eat pork?" This joke provoked general mirth. At the end he asked them to explain their political organization. The Jews began their explanation. But the emperor did not listen and discussed the slabs of rock salt to be placed in the windows. He ended with a less harsh comment: "These imbeciles are more to be pitied than to be blamed."

Philo does not mention his personal role in this audience. But Josephus, who gave us another version, emphasizes it. The text is important, because it is contemporary testimony about Philo. Josephus first emphasizes the accusations made by Apion, who was part of the pagan delegation. Philo assigns the chief role to Isidore. But this does not seem to indicate that there were two audiences. Joseph was especially interested in Apion, against whom he wrote. It was normal for him to underline Apion's role. Philo, by contrast, seems to be more hostile to Isidore.

Accordingly, Josephus writes:

> Many of these severe things were said by Apion, by which he hoped to provoke Gaius to anger at the Jews, as he was likely to be. Philo, the principal of the Jewish embassage, a man eminent on all accounts, brother to Alexander the Alabarch, and one not unskillful in philosophy, was ready to betake himself to make his defense against the accusations; but Gaius prohibited him and bid him begone; he was also in such a rage, that it openly

> appeared he was about to do them some very great mischief. So Philo, being thus affronted, went out, and said to those Jews who were about him, that they should be of good courage, since Gaius's words indeed showed anger at them in words, but in reality had already set God against himself (*Antiquities of the Jews*, XVIII, 8, 1).[27]

The fact remained that the mission was headed toward failure. Philo was overwhelmed, so much that, as one can detect in his narrative, he wondered whether he had been clumsy. In any case, he risked having the burden of the failure fall upon him (*Legum Allegoriae*, 46, 369). Their last friends abandoned the Jews, seeing their disgrace. The plight was going to get still worse. Indeed, Caligula ordered the arrest of Philo's brother, Alexander the Alabarch, who was part of the delegation. Alexander was a close friend of Agrippa. The latter had everything to fear.

Then things took a dramatic turn. On January 24, 41, the tribune Chaereas assassinated Caligula. It was a moment of danger. Convoked by the Consuls, the Senate proclaimed the reestablishment of the Republic. The army hailed Caligula's uncle Claudius as emperor. In these circumstances, Agrippa would play a decisive role. It is he who discovered the Emperor's body. To win time he placed it on a bed and declared that the Emperor was still breathing. Then he sought out Claudius and offered his services. He went to the Senate and declared his republican sympathies but asked that Claudius be given their adherence. Sensing that the Senate hesitated, he returned to Claudius and convinced him to proclaim himself Emperor.

At this instant, Agrippa is the leading personality of the Empire. His prestige was at its height. A decree was proposed to the senate to restore the kingdom of his grandfather Herod the Great to him, that is to say, to add Samaria and Judea to what he already possessed. Soon he entered his new capital Jerusalem in triumph. There he met a new problem, Christianity. His grandfather had the Holy Innocents massacred. His uncle had John the Baptist beheaded and sent Jesus back to Pilate with mockery. In 44 Agrippa would have Peter arrested and James beheaded. The Acts of the Apostles describes Agrippa's death, which took place at Caesarea shortly afterwards.

But in January 41 he was at the peak of his glory. His prestige reflected back upon his friends. Alexander was liberated. Was Alexander,

27. *The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus*, 550.

furthermore, not the steward of the possessions of Antonia, mother of the new Emperor? Alexander shared Agrippa's triumph. The connections between the two families became closer through a marriage that constitutes a singular historical nexus. Agrippa gave his daughter Berenice to Mark, the son of Alexander (*Antiquities of the Jews*, XIX 5). Berenice was then thirteen. She enters history with this marriage. It must not have lasted long. Mark having died, she would marry her uncle, Herod of Chalcis. This marriage also must have been brief. At twenty, Berenice was a widow, and would share her kingdom with her brother Herod Agrippa II. The Acts of the Apostles will show her presiding with him over a tribunal that judges St. Paul (Acts 25–26). Then she was to meet Titus.[28]

So Berenice inhabits worlds that we are unaccustomed to combine, Paul's mission, the Empire of the Caesars, Alexandrian Judaism. It is odd for us to think that during that early part of 41, Philo frequently saw the young Jewish princess who was going to become his niece. His situation was now completely reversed. Yesterday the butt of sarcasm at Gaius's court, he became an important figure on the morrow. He must have frequented the highest Roman society. He was part of the Emperor's inner circle. We know well enough that the pious rabbi was a humanist and man of the world to perceive that he found himself perfectly at ease in the new situation.

We have a possible testimony proceeding from the pagan world of Philo's presence in Rome at this date. The treatise *On the Sublime*, so praised by seventeenth century French writers, is well known. This treatise is attributed to the third century rhetorician Longinus. But it has been demonstrated that it was written earlier. Careful studies, in particular those of the great philologist Eduard Norden, have made it possible to demonstrate that it was written in the first century. Certain indicators, among others, praise for the republican regime, even let it be precisely dated in the year A.D. 41.[29]

Now, this treatise contains the first allusion by a pagan author to the Bible. Indeed, a quote from Genesis 9:9 is found in it. The task is to find out through whom the author knew the Book of the Hebrews. At the end of the work, Pseudo-Longinus reports that a philosopher recently questioned him, asking how it happens that in a period so rich in talent, there were so few "natural geniuses." Does not that genius need a

28. See Mireaux, *La reine Bérénice*.

29. Norden, *Genesiszitat*.

climate of freedom and does not tyranny hinder the blooming of genius? Norden has shown that these ideas literally reproduce those of Philo (*De Ebrietate*, 198).

The *Treatise on the Sublime* seems to be very much in the context of the situation of spring 41: it is the period of discussion about the return of the Republic after the excesses of Gaius's tyranny. These questions were discussed in intellectual circles at Rome. Philo was a visible presence in these circles. It is possible that the author of the *Treatise* discussed this with him and that he reports Philo's teaching to us. So, at the time, Philo was in relations with the highest spheres of political and intellectual life. Perhaps in the midst of this worldly life, he felt nostalgia for the desert of Lake Mareotis and for its monks. At any rate, here, we mark the zenith of Philo's career.

It is clear that in these conditions the diplomatic mission must have been completely successful. Moreover, at Alexandria itself the situation had turned around. When they learned of Gaius's death, the Jews had hastened to take up arms—which certainly proves that they possessed some, despite Philo's protestations—and, in their turn, they set about massacring Egyptians and Greeks. Claudius intervened with a series of decrees in which he guaranteed the Jews their rights while inviting both sides to live in peace henceforth. It is certain that Agrippa and Philo inspired these texts. Indeed, they represent the very object of their mission.

The first is an edict that Josephus has preserved, which may date from mid-41 (*Antiquities of the Jews*, XIX, 52). The Emperor recalls that the coexistence of Jews and Alexandrians is of long standing, that the Emperors have recognized the civic rights of both, and that they have acknowledged the right of the Jews to observe their customs. He alludes to the uprising of the Alexandrians against the Jews under Caligula and condemns the latter's attempts to have himself worshipped as a god. He demands that the traditional rights of the Jews be restored and that both sides remain in peace.

Subsequently to that first text, Claudius received delegations of both Jews and pagans coming from Alexandria. He had to listen to complaints from both sides. A second text from 42 is the *Letter to the Alexandrians*, discovered in 1921 and published by Harold Idris Bell.[30] It refers to the Egyptian delegation whose eleven members are named. The first part authorizes the erection of statues and chariot scenes at Al-

30. Bell, *Jews and Christians in Egypt*, 23–26.

exandria in honor of the Emperor. But the Emperor asks that no temple be built to him and that there be no high priests devoted to his cult. That is a reaction against Caligula.

The second part alludes to the pogrom of A.D. 38 the Emperor has heard the explanation of the delegation and of the opposing side. This shows that the Jews had also sent a delegation. Claudius exhorts the Alexandrians to live in peace with the Jews and threatens punishments if they begin to persecute them again. He particularly affirms their right to practice their religion. Furthermore, explicitly referring to the counter-attack of A.D. 41, he demands that the Jews be content with the rights that have been acknowledged as theirs, to send no more delegations beside the official delegation, and to live in peace with others.

Thereafter, Claudius showed he had decided to pass from words to deeds. Some years later the Alexandrians made new attempts against the Jews. Again the leaders were Lampo and Isidore. They were summoned to Rome and judged in the presence of Claudius. They tried to place the blame on Agrippa II, son of Herod Agrippa and brother of Berenice. We have rediscovered the papyrus that contains the Acts of this proceeding. Herbert Musurillo has edited them.[31] The trail ends with a death sentence for the two Egyptians. The relentless adversaries of Philo and the Alexandrian Jews saw their careers end tragically. Flaccus had perished. Philo could thus judge that the God of the Jews avenged his persecuted servants.

After his finally successful mission, Philo returned to Alexandria at the end of A.D. 41. We can imagine the reception he received. He had been the savoir of the Jewish community. It remained for him to finish this labor by drawing a lesson from it. It is then that he wrote *In Flaccum*, presumably dedicated to the new Roman governor of Alexandria and the *Legatio ad Gaium* addressed to Claudius. In his fashion, the Christian Apologists of the following century addressed their books to the Emperor. Philo was then over sixty. We know nothing of his last years or of the date of his death.

31. Musurillo, *The Acts of Pagan Martyrs*.