

The first pogrom: Alexandria 38 CE

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The first pogrom documented in history took place in Alexandria in the year 38 CE. The only document describing this event is an eyewitness account by the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria. It is a problematic source because the concern of the author is largely theological and also because he fails to inform the reader about the causes of the violence. These causes must be sought in the combination of a growing tendency among Alexandrian intellectuals to depict Jews as criminal misanthropes, and the Jewish tendency to side with the Roman occupiers of Egypt.

Introduction

The term ‘pogrom’ is originally a Russian word meaning ‘destruction,’ but by the time it was taken up by other languages it had acquired the meaning of ‘organized and officially tolerated massacre and looting of Jews’, a phenomenon that could be witnessed at a regular basis in post-medieval Russia and that reached its apex in the 1930s and 1940s. The first such organized anti-Jewish uprising accompanied by looting and massacre we know of took place in Alexandria in the year 38 of the first century of the Common Era (CE). By ‘first’ I mean the first documented pogrom, for we do not know of earlier ones. Of course we do have the biblical story of the planned pogrom in the Persian empire in the book of *Esther*, and in the post-biblical Jewish book of *3 Maccabees* we also read of a planned pogrom, this time in Hellenistic Egypt. In both cases we are certainly in the realm of fiction, although it should be said that the Jewish authors of these stories do convey a strong sense of being in real peril due to threats on the part of hostile non-Jews. But it is with the pogrom in Alexandria in the year 38 CE that we are on solid historical ground for the first time.

The sources

But how solid is this historical ground? What are the sources at our disposal? Immediately the problems begin. The only source we have is a work, commonly

called *In Flaccum*, and written by the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who lived from about 25 BCE until 50 CE. He was not only a contemporary; he was also a witness of the events. At first sight that would seem to inspire confidence, but closer analysis of his book tends to undermine that confidence. I will return to that in a moment. First of all we must note that no one else makes mention of these dramatic events, apart from Philo's somewhat later contemporary, the Jewish historian Josephus, who tells us that in the 90s of the same century in the reign of the Emperor Gaius (better known as Caligula) 'after there had been civil strife between the Jewish and Greek inhabitants of Alexandria', both factions sent delegates to the Emperor in Rome (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.257). That is the sum of the information. Yet it is helpful. The casual, almost parenthetical way of mentioning the event tells us that on the one hand, Josephus either had little information about the uprising or did not find it worthwhile to waste any more words on it, but on the other hand he makes clear that what had happened was important enough to justify the sending of embassies to Rome by both parties, a fact that is amply confirmed elsewhere.

Philo himself wrote a complete book about it (*Legatio ad Gaium*) because he himself had acted as the leader of the Jewish delegation. So, Josephus does confirm the historicity of the event. But the relative neglect of it by him (only 11 words in Josephus as against more than 11,000 words in Philo) makes us wonder whether the large scale of the pogrom as suggested by Philo may have been somewhat exaggerated.

Another problem lies in the genre of Philo's treatise. It is not just a piece of historiography. The best way to demonstrate this is to quote the final sentence of the work. It ends as follows: 'Thus Flaccus [the protagonist] became an indubitable proof that the Jewish people had not been deprived of the help of God' (§191). So Philo has a message, and a theological message at that, which does not usually greatly contribute to the objectivity of historical writing. But let us first, before entering into a discussion of what he says, present a short summary of the contents of *In Flaccum*.

Flaccus was appointed Roman governor of Egypt and Alexandria by the Emperor Tiberius in 32 CE. In the first five years he showed great and exemplary ability in handling his responsibilities. That began to change, however, when Tiberius was succeeded on the throne by Caligula in 37 CE. That marked the onset of Flaccus' degeneration. He first became depressed and anxious because he had supported the rival candidate for this succession and he had also played an active role in the prosecution of Caligula's mother, Agrippina. At this juncture, the leaders of the anti-Jewish Greeks in Alexandria advised him to win the Emperor's favour by giving them his support in their planned actions against the Jews in the city; they knew Caligula hated the Jews. Bit by bit, Flaccus began to hurt the Jews, first by partiality as a judge in lawsuits, later by other measures. The climax came

when Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, visited Alexandria on his way from Rome to his new kingdom in Palestine that he had just received from his friend Caligula. It was the early summer of 38 CE. He was enthusiastically welcomed by the Jews but the Greeks reacted furiously and staged a mock ceremony, bringing a local lunatic into the gymnasium, greeting him with royal honours and hailing him 'our Lord'. Instead of punishing the instigators of this insult to a friend of the Emperor, Flaccus turned a blind eye. This encouraged the Greeks to go on and erect statues of the Emperor in Jewish synagogues: an act of desecration. This was followed by the issuing of a decree by Flaccus to the effect that Jews were, from now on, to be regarded as foreigners and aliens in the city. This opened the floodgates to massive plundering of Jewish houses and shops and rounding up the Jews in one quarter of the city, where already a great number of Jews lived, so that an overcrowded ghetto was created where the Jews had to live under terrible circumstances. Synagogues and houses were sacked and set on fire. Then followed a long series of events of unchecked savagery by the Greeks, when they caught Jews who strayed outside the ghetto in search of help. Jews were set upon by mobs, who patrolled the edge of the ghetto in search of their victims. They beat them up, or burned them to death, or bound them together and dragged them through the market square, kicking them and trampling on them until their bodies were mutilated beyond recognition. At the end of August, on Caligula's birthday, a large group of Jews were arrested, marched through the streets to the theatre where they were beaten and forced to eat pork. If they refused, they were finished off by way of a birthday celebration for the Emperor. Many Jews also died of disease that broke out because of the atrocious conditions in the ghetto. Some weeks later, a detachment of troops suddenly arrived from Rome, sent by Caligula, to arrest Flaccus. (We are now exactly halfway through the treatise. The first half was about the sufferings of the Jews, the second half consists of a description of the well-deserved sufferings of Flaccus. I will summarize that part more briefly.)

In Rome, Flaccus stood trial. Philo does not tell us what he was charged with, but we are told that the men who were mentioned earlier as leaders of the faction, which had urged him to secure his position by persecuting the Jews, now appeared as his accusers. Flaccus was condemned, his property confiscated, and he was sentenced for deportation to the miserable island of Andros in the Aegean Sea. We are then given an account of his journey to Andros and his plight after his arrival, interspersed with speeches, soliloquies and, yes, even prayers, by Flaccus in which he acknowledges that his punishment by God is just. In Rome, Caligula came to the conclusion that the fate of his many deportees was too mild a punishment and he ordered them to be executed, Flaccus at the top of the list. Soldiers landed on Andros and sought Flaccus who immediately realized what was going to happen to him. He fought back with the only result that 'his body received the same number of wounds as that of the Jews who had been unlawfully murdered

by him'. Then follows the final sentence that I have already quoted: 'Thus Flaccus became an indubitable proof that the Jewish people had not been deprived of the help of God.'

Philo's concern

As already mentioned, with that finale Philo wants to prove that God's providence is always at work for the benefit of his people. Apparently it was necessary to stress that idea. As Philo makes clear in the opening paragraphs of the sequel to *In Flaccum*, in the *Legatio ad Gaium (Embassy to Caligula)*, 'Some people have come to disbelieve that God exercises providence for mankind, and particularly for the nation of suppliants (i.e. Israel)' (*Legatio* 3). In other words, what Philo is attempting to do in *In Flaccum* (and also in the *Legatio*), is to convince those of his co-religionists who have begun to doubt that God can and will intervene on their behalf, that he has intervened and that therefore there is no reason for doubt or disbelief. His pastoral concern is apparent also from the fact that the whole of *in Flaccum* has been structured as a kind of diptych: the first half about the sufferings of the Jews is mirrored exactly in the second half, not only because both halves are of equal length but also because, as Philo has Flaccus himself confess, 'all the mad acts that I have committed against the Jews I have now suffered myself' (§170). So, Philo's work is a plea for divine justice, a theodicy and also, as such, as a German translator of the work has rightly called it, a *Trostschrift*, a piece of consolation literature. And this insight makes the question of whether such a work can be used for the reconstruction of historical events all the more urgent.

Some things have to be kept in mind here. Philo's book is not exceptional in so far as there is no historical document from antiquity that strives for completely detached or disinterested objectivity. It was part and parcel of the art of the historian in ancient times to convey a message, either moral or philosophical or religious or anti-religious, and the 'events' narrated were used for this purpose. In this connection, one can speak of 'rhetorical historiography' or of 'dramatic' or 'tragic' or 'empathic' or sometimes even 'pathetic historiography,' but there is no generally accepted designation for the genre. The difference between non-rhetorical or non-dramatic historiography and this genre is that, instead of the sober statement 'Six million Jews died in World War II', one writes, 'Millions of completely innocent Jewish men, women and children, became the victims of a brutal massacre by the most ruthless and criminal regime the world has ever witnessed'. The information in the second formulation is not false, but its phraseology is full of pathos and is intended to evoke emotions. That is to say, ancient history texts should not be thrown out as having no value for the historian, they were written by the same historians who were developing criteria for writing

reliable historiographical works, that is, trustworthy sources, eyewitness accounts, personal observation etc. But at the same time, it is clear that their use of rhetorical and dramatic techniques must make us pause and consider with how many grains of salt, or even downright scepticism, we should take their statements. And this is what makes so much of ancient historical writing such a striking mixture of fact and fiction, of legend and history.

It is clear that Philo could not have had any knowledge at all of the inner thoughts of Flaccus when he was in exile. So, the text of Flaccus's inner monologues, his utterances of despair, the prayers he said, all of them are pure invention by Philo. This means that a great part of what he relates in the second half of the diptych is simply unhistorical; only the bare framework of Flaccus' arrest, condemnation, exile and death at Andros are historical facts. But what about the first half? Here he writes about things that every one of his readers in the city could easily check. Many of them had been eyewitnesses and, moreover, when he published the work, the events were still fresh in their memory (Philo published his work not later than 40 or 41 CE). Philo would have made a fool of himself had he distorted the facts too drastically. He may have exaggerated (he was probably even expected to do so by his fellow Jews); he may have left out important information that was not conducive to his argument (which he probably did); but he could never have got away with a complete invention of 'events' that everyone knew, and could prove, had never taken place. What Philo presents in *In Flaccum* is dramatic or rhetorical historiography: it aims at evoking emotions, indignation and anger, pity and sadness, piety and awe for the divine, exactly as did so many of his contemporary fellow historians. In spite of this, we may, with due caution, use the first half of the work *In Flaccum* as a source for the history of a Jewish community in the Diaspora at the beginning of our era.

The problem

The problems, however, are still not over and what is perhaps the biggest problem is yet to be mentioned. Philo spells out in detail *what* happened in the clash between the Jews and non-Jews of Alexandria. However, he does not say even one word on the burning question of *why* all this happened. Why did the Greeks (and Egyptians) of that city hate the Jews so much? Why could they so easily draw the Roman governor into their way of thinking? In one paragraph, Philo mentions in passing that the Alexandrians had 'an ancient and in a sense innate enmity towards the Jews' (§29), but he fails to explain the source of this enmity. In his book, *Embassy to Caligula*, Philo does explain why the Emperor treated the Jewish delegation so badly: Among all the nations in the Roman Empire it was only the Jews who refused to acknowledge the divinity of Caligula. That they did not want to see him as a god made him furious. But in *In Flaccum* we are denied

any explanation. And here comparisons with later pogroms are misleading rather than helpful. In the pogroms of the 19th–20th centuries the driving forces behind the persecutions were always the anti-Jewish preaching of the Christian church or theories on the racial inferiority of the Jews, or a mixture of both. These factors played no role at all, however, in first century Alexandria for the simple reason that neither Christianity nor racist theories were in existence in that time. So even though the similarity between what happened in first century Alexandria and in 19th–20th century Europe is striking, the background must be completely different. But what is that background? It is *a priori* not plausible that there was only one cause or one reason for this outburst of anti-Jewish violence, it stands to reason that it must have been more complex. Since such outbursts took place nowhere else in the ancient world in the first half of the first century, it must surely have to do with something specifically Alexandrian. It is to this problem that we will now devote extra attention.

The backgrounds

I will first deal briefly with the possible political factors and thereafter with elements that are related to Jewish religious beliefs and non-Jewish reactions to them. To begin with the political factors, it should be borne in mind that the Jewish presence in Egypt was not something new in the first century. Despite biblical stories about the liberation of the Israelites from the oppressive Egyptians in the time of Moses (the 13th century BCE), Jews had already settled again in Egypt in biblical times. In the book of Jeremiah (ch. 43) we read that many Israelites took refuge in Egypt in the face of the Babylonian armies that overran Judea and Jerusalem at the beginning of the sixth century BCE. And the find of a rich trove of Aramaic letters from Elephantine, an island in the Nile near Aswan, proves that there existed a Jewish military settlement there from the sixth to the fourth centuries BCE, in that place as a kind of border police. It is interesting to see that, after a period of peaceful, coexistence these Jewish soldiers and their families came into serious conflict with their Egyptian neighbours in the fifth century. The Jews had their own temple at Elephantine, and so did the Egyptians, who had a shrine for Khnum, the ram-god who was creator and also the ‘Lord of the Nile’. In the eyes of the priests of Khnum, the Jews who sacrificed rams (Khnum’s sacred animal) on the altar of their temple committed deicide. In 410 BCE, a band of Egyptians vented their anger about this on the Jews by destroying their sanctuary at Elephantine, which was followed by the pillage of Jewish houses.

Less than a century later (in 331 BCE), Alexander the Great founded the great city in northern Egypt, which he named after himself. The Jews were there almost from the beginning as one of the groups of non-Egyptians who had been brought there by the Greek overlords, the Ptolemies. This was the beginning of a long

history, which was peaceful for some three centuries. The Jewish community grew and flourished there. After one generation they had already become so acculturated that their Hebrew Bible had to be translated into Greek (the so-called Septuagint); and thereafter an impressive Jewish literature in Greek came into being on a scale that one saw nowhere else. Alexandria had become the place par excellence of the Judaeo–Greek cultural synthesis. Around the turn of the era, several hundred thousand Jews lived in the city, many of who were highly educated.

This peaceful situation began to change, however, when the Romans took power in Egypt. When Julius Caesar tried to conquer Alexandria in 48/47 BCE he received support from the Jews who lived there, and this certainly did not help to make them popular with their Greek and Egyptian neighbours, who were notoriously anti-Roman and felt betrayed by the Jews. In the eyes of the Greeks, the Jews had furthered the decline of their city from a royal residence and head of a sovereign state to a mere provincial capital. Alexandria's glory was gone, and the Greeks felt humiliated by the Jews. After that, attacking the Jews became an indirect, and therefore relatively safe, way to attack the authority of Rome. Some decades later, the first Roman Emperor, Augustus, conquered Alexandria and confirmed all Jewish privileges, which he had engraved on a marble slab and set up in the city. He also introduced a much-hated poll tax from which only the Greek Alexandrians with full citizenship were exempted. This made the question of citizenship acute and that created much tension between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' of this privilege. The various Jewish sources that deal with this matter seem to be unanimous in asserting Jewish citizenship in Alexandria from the very beginning, but non-Jewish sources give a very different impression. The legal status of the Alexandrian Jews is a very complicated issue that has been hotly debated not only in antiquity but also in modern scholarly literature. I will mention only some of the most important data here, but as briefly as possible.

The Jews enjoyed a certain degree of self-government in Alexandria right from the beginning. This included a governing body (in Roman times this was a council of elders or gerousia) and the establishment of their own law courts. In this way, the Greek and Roman overlords enabled the Jews to live completely in accordance with their own ancestral traditions. So, they were privileged residents, not just foreigners with temporary domicile, and set well above the ordinary Egyptians, although still below the fully enfranchised Greeks. It was these privileges that Flaccus suddenly dissolved in 38 CE. It would seem that he had been instigated to do so by the Greek nationalists who were of the opinion that Jews did not deserve a higher status than the Egyptians. One of the reasons for this instigation may have been that, at the peak of the Jewish social pyramid, were a minority of families who had attained citizen status and therefore equal rights with the Greeks.¹ No doubt Philo's own family was one of these, for his brother Alexander

was one of the highest officials in the government of the city and his nephew even became Roman governor of Egypt. The status of full citizen was usually acquired by inheritance but this privilege could also be granted to individuals by kings, emperors or the citizen body. The Greeks felt that, in their city, only they and not the Jews were entitled to this desired status. And there is reason to believe that the Greek delegation that went to Caligula after the events of 38 CE challenged the privileges of Alexandrian Jewish citizens, in line with the long-standing uneasiness in Alexandria about the ‘infiltration’ of unworthy individuals into the citizen body. In a telling papyrus from about 20 BCE, an Alexandrian official expresses the wish of his Greek fellow citizens ‘to take care that the *pure* citizen body of Alexandria is not corrupted by men who are uncultured and uneducated’ (*Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* no. 150.5–6), i.e. by non-Greeks. Jews are not mentioned explicitly here, but there can be little doubt that they were in the mind of the writer. The document makes clear that non-Greeks tried to be enrolled as citizens because this was the only way to avoid the heavy poll-tax that the Romans levied. As we never hear of Egyptians trying to do this, it is most probably the Jews that the Greeks tried to keep outside their prestigious body politic. When the leader of the Greek delegation complains to Caligula, ‘Why is it that, if they are citizens, they do not worship the same gods as the Alexandrians?’ (Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 2.65), it is clear that (1) there were Jewish citizens of Alexandria, (2) they had not abandoned their traditional Jewish faith, and (3) for that very reason they were hated by the Greeks, because citizenship normally involved participation in religious activities, in civic cults, and this was forbidden to the Jews as being idolatrous. Whatever exemptions or compromises were worked out here were clearly resented by Alexandrians who denied that one could uphold Judaeian ethnic customs while also enjoying the status of Alexandrian citizenship. So the crisis of 38 CE concerned both the immediate and general loss of the Jews’ communal privileges in Alexandria and the long – standing dispute about Jews entering the citizen class. In the year 41 CE, Caligula’s successor, the Emperor Claudius, writes a long letter to the Alexandrians (*Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* no. 153) in order to settle the matter. He urges the Alexandrians to show more tolerance towards the Jews, and he upholds the social and ancestral rights of the Jewish community. His language is firm: ‘Unless you stop this destructive and obstinate mutual enmity, I shall be forced to show what a benevolent ruler can be when he is turned to righteous indignation’ (lines 79–81). But at the same time he states that Jews cannot claim citizenship in Alexandria, ‘a city which is not their own’ (line 95). So, the Jewish ancestral customs and probably also their limited autonomy were restored to them, but the door to citizenship was slammed firmly in the faces of the few who had achieved, or aspired to, this status (see Ref. 1, pp. 70–71).

Greek and Roman anti-Semitism

Why were the Greeks so adamantly opposed to ‘contamination’ of their body politic by the Jews? From where did this hatred come in Alexandria where anti-Jewish slander, as Philo says, was nurtured and taught to everyone right from the cradle (*Legatio* 170)?

Although it is undeniable that in Greek and Roman sources from the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE we encounter a remarkable degree of sympathy for Judaism on the part of pagan writers (pagan = non-Jewish + non-Christian), it is also undeniable that in the same period other pagan writers demonstrate a strong animosity towards the Jews. For lack of a better term I will call it anti-Semitism, in spite of its anachronism (others would prefer ‘Judaeophobia’, but that is not yet a current term).

Let me begin by giving you a striking example of this phenomenon. Some 70 years after the pogrom, in the first decade of the 2nd century CE, the famous Roman historian Tacitus, who has the reputation of being well-informed, writes the following about the Jewish people (*Histories* 5.3–5):

Most writers agree that once a disease, which horribly disfigured the body, broke out over Egypt. King Boechoris, seeking a remedy, consulted the oracle of Hammon, and was bidden to cleanse his realm, and to convey into some foreign land this people [the Jews] that was detested by the gods. The people, who had been collected after diligent search, found themselves left in a desert and sat for the most part in a stupor of grief, till one of the exiles, Moses by name, warned them not to look for any relief from God or man, forsaken as they were of both, but to trust to themselves, taking for their heaven-sent leader that man who should first help them to be relieved of their present misery. They agreed, and in utter ignorance began to advance at random. Nothing, however, distressed them so much as the scarcity of water, and they had sunk ready to perish in all directions over the plain, when a herd of wild asses was seen to retire from their pasture to a rock shaded by trees. Moses followed them, and, guided by the appearance of a grassy spot, discovered an abundant spring of water. This furnished relief. After a continuous journey for six days, on the seventh they possessed themselves of a country, from which they expelled the inhabitants, and in which they founded a city and a temple.

Moses, wishing to secure for the future his authority over the nation, gave them a novel form of worship, opposed to all that is practised by other men. Things sacred with us, have no sanctity with them, while they allow what is forbidden with us. In their holy place they have consecrated an image of the animal by whose guidance they found deliverance from their long and thirsty wanderings. They slay the ram, seemingly in derision of Hammon, and they sacrifice the ox, because the Egyptians worship it as Apis. They abstain from swine’s flesh, in consideration of what they suffered when they were infected by the leprosy to which this animal is liable. (...) We are told that the rest of the seventh day was adopted, because this day brought with it a termination of their toils; after a

while the charm of indolence beguiled them into giving up the seventh year also to inaction. (...) All their other customs, which are at once perverse and disgusting, owe their strength to their very badness. The most degraded out of other nations, scorning their national beliefs, brought to them their contributions and presents. This augmented the wealth of the Jews, as also did the fact, that among themselves they are inflexibly honest and ever ready to show compassion, though they regard the rest of mankind with all the hatred of enemies.

They sit apart at meals, they sleep apart, and though, as a nation, they are singularly prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women; among themselves nothing is unlawful. Circumcision was adopted by them as a mark of difference from other men. Those who come over to their religion adopt that practice, and have this lesson first instilled into them: to despise all gods, to disown their country, and set at naught, parents, children, and brethren.

What we see in this spiteful caricature is a culmination of 400 years of anti-Jewish propaganda, which we find in many written sources from the preceding centuries. What is so striking about this literature is that not only are the first instances known to us of Alexandrian provenance, but that also many of the other instances derive from this city. Let us pass some of them briefly in review.

The first Egyptian intellectual to write in Greek was the Alexandrian priest Manetho, who lived in the early 3rd century BCE. In his great work on Egyptian history (see Ref. 2, nos. 19–21), he tells about pharaoh Amenophis' wish to see the gods — a wish, so he was told, that could be fulfilled only if he purified the whole land of lepers and other polluted persons. He collected some 80,000 such people and sent them to the quarries. Then the polluted people joined forces with the lepers, convened in the city of Avaris, and revolted under the leadership of a priest called Osarsiph, who at the end Manetho says to be identical with Moses. This priest made it a law that they should neither worship the gods nor refrain from killing any of the animals regarded as sacred in Egypt but that they should sacrifice and consume all alike, and that they should have contact with nobody except those of their own confederacy. He decreed a great number of laws that were fully opposed to Egyptian custom and then asked the inhabitants of Jerusalem, old enemies of the Egyptians, to join them in an attack on Egypt. Not only did they set villages and towns on fire, pillaging the temples and mutilating images of the gods without restraint, but they also used the sanctuaries as kitchens to roast the sacred animals that the Egyptians worshipped. They even compelled the Egyptian religious officials to sacrifice their own sacred animals and afterwards cast the officials naked out of the temple. So this brutal regime was characterized by *misanthropy* and by hatred of the indigenous Egyptian religion. But fortunately, after some time, this regime of terror was expelled and the

criminals settled in Syria (Palestine). Such, says this Alexandrian priest, were the origins of the Jewish people. Although there can be no doubt that older Egyptian stories dealing originally with the reigns of terror by Semitic peoples such as the Hyksos have been applied here by Manetho only secondarily to the Jews, it is clear that what we have here is an anti-Jewish version of the biblical story of the exodus from Egypt. Here is no story of liberation from Egyptian oppression by God; on the contrary, it was the gods who commanded that these not only polluted but also oppressive persons of extreme impiety be expelled from their territory. This is a motif that will recur from this time on in all sorts of variations, as we have already seen in Tacitus.

It was probably in the 2nd, or perhaps in the 1st century BCE, that the Graeco-Egyptian author Lysimachus wrote his work, *Aegyptiaka*. The work is now lost but the Jewish historian Josephus quotes him as saying (Ref. 2, no. 158) that pharaoh Bokchoris ordered that Egypt be purged of lepers as well as of impure and impious people; the former should be killed by drowning, the latter should be driven into the desert. These gathered around a certain Moses who instructed them to show goodwill to nobody, to offer not the best but always the worst advice, and to overthrow any temples and altars of the gods they found. Thereupon, these impure and impious people maltreated the population of Egypt and plundered and set fire to the temples wherever they came until they reached the country now called Judaea, where they settled and built Jerusalem. Different than Manetho, 'Lysimachus is unambiguous as to who the impure people are. We learn that they are Jews not only at the end of the story when they reach Judea; rather, we are told from the very outset that the Jewish people were afflicted with leprosy, scurvy, and other maladies' (Ref. 3, p. 28). Lysimachus remodels the motifs of impiety and misanthropy in a very negative way: the Jews deliberately destroy all the temples of other peoples and they are hostile to all humankind, intentionally offering everyone the worst advice.

Another version, probably Alexandrian, of the story of the Egyptian origin of the Jews is also related by the Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily in the first century BCE. He tells us (Ref. 2, no. 63) that when in 135 BCE King Antiochus VII tried to capture Jerusalem, his advisers said to him that he should take the city by storm and wipe out the nation of the Jews completely, since they alone of all nations avoided dealings with any other people. They also pointed out that the ancestors of the Jews had been driven out of Egypt as men who were impious and detested by the gods. For, by way of purging the country, all persons who had white and leprous marks on their bodies had been assembled and driven across the border as being under a curse. The refugees had occupied the territory around Jerusalem and had organized the nation of the Jews. They had made hatred of humankind into a tradition and, on this account, had introduced utterly outlandish laws: neither to break bread with any other people nor to show them any goodwill at all. The

most striking feature in this account is that the Jews had adopted hatred of humankind and atheism as a permanent tradition. Impiety and misanthropy have now become stock elements in anti-Jewish propaganda of Alexandria.

We see that again in the first century CE when Apion, a philologist of Egyptian origin, published his work on the history of Egypt. His attacks on the Jewish people are so vehement and influential that several decades after his death the Jewish historian Josephus still finds it necessary to devote a whole work to the refutation of the slanders of this arch – anti-Semite, his *Contra Apionem*. Apart from the elements that have become familiar by now he adds the following new detail that the Jews, after leaving Egypt, marched for six days and then ‘developed tumours in the groin, and that was why, after safely reaching the country now called Judaea, they rested on the seventh day, and called that day *sabbaton*, preserving the Egyptian terminology; for disease of the groin is called *sabbatosis* in Egyptian’ (Ref. 2, no. 165). But this funny etymological speculation is innocent as compared to what he adds later, namely that the Seleucid King Antiochus IV entered the Jerusalem temple and:

he found there a couch on which a man was reclining, with a table before him laden with a banquet of fish of the sea, beasts of the earth, and birds of the air, at which the poor man was gazing in stupefaction. The king’s entry was instantly hailed by him with adoration, as about to procure him profound relief. Falling at the king’s knees, he stretched out his right hand and implored him to set him free. The king reassured him and asked him to tell him who he was, why he was living there, what was the meaning of his abundant fare. Thereupon, with sighs and tears, the man told in a pitiful tone the tale of his distress. He said that he was a Greek and that while travelling around in this province in order to make his living, he was suddenly kidnapped by foreigners and brought to this temple, and shut up there. He was seen by nobody, but was fattened on feasts of the most lavish description. At first such unexpected advantages seemed to him a pleasure, but after a while they made him suspicious, and finally astonished. At last he inquired of the servants that came to him and was informed by them that it was in order to fulfil a law of the Jews, which they were forbidden to tell him, that he was being fattened. They did the same at a fixed time every year: they used to catch a Greek foreigner, fatten him up for a year, and then lead him to a certain wood, kill him, sacrifice his body with their customary ritual, and partake of his flesh. While immolating the Greek, they swore an oath of hostility to the Greeks. (Ref. 2, no. 171)

We should keep in mind that it was this man, Apion, who during the reign of Caligula was not only honoured by the city of Alexandria with a grant of citizenship — Josephus tells that Apion congratulated the city on that occasion for having so great a man as he as a citizen (*Contra Apionem* 2.135) — but that the city also asked him to act as leader of the Alexandrian delegation to Rome in the conflict between Greeks and Jews that divided the city in 38 CE. If this man

was so prestigious that the Greeks of Alexandria decided to confer full citizenship upon him, it should surprise no one that his incredible accusation of Jewish cannibalism (eating a Greek at that!) was taken seriously and believed by these Greeks. It would certainly have sown a lot of hatred.

Apion's ridiculing remark about the Sabbath (derived from an Egyptian word for groin disease) brings us to the following element: the accusations of Jewish laziness. Here again we encounter a malevolent interpretation of a Jewish custom. The Sabbath is interpreted as a sign of Jewish idleness and indolence by several ancient authors. To mention only one instance, the Roman philosopher Seneca, a contemporary of Philo, says that the Jewish observance of the Sabbath is very inexpedient since by introducing one day of rest in every seven they lose in idleness a seventh of their life (Ref. 2, no. 186). This is echoed by Tacitus, as we have seen, when he remarks that the pleasures of indolence on the Sabbath induced the Jews to giving up the seventh year as well to inaction, a clear reference to the so-called sabbatical year (*Histories* 5.4). His contemporary, the Greek philosopher Plutarch, lists keeping of the Sabbath among the stupid forms of barbarian superstition that have been adopted even by some Greeks (Ref. 2, no. 255). Circumcision is a Jewish custom that forms an easy target for ridicule. To the Jews it was the most important external sign of the covenant between God and Israel, but to the Greeks and Romans it was just a discreditable mutilation. They regarded a circumcised penis as obscene and ugly, and as a sign of lewdness. Although several ancient authors still show some awareness of the fact that circumcision is of Egyptian origin, many others regard it as a typically Jewish custom, and their perception of it varies from neutrality to irony to derision and outspoken hostility. We have already seen how Tacitus makes a connection between circumcision and Jewish separatism, which he interprets as misanthropy. They chose it deliberately, he says, to distinguish themselves from other people and to express their hate and enmity against others (*Histories* 5.5.1). Other authors speak about circumcision with all kinds of sexual innuendo, the implication often being that Jewish men are well-endowed and sexually extremely active and very potent. The association of circumcision with lechery is not uncommon, but for reasons of decency I will refrain from quoting texts here (see Ref. 3, pp. 93–105).

Let me finally add some remarks on what Graeco-Roman authors say about the Jewish belief in one god. What struck them more than anything else is that the Jewish God is an – iconic, which is contrary to all the customs of the Greeks and Romans. And since this deity without image is invisible, the conclusion that is often drawn is that the Jews do not recognize any god at all and are atheists. Since the Jews differ from all other peoples in this respect, it is said that this contributes to their xenophobic lifestyle (see Ref. 3, pp. 34–35). More than one ancient author, therefore, condemns the Jews as both atheists and misanthropes. Others comment upon the arrogance that goes hand in hand with the exclusiveness of Jewish

monotheism (Ref. 2, no. 375). The separatism that this entails is clearly worded by the third century CE historian Cassius Dio, when he says that the Jews are distinguished from the rest of mankind in practically every detail of life, but especially by the fact that they do not honour any of the usual gods, but show extreme reverence for only one particular divinity (*Historia Romana* 37.17.1, Ref. 2, no. 406). Others, however, assert that the Jews worship an ass, a motif that had its origin in Alexandria, where stories about a statue of a pack-ass in the Jerusalem temple circulated (see Mnaseas in Ref. 2, no. 28). Here one should bear in mind that this animal was associated with the malicious Egyptian deity Seth (in Greek Typhon), an evil power who embodies the foreign rulers who have to be expelled from Egypt. In certain Egyptian circles, one tried to connect the origin of the Jews with Seth–Typhon, feared and despised in both Greek and Egyptian mythology (see Ref. 3, p. 57). It is no coincidence that Manetho, the earliest Alexandrian anti-Semitic author we know of, writes that the expelled unclean and leprous persons joined forces in the city of Avaris, and adds that ‘according to religious tradition this city was from earliest times dedicated to Typhon’ (Ref. 2, no. 21). And his later fellow countryman, Apion, states that in the innermost sanctuary of the Jerusalem temple the Jews kept an ass’s head, which they worshipped with the greatest reverence, thus characterizing them as followers of this power of evil (Ref. 2, no. 170). How dangerous such a crude anti-Jewish statement could be can be gauged from the fact that Josephus found it necessary to write a lengthy refutation (*Contra Apionem*, 2.81–88).

Now I must immediately add that I have shown here only one side of the coin. It would have been equally possible to present you with a completely opposite picture. We have an abundance of material in which Graeco-Roman authors (but not from Alexandria!) express a widely very different view of the Jews. Moses is depicted by these authors as a wise lawgiver and his followers as a people of philosophers, who have one of the most exalted forms of spiritual worship. Some authors say the Jews set an example that should be followed by other nations. And from other sources we know that Judaism exerted a great fascination on many gentiles in the ancient world. We do not know of many proselytes, but we do hear of large numbers of gentiles who sympathized with Judaism and gathered on the fringes of many a synagogue in the Jewish Diaspora. They came to the services, studied the Torah, and kept some of the biblical commandments, although they did not usually become members of the community. These sympathizers, often dubbed ‘godfearers’ in the ancient sources, sometimes made substantial contributions to the Jewish communities, for instance by financing buildings such as synagogues. So, the picture I have sketched is not the whole picture. But for our present purpose it is important to notice that the black side was there and that it had, from the very beginning, a strong Alexandrian stamp.

What happened in Alexandria in the, roughly, three centuries preceding the

pogrom was a complex process. It would be unwise to speak in the simplifying terms of a monocausal model. First, there was the long-standing tradition of Alexandrian anti-Semitism. We do not know whether the Graeco-Alexandrians were incited to produce their anti-Jewish versions of the exodus story because they read the first Greek translation of the Jewish Bible and reacted to the anti-Egyptian version of the story it contained, or rather through hearsay. Whatever the case, the bitter antagonism that these anti-Jewish versions speak of from the very beginning lingers on from the start of the Hellenistic period until far into the Roman period. On top of that come the many stories of Jewish separatism and hatred of Egyptian civilization, inevitably widened to hatred of mankind in general, until it reached its bizarre final stage with the accusation of an annual cannibalistic ritual in which a Greek was sacrificed and eaten in Jerusalem (of course with the implication that it is the Jewish God who demands the sacrifice of foreigners). This unabated anti-Jewish propaganda cannot have failed to have a dramatic effect. As we can witness even today, in a continual and unabashed stream of anti-Jewish propaganda — however full of obvious lies and slander it may be (including the nonsense from the so-called *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*) — hatred is very easily sown. But it needs a trigger to set it off. And triggers were not lacking in Alexandria. The explosive mixture of verbal anti-Semitism and political reality came into being with the Roman conquest of the Near East in the first century BCE. The first factor was that the Alexandrian Jews sided with the Romans, sensing that they would gain privileges by that, which was true, but the price was high. The semi-autonomous status they received in Alexandria from the Romans gave rise to an enormous resentment among the Greeks, who felt that their city had lost its status, whereas the Jewish community had won prestige. This exacerbated the antagonism. The second trigger, which actually put the spark to the tinder, was the visit of the Jewish puppet-king Agrippa to Alexandria with a pompous show of his armed bodyguard. This was too much for the frustrated Greek nationalists. In their midst were a people who they regarded as foreigners, even as barbarians; these were people who had no regards for the traditional gods of the civilized world whatsoever, for they practised an arrogant exclusivist religion; these unbearable separatists were not only full of hatred of humankind in general but, what was even worse, every year they fattened up a human person, a Greek at that, to be slaughtered in a cruel cannibalistic ritual. When this scum of the world had the affront to hail a king of their own, while the Greeks had not even a modicum of self-rule, a line had been crossed and their fury could no longer be contained. When they realized that the Roman governor, who was supposed to keep them in check, was himself in deep trouble because of the ascension of Caligula, they grabbed their chance. They blackmailed the governor into connivance and vented their anger by attacking the Jews.

L'histoire se répète, not always, but as far as outbursts of hatred against the Jews are concerned, it *does* always, right up until the present day. Apparently motives do not really matter. Whether it is monotheism, or Sabbath observance, or circumcision, or kosher food, or god-killing (whether the god is the ram of Khnum or Jesus Christ), or economic considerations, or racial theories, the Jews always seem to be the ultimate *other*, the dangerous *other*, the 'stranger' who threatens us by his or her difference. A common response to such a deeply felt threat is an armed attack on those 'others' in order to reduce the tensions caused by the 'phobic mystification of the outgroup', by the turning of their Jewish otherness into 'a monstrous conspiracy against humankind and the values shared by all civilized human beings' (Ref. 3, pp. 206, 210). We witnessed the zenith — or should one say the nadir? — of this sad history of hatred just over half a century ago. But the fact that this history goes as far back in time as I have demonstrated here does not make one optimistic about the future.

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