

PHILO ON PILATE: RHETORIC OR REALITY?

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Philo of Alexandria (ca. 30 BCE–50 CE) is remembered primarily for his allegorical hermeneutic, but two treatises, *Pro Flaccum* and *Legatio ad Gaium*, contain significant historical data on the Alexandrian Jewish community. The latter, *Legatio*, is also of interest to students of the Gospels because it contains a rare non-canonical reference to Pilate's political activity in sections 299–305, an offense against the Jews known as the “Golden Shields” episode. This pericope has seriously complicated the study of Jesus' trial, as noted in Harold Hoehner's 1992 contribution to the popular *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*:

The Gospels portray Pilate in the trial of Jesus as one who was weak and willing to comply with the wishes of the Jewish leaders against his own desires.

This profile of Pilate's character is quite different from that given by Philo and Josephus.¹

This “difference” has been particularly stressed by those who find anti-Semitic tendencies in the Gospels.²

It cannot be denied that Philo's Pilate is a stubborn and malicious figure, and it is not impossible that an event involving golden shields actually occurred. This “historical” material, however, is heavily filtered through the conventions of philosophical moral rhetoric. In context, the pericope is part of an appeal letter from the Jewish King Agrippa I to Gaius concerning the installation of the Temple image (276–329). Agrippa's letter is lengthy and lacks normal epistolary or apologetic

¹ Harold Hoehner, “Pontius Pilate,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. Joel Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992) 616.

² Notable here is Paul Winter's *On the Trial of Jesus* (rev. and ed. T. A. Burkill and Geza Vermes; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974) 72–83.

conventions. It is, in fact, a hortatory discourse on the way an ideal emperor would treat the Jews, encouraging Gaius to revise his policy.³

Philo needed such a letter at this point in his story. Whether the historical Agrippa wrote one is unknown, but the present version is certainly Philo's own composition. Josephus, although generally fascinated with Agrippa, Caligula, and the image episode, knows of no such letter and places Agrippa's appeal in the context of a banquet (*Ant.* 18.289–297, see *War* 2.203). In Philo's version, however, this letter resolves the image conflict, as Gaius is temporarily persuaded to abandon his plan. It further condemns any Roman violation of the Temple. The connection with Agrippa is not surprising. The hortatory letter was a "friendly" letter, meaning that it required a positive relationship between the communicants.⁴ Philo obviously did not enjoy such a relationship with Gaius, but Agrippa, both Jew and imperial friend, was socially competent to function in this capacity.

Hortatory epistles generally operated on the modeling principle: the reader was persuaded to pursue a particular course of action via confrontation with case studies. A person's behavior was presented to illustrate a particular virtue or vice, and positive or negative consequences were noted. Positive results would hopefully motivate the reader to pursue virtue.

Models were judged more effective when more familiar, particularly friends and family members. This approach fits the narrative context of Agrippa's letter, as it was deemed necessary to indict a despot indirectly.⁵ The modeling format is blatantly revealed at 321–322, where Agrippa summarizes the contents of the letter as "paradigms" (*paradeigmata*). Agrippa's letter may thus be outlined as a series of models from Gaius's family who have shown respect for the Jewish faith and cult: Agrippa (294–297), Gaius's maternal grandfather, who visited Herod the Great in Jerusalem and was so awed by the Temple and its cult that he left many

³ For further discussion of this genre, with citations, see Stanley Stowers, *Letter-Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, Library of Early Christianity (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 36–40, 91–125, and Abraham Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, Library of Early Christianity (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 79–85.

⁴ Ancient epistolary genres were based on the social relationship between the communicants. Because personal advice was not considered generally suitable for a letter (see Demetrius, *On Style* 223–235, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, LCL [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982]), hortatory epistles require the illusion of a very close relationship.

⁵ Thus Demetrius, *Style* 289–295, esp. 292. Within *Legatio*, Philo suggests that the downfall of Macro resulted from ignorance of this principle (52–61).

dedications; Tiberius (298–308), Gaius’s paternal grandfather, who respected the traditions connected with the Temple throughout his reign (298); Augustus (309–318), the virtuous and philosophical emperor (310, 318) and Gaius’s great-grandfather, who circulated an imperial fiat forbidding obstruction of Jewish offerings for the Jerusalem Temple and who instituted the daily imperial sacrifice at his own expense; Julia Augustus (319–320), Gaius’s great-grandmother, who adorned the Temple with golden vials, libation bowls, and other gifts, and whose education gave her wisdom beyond that typical of women to apprehend the invisible Jewish god.

Pontius Pilate is Philo’s only “bad” example, and the pericope is replete with negative editorial statements. Pilate sets up the shields “not for honor of Tiberius but for sake of grieving the populace”; he refuses the Jewish delegates because he is “by nature unyielding and of a stubborn harshness”; he fears an appeal to Tiberius because this might expose “the briberies, the assaults, the plunders” of which he was guilty. “Agrippa” makes no attempt to verify any of these accusations, and none of the charges are confirmed by Pilate’s actions. Brian McGing notes that Pilate’s crimes seem to come less from history and more from “a store of standard, highly rhetorical accusations and even vocabulary . . . [which Philo] applied with no great distinction between one Roman and another.”⁶ Pilate is also set in conflict with reliable characters. The first is Tiberius. Philo was sorely aware of the anti-Semitic policy which Tiberius allowed Sejanus to pursue, mentioning it specifically at *Legatio* 159–160 and Flaccus 1; nevertheless, the Tiberius of Agrippa’s letter, and of *Legatio* generally, is the constant defender of Jewish rights. Upon receipt of the Jewish appeal, “although not being easily angry,” Tiberius takes violent action, immediately demanding that the shields be removed. Pilate is also at odds with the Jewish delegation, four prominent citizens who act and speak as one. Their reliability is stressed in a number of ways: they “did not lack the dignity and fortune of kings”; their appeal is reasonable and involves only the continuation of rights “which had been kept through all ages unaltered even by kings and emperors”; they urge Pilate not to encourage sedition; they finally appeal to Tiberius only because they realize that Pilate acknowledges his error but stubbornly refuses to repent. Conflict with reliable characters in the story shows that Pilate does not follow imperial policy and is guilty of a specious act of anti-Semitism.

Agrippa’s models implicitly suggest two negative consequences of Gaius’s plan. First, this act will represent an impious violation of the religious customs of the Jews and the political customs of the Romans.

⁶ Brian McGing, “Pontius Pilate and the Sources,” *CBQ* 53 (1991) 433.

Second, it will encourage Jews to rebel (301). The latter warning becomes an explicit threat at 306–307. The function of the model is clear: Following Pilate’s bad example will reap a harvest of evil.

This analysis of the Pilate pericope fits the overall theme of *Legatio*, generally ignored by biblical historians. It seems likely that *Legatio* was written after 41 to instruct Claudius on the conduct of the “virtuous ruler” toward Jews.⁷ At this level Gaius becomes another bad example with a bad end. Claudius is motivated to shun the way of Gaius via the implicit threats that God will providentially defend the Jews and that the Jews will fight to defend God’s law. Schoedel has recently observed that *Legatio* follows the standard outline for Greco-Roman epideictic/invective as a story in which Gaius betrays his heritage and favorable estate. Thus “Philo manages to convey a good deal of historically significant information in the treatise, but it serves throughout to blacken the memory of Gaius.”⁸ *Legatio* may be “history,” but it is history in service of a rhetorical agenda.

There is no reason to doubt the basic historical veracity of the Pilate narrative, especially as it complements a similar event recorded by Josephus (*War* 2.169–174).⁹ It suggests that Pilate on one occasion miscalculated Jewish sensitivities by installing an honorarium to the emperor in Jerusalem. This was removed after a Jewish appeal to Tiberius. In connection with the Jesus trial, this episode confirms that hostility existed between Pilate and leading Jews. It also confirms the potential reality of the threatened report to Caesar at John 19:12–13. It should not, however, be used to suggest that Pilate was too willful or malicious in his dealings with the Jews to be so easily manipulated by them. This is so because all character traits revealed in the Philo pericope are filtered through a highly stylized context which certainly did not function in the capacity of preserving “history.”

⁷ See E. R. Goodenough, *The Politics of Philo Judaeus: Practice and Theory* (New Haven: Yale, 1938) 19–20. This suggests only that Claudius was the implied reader of *Legatio*, not necessarily the actual recipient.

⁸ William Schoedel, “Apologetic Literature and Ambassadorial Activities,” *HTR* 82 (1989) 67.

⁹ If the “standards” of Josephus are distinct from the “shields” of Philo, as suggested here, it seems illogical that Philo chooses the less serious offense, especially as the standards more closely resemble Gaius’s aspiration. While the standards would create a more callous Pilate, it would also represent an admission that *some* Roman official had very recently set a precedent for Gaius’s proposal.