

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31548-7 - Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo

Ronald Williamson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: Philo's life and work

Life. Philo is usually referred to as Philo the Jew (Philo Judaeus) or Philo of Alexandria, a city of the Jewish Dispersion in Egypt. We do not know the exact dates of his birth and death, but in one of his writings he refers to himself as among the 'aged' who have grown 'grey' (*Leg. Gaj.* 1), by Jewish reckoning sixty or seventy. Later in this same work he speaks of his (advanced) 'age' (*ibid.* 182). He describes a visit in AD 40 by a delegation of Jews from Alexandria to the Roman Emperor Caligula in Rome to complain about anti-Jewish hostilities on the part of the Egyptian citizens of Alexandria which occurred in AD 38. From this we may deduce that Philo was between sixty and seventy in AD 40 and was therefore born *c.* 30 BC. His lifetime thus extended over a period from the time of Herod the Great, including that of some of the great Jewish rabbis (Hillel, Shammai and Gamaliel) and Paul; in particular, he was a contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth, of whom, however, he makes absolutely no mention. In *Leg. Gaj.* 299 he refers to Pontius Pilate and the incident involving the placing of 'shields coated with gold' in Herod's palace in 'the holy city' (cf. Josephus, *War* II.9.2 (169ff.)). He describes Pilate as 'naturally inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness', and as stubbornly refusing to meet the Jews' request for the removal of the shields. He also describes 'the briberies, the insults, the robberies, the outrages and wanton injuries, the executions without trial constantly repeated, the ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty' which characterised the governorship of Pilate, but makes no mention of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, a silence which is an indication of the unimportance to contemporary Judaism of the career of the Jew recognised by Christians as the Messiah and regarded by them with such reverence and devotion.

We know almost nothing about the personal and domestic life of Philo. We do not even know if he was married, though two passages in the *Legatio ad Gaium* perhaps imply that his experiences with women – and perhaps with a wife – had not been particularly happy. In the first (*Leg. Gaj.* 39) he writes: 'A wife has great power

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31548-7 - Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo

Ronald Williamson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

to paralyse and seduce her husband and particularly if she is a wanton, for her guilty conscience increases her wheedling.' In the second (*ibid.* 61) he states: 'love as they say is a fickle passion, and therefore none of its endearments are stable'. These comments, so much like Proverbs, may have little biographical value, but Philo makes a number of references to relationships between parents and children which may reflect his own experiences as a father; however, that he *was* a married man with a family we do not know for sure.

He seems to have belonged to a rich and influential Jewish family, and was to become an esteemed leader of the Alexandrian Jewish community, of such eminence that he was chosen to lead the five-man delegation to the Roman Emperor Caligula which he describes in the *Legatio ad Gaium* and to which he refers in the *In Flaccum*. From Josephus we learn that his brother Alexander was rich and that his nephew was deeply involved in the political and military affairs of the Roman Empire.

Jew or Greek? Much discussion has taken place on the extent to which Philo remained truly Jewish, an orthodox Jew. It has been said: 'It is significant that Philo could assimilate so much from Hellenism and still consider himself a Jew'; 'Was he a *Greek Jew*, or, might one more properly speak of him as a *Jewish Greek*?' The writer of the second of these quotations could also, however, say 'no Jew in history ever surpassed Philo's loyalty to Judaism', and also 'If at times it seems to be Judaism, rather than the Jews, to whom his loyalty is addressed, nevertheless that loyalty is beyond all denial.'

Philo certainly thought of himself as a good Jew, a Jew by religion and not just by race. He describes himself as a scholar of Moses (*Spec. Leg.* 1.345) and as one of 'the disciples of Moses' (*Ret. Div. Her.* 81), and in his own mind was as far removed as it is possible to be from those described in *Conf. Ling.* 2 as 'persons who cherish a dislike of the institutions of our fathers and make it their constant study to denounce and decry the Laws'. Philo wrote his treatises to refute these 'impious scoffers'.

Philo's place on the deputation to Caligula shows that he was not regarded by the Alexandrian Jewish community as either an outsider or an heretic. The sole purpose of the deputation was to protest against attacks on Jewish beliefs and practices and, in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31548-7 - Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo

Ronald Williamson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Philo's life and work*

3

particular, the desecration of the local synagogues by the introduction into them of images of the emperor.

When Philo asks the question (in *Leg. Gaj.* 194) 'For what religion or righteousness is to be found in vainly striving to show that we are Alexandrians, when we are menaced by the danger which threatens a more universal interest, the corporate body of the Jews?', it shows that Philo was a Jew first and an Alexandrian only second.

Philo believed Judaism to be a universal religion, capable of attracting and winning 'the attention of all, of barbarians, of Greeks, of dwellers on the mainland and islands, of nations of the east and the west, of Europe and Asia, of the whole inhabited world from end to end' (*Vit. Mos.* II.20); but it did not, in Philo's view, achieve this universality by any abandonment of its fundamental beliefs and practices. In the sections following on the one just quoted Philo speaks of the Jewish respect for the seventh day and the solemn annual celebration of the Day of Atonement (*Vit. Mos.* II.21-4).

It might perhaps have been expected that Philo, because of his practice of the allegorical exegesis of the Old Testament, and in the light of his philosophical tendencies, would have felt it in order to advocate an abandonment of certain Jewish practices, especially perhaps the rite of circumcision. In fact, while he sees it as possessing a symbolic meaning, there is nothing in the opening paragraphs of the *De Specialibus Legibus* to suggest that he saw any good or sufficient reason to abandon the practice ridiculed by others (even though its observance by the Egyptians might have been a good enough reason in itself for doing so). But in *Migr. Abr.* 92 Philo makes it quite clear that an understanding of the symbolic meaning of the law regarding circumcision should not lead to that law's being repealed.

Philo lived at a time when the Temple in Jerusalem was still standing. That Temple Philo, according to his statement in *Prov.* 64, had visited at least once, 'to offer up prayers and sacrifices'. It is possible, as has been suggested, that Philo regarded the physical Temple as a hindrance to the spiritual cult, but he never actually says so, and it is more likely that he regarded the worship of the Jerusalem Temple as symbolic of a greater, spiritual worship, but as indispensable to Judaism all the same (though in fact the synagogue played a larger part in Philo's own worship, since he

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31548-7 - Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo

Ronald Williamson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

was a citizen of Alexandria). In *Migr. Abr.* 92 he says: ‘Why, we shall be ignoring the sanctity of the Temple and a thousand other things, if we are going to pay heed to nothing except what is shown to us by the inner meaning of things’ (that is, excessive allegorism, or an exclusively allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures, is dangerous). There are a great many references to the Jerusalem Temple in the course of the *Legatio ad Gaium* and the *In Flaccum*: for example, the statement (*Leg. Gaj.* 157) that the Emperor Augustus ordered perpetual sacrifices for himself to be offered there and that ‘these sacrifices are maintained to the present day and will be maintained for ever’. Philo clearly did not expect the total destruction of the Temple which occurred in AD 70. Another interesting reference to the Temple is to the sacrifices offered in it on behalf of Caligula, ‘as a prayer of hope for victory in Germany’ (*Leg. Gaj.* 356).

But, as will be shown below, Philo, although he participated in, and does not appear in any way overtly to have objected to, the sacrificial ritual of the Temple, also interpreted sacrifice as a symbol for prayer, and presented prayer as a sacrifice superior to that of bodies of animals, and regarded the universe as the true Temple in which the Logos, as High Priest, ministered.

Philo always speaks with great reverence for the Jewish Sabbath, though he also feels free to interpret it symbolically. In *Vit. Mos.* 216 he says of Sabbath observance: ‘Even now this practice is retained, and the Jews every seventh day occupy themselves with the philosophy of their fathers, dedicating that time to the acquiring of knowledge and the study of the truths of nature.’ He adds: ‘For what are our places of prayer throughout the cities but schools of prudence and courage and justice and also of piety, holiness and every virtue by which duties to God and men are discerned and rightly performed?’ The Pentateuch was the section of the Old Testament read serially on the Sabbath in the synagogues of Judaism. It is quite possible that Philo gave some instruction as part of the synagogue services, since much of his work has a homiletical flavour and character. Many of his treatises could have begun their life as synagogal homilies on lections from the Alexandrian synagogue lectionary. Philo would by no means be the first theological writer to have presented in another form material first used by him in sermons.

There are many passages in Philo’s works which reveal him as a man of deep piety and delicate spirituality. In *Leg. Gaj.* 210 he

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31548-7 - Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo

Ronald Williamson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Philo's life and work*

5

describes the Jewish nation as one which zealously guards its own customs, as others do, but which is distinguished by its belief that 'the laws are oracles vouchsafed by God'. He continues, with reference to the Jews, 'having been trained in this doctrine from their earliest years, they carry the likenesses of the commandments enshrined in their souls'. No reader of Philo can reasonably doubt that the Law of Moses was enshrined in *his* soul. Its study was his perpetual delight, if we are to judge from the quantity and quality of his writings in exposition of it. The way in which Philo refers to the synagogues of Alexandria in, for example, the *Legatio ad Gaium* shows that they were for him meeting-houses for prayer and study to which he was a regular, weekly visitor. It was to protect those very synagogues from defilement by the introduction into them of images of the Roman Emperor that Philo led the delegation to Rome described by him in the *Legatio ad Gaium*. Whatever the peculiarities and eccentricities of Philo's particular theological and philosophical viewpoint, at times apparently distant from orthodox Judaism, there can be little doubt that, as is often the case with radical, eccentric Christian theologians, the man behind them was, deep down, a devout, orthodox Jew.

Philo's loyalty was both to his fellow Jews, in Alexandria and Palestine (remarks he makes in the *Legatio ad Gaium* and the *In Flaccum* show that he was equally concerned about the desecration of the Temple and the defilement of the synagogues of Palestine), and to Judaism and its doctrines.

What he thought about the Temple is revealed by a passage in the *Legatio ad Gaium*. When he is telling of the news of Caligula's intention to defile the Temple with a statue of himself as Zeus, he asks: 'Shall we be allowed to come near him and open our mouths in defence of the houses of prayer to the destroyer of the all-holy place? For clearly to houses less conspicuous and held in lower esteem no regard would be paid by one who insults that most notable and illustrious shrine whose beams like the sun's reach every whither, beheld with awe both by east and west' (*Leg. Gaj.* 191; see also *ibid.* 292, etc.).

Philo and Alexandria. Philo is frequently referred to as Philo of Alexandria. He is known to us, therefore, by a Greek, and not a Jewish, name and by reference to a city founded by Alexander the Great (a city which by its very name constituted a memorial to the great Emperor and a reminder of him), who introduced into it a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31548-7 - Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo

Ronald Williamson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

colony of Jews. Philo was almost certainly born in Alexandria. He refers to it, with evident pride, as 'our Alexandria' (*Leg. Gaj.* 150). Of Caligula Philo wrote (*Leg. Gaj.* 338): 'he was possessed by an extraordinary and passionate love for Alexandria'. An intense affection for Alexandria, if not for all Alexandrians, can also be detected in Philo's writings.

Alexandria has been called the 'metropolis' of Egypt. It was a city which, for intellectual culture, had outstripped Athens in the period in which Philo lived. Within the Roman Empire Alexandria was second only to Rome itself, and that only in political terms. It possessed what we would call a university, the museum and a vast library of over 400,000 volumes. As a centre of Judaism it had an enormous importance – Philo estimated (perhaps over-estimated) its Jewish population as more than a million, outnumbering that of Judaea. He speaks of 'the many myriads of the Alexandrian Jews' (*Leg. Gaj.* 350). He mentions its many synagogues, in which every Sabbath the Pentateuch was read from the Greek version or translation known to us as the Septuagint (LXX) and made in the city (Philo gives an interesting account of the making of the Septuagint in *Vit. Mos.* II.26–44).

The Jewish citizens of Alexandria had achieved a high degree of prosperity. The personal circumstances of Philo's family can alone have made it possible for him to become the highly educated person he undoubtedly was. Philo describes the occupations of some of the Jews living in Alexandria. He refers to 'tradespeople', including 'husbandman, shipman, merchant, artisan' (*Flacc.* 57).

It is interesting to note that, while no written work has come down to us from the Jewish community in Rome, Philo's works, themselves numerous, represent only a part of the literary activity and output of Alexandria. Philo can speak of Egypt (admittedly in his account of the persecution of the Alexandrian Jews by Flaccus) and the Egyptians as 'the greatest of his possessions' (*Flacc.* 158), and of Alexandria as 'that great city or multitude of cities' (*ibid.* 163).

The Jews of Alexandria seem to have been the most thoroughly hellenised of the Diaspora. In fact, it has been suggested that in the period in which Philo lived Alexandria *was* hellenism. If that is true, as it probably is, then Philo lived within a Jewish community exposed intimately to the most complete expression of hellenistic culture existing in his day.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31548-7 - Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo

Ronald Williamson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Philo's life and work*

7

Philo the statesman. Philo became involved in political life on more than one occasion. He looks back, in the opening paragraphs of the third book of the *De Specialibus Legibus*, to the time when he had 'leisure for philosophy and for the contemplation of the universe and its contents' (*Spec. Leg.* III.1). But, he adds regretfully, he was 'plunged . . . in the ocean of civil cares' (*ibid.* 3). His most painful involvement in the political, or civil, affairs of the Jews in Alexandria came in AD 38 and in the years immediately afterwards. After Egypt became part of the Roman Empire, relationships between Jews, Greeks and Egyptians deteriorated to the point of overt hostility, and with the accession of Caligula in AD 37 anti-Jewish hostility – what we now mistakenly call anti-Semitism – developed into the first imperial pogrom, or a pogrom conducted in the name of Rome. The Emperor wished to be regarded as a god, and so regarded himself, commanding that images of himself as a god should be erected in all religious meeting-places in the Empire, including Alexandria. The Jews in Judaea, helped by an understanding governor (Petronius, the legate of Syria), escaped from the – to them – impossible demand to place an image of the Emperor, a statue in fact, in their holy Temple. But in Alexandria, according to Philo, Flaccus, the Roman prefect, was persuaded by the non-Jewish residents of the city to support their anti-Jewish feelings by representing the Jewish opposition to the placing of the emperor's image in their synagogue as a sign of political disloyalty to the Emperor. Flaccus did not, unfortunately for the Jews in Alexandria, handle the matter with the same good-will and understanding shown by Petronius in Judaea towards the Jews there. To secure their rights and to convince Caligula that opposition to images did not involve any political disloyalty, the Jews sent a deputation to Rome headed by Philo. Philo has written two works about the situation of the Jewish community in Alexandria at the time Flaccus was governor there and about the deputation's visit to Rome and its meeting with the Emperor: his *In Flaccum* and his *Legatio ad Gaium*.

In the *In Flaccum* Philo accuses Flaccus of proclaiming that the Jews in Alexandria were 'foreigners and exiles': that is, that they were deprived of civil rights. On the issue of the erection of statues and images of emperors in synagogues and the Temple the Jews had to wait until after the death of Caligula and the accession of Claudius. Only then was this particular requirement rescinded.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31548-7 - Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo

Ronald Williamson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The immediate reaction to the policy of Caligula and the actions of Flaccus was twofold. There was a diplomatic response: this took the form of the deputation to Rome, a five-man team of senior Jews with the intellectual Philo as its leader, whose aim was to secure, if possible, the restoration of the *status quo ante*. Philo's *Legatio ad Gaium* contains many interesting statements about that situation as it involved and affected the inhabitants of the Roman Empire. The Empire Caligula inherited from Tiberius is described as 'the sovereignty of the whole earth and sea, not gained by faction but established by law, with all parts, east, west, south, north, harmoniously adjusted, the Greek in full agreement with the barbarian, the civil with the military, to enjoy and participate in peace' (*Leg. Gaj.* 8). The Empire, Philo says, extended over the greater part of the inhabited world, 'the world, that is, which is bounded by the two rivers, the Euphrates and the Rhine, the one dis severing us from the Germans and all the more brutish nations, the Euphrates from the Parthians and from the Sarmatians and Scythians, races which are no less savage than the Germans' (*ibid.* 10), the 'us' indicating that Philo and his fellow Jews in Alexandria regarded themselves as citizens or subjects of the Empire of Rome. They were certainly not part of the world occupied by 'brutish nations' or savages. Within this great Empire, which extended 'from the rising to the setting sun both within the ocean and beyond it', if we are to judge from Philo's comments, the Jews shared in a society based on a rule of law, which extended freedom to its citizens, and in particular freedom to worship in their own way, so long as loyalty was given to the Empire and the Emperor. Philo's case to Caligula seems to have been based, to judge from his account in the *Legatio ad Gaium*, on the record of Rome in offering, above all, equality to all Roman citizens and subjects: 'In these days 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' (*ibid.* 13). People, until things began to go wrong under Caligula, enjoyed 'freedom from grief and fear' (*ibid.*). But, as Philo puts it elsewhere: 'Slavery to the free is a thing most intolerable. To avoid it sensible people are eager and ready to die and gladly run any risk in contending with those who menace them with enslavement. But an irresistible enemy is also something intolerable, and when both despotic power and hostility are combined in the same person,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31548-7 - Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo

Ronald Williamson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Philo's life and work*

9

who can resist one to whom his authority has given the power to act unjustly and his implacable enmity the disposition to show no consideration?' (*Praem. Poen.* 137). The description there of the hostile despot sounds very like Philo's delineation of Caligula, but when the confrontation came in AD 38 the Jews did resist. They did so first, however, by an appeal to the Empire's past record of good government and toleration. Philo says at one point, 'the best and greatest art is the art of government which causes the good deep soil in lowlands and highlands to be tilled, and all the seas to be safely navigated by merchant ships laden with cargoes to effect the exchange of goods which the countries in desire for fellowship render to each other, receiving those which they lack and sending in return those of which they carry a surplus' (*Leg. Gaj.* 47). But Rome had done more than that. The Roman Empire, according to Philo – and especially the Roman Empire in what he regards as the golden age of Augustus (an emperor whom Philo describes as one 'who in all the virtues transcended human nature' and who was justly entitled to 'the veneration which was received also by those who followed him' (*ibid.* 143)) – had its praiseworthy aspect. In a later passage, Augustus is called by Philo the 'best of the emperors' (*ibid.* 309). In his eulogy of Augustus Philo describes him as 'the Caesar . . . who healed the pestilences common to Greeks and barbarians, pestilences which, descending from the south and the east, coursed to the west and north, sowing the seeds of calamity over the places and waters which lay between' (*ibid.* 145). Then follows a lengthy description of the many benefits bestowed upon the citizens and subjects of the Empire by Augustus. Among the achievements of the great Emperor was his reclamation of 'every state to liberty' (*ibid.* 147) and his enlargement of 'Hellas' by 'many a new Hellas' and his hellenisation of 'the outside world in its most important regions' (*ibid.*). Augustus was annoyed, according to Philo, if anyone addressed him as a god – unlike Caligula, who expected it. Augustus also approved of the Jews, 'who he knew full well regarded all such things with horror' (*ibid.* 154). He knew from his experience of the Jewish community 'on the other side of the Tiber' in Rome that the Jews met in 'houses of prayer' each Sabbath and took collections to send to Jerusalem to pay for sacrifices in the Temple. But this did not make him deprive the Jews of their citizenship or take any violent measures against them or their synagogues. In fact, Philo says, 'so religiously did he

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31548-7 - Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo

Ronald Williamson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

respect our interests' that he 'adorned our Temple through the costliness of his dedications' and ordered sacrifices to be offered there at his own expense (*ibid.* 155–7).

However, under Caligula things took a sudden turn for the worse. He was a man 'beside himself with vanity, not only saying but thinking that he was God' (*ibid.* 162). The Egyptians, who, according to Philo, used the title of God to apply to 'the indigenous ibises and venomous snakes and many other ferocious wild beasts' (*ibid.* 163), did not hesitate to use it of the Emperor, who 'supposed that he really was regarded by the Alexandrians as a god, since they incessantly used plainly and without any indirection terms which other people commonly employ when speaking of God' (*ibid.* 164). Because of this, Caligula was persuaded that the attack on the Jewish synagogue by the Alexandrians, made out of hostility towards the Jews, was really prompted by a sincere regard for him as Emperor and a genuine reaction against what the Alexandrians regarded as Jewish irreverence towards him. Philo then describes the part played in stirring up hatred towards the Alexandrian Jews by a man called Helicon (*ibid.* 166ff.), and refers to a 'supplication' prepared by the Jews and sent to the Emperor by the hand of King Herod Agrippa I (grandson of Herod the Great, appointed ruler of Judaea in AD 41) and to an 'epitome' of it which the Jews decided to present to the Emperor.

While Philo and the other four members of the deputation were in Rome, news came to them of the imperial order for a 'colossal statue to be set up within the inner sanctuary' (*ibid.* 188). This was to be dedicated to Caligula 'under the name of Zeus'. This news naturally caused great consternation among the members of the deputation, who 'stood there speechless and powerless in a state of collapse with our hearts turned to water' (*ibid.* 189). The attitude of the Jews in the face of the threat to the sanctity of their holy Temple is shown by the words Philo attributes to the deputation: 'Well so be it, we will die and be no more, for the truly glorious death, met in defence of laws, might be called life' (*ibid.* 192). In other words, Roman rule could be endured, and indeed enjoyed, for the many benefits it conferred, so long as it did not involve any interference with the Jews' religious beliefs and practices and, in particular, any desecration of their synagogues or the Temple by images of 'divine' emperors. Philo's words reveal another aspect of Jewish belief which he obviously shared – confidence that God would not abandon his Chosen People: 'But let our souls retain