

## Idol in the Temple ...

### Commentary for July 1, 2009 — Began with Idols in Synagogues

The ASK article this month by Dr. Ernest L. Martin is titled “The Importance of First Century History.” It tells the story of a major crisis in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD that directly involved the Temple in Jerusalem, the state of Judea, and all Jewish people.

This month’s article is longer than usual. This was necessary include all the details that Dr. Martin presented and for him to explain the importance these events had on the thinking of the early Christian *ekklesia*. Begin your reading with the “[July 2009 Newsletter](#).” It has additional information for you to consider.

### Origins of One Crisis ...

The crisis in Dr. Martin’s article had its origins in the actions of a Roman Prefect of Alexandria named Flaccus. This account is told by the Jewish philosopher and historian named Philo, who lived in Alexandria while Flaccus was Prefect (32–38 AD). Alexandria was one of the more populous and important cities in the Empire, probably larger than the capital of Rome. Its large Jewish population:

**“from the Catabathmos on the side of Libya to the boundaries of Ethiopia were not less than a million of men.”**

• *Philo, Flaccus 1:43*

In 37 AD, Flaccus went through an unaccountable change in his administrative and judicial temperament. According to Philo, Flaccus began persecuting the Jews in Alexandria, siding with Gentiles who wished to harm Jews because their ways were contrary to all men.<sup>1</sup>

**“[Flaccus’] subjects must quickly become disobedient, especially those who are naturally, at every trivial or common occurrence, inclined to show insubordination, and, among people of such a disposition, the Egyptian nation is pre-eminent, being constantly in the habit of exiting seditions from very small sparks.”**

• *Flaccus 1:17*

**“Being at the same time filled with an ancient and what I may in a manner call an innate enmity towards the Jews, ...”**

• *Flaccus 1:29*

Flaccus began to act hatefully against Jews and took the side of their enemies in all instances. Flaccus came up with an idea to show the Jewish contrary nature compared with other peoples, but also to prove that the Jews did not respect the authority of Imperial Rome or Caesar. He ordered that all places of worship in Alexandria should contain an image of Caesar. Flaccus knew that the Jews would reject this command and show their rebellious nature.

He ordered that an image of Caesar be put in all Jewish Synagogues, and he **“permitted the mob to proceed with the erection of the statues”** (*Flaccus* 1:41–43). Many synagogues were destroyed (*Flaccus* 1:45). To righteous Jews this was a terrible offense to their religion. The Jews had a unique relationship with Rome. They maintained their Temple and traditions without interference from the time of Julius Caesar to 37 AD when Flaccus broke that policy.

---

1. See Esther 3:8. For early 1st century Gentile views and false accusations towards Jews see Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:14–15. The entire story of this Alexandria crisis is in [Philo, Against Flaccus](#).

What Philo describes was a situation similar to that told in the Book of Esther, Flaccus was **“allowing any one who was inclined to proceed to exterminate the Jews as prisoners of war”** (*Flaccus* 1:54). Jews were forced to eat swine flesh (*Flaccus* 1:96). Jewish houses were attacked, looted, burned, and entire families murdered. Thousands were tortured and killed (*Flaccus* 1:64–73). In all this and in spite of their great numbers, Philo says that the Jews did not fight back. News of this insult to Jews in Alexandria was spread to Jews everywhere:

**“And there was reason to fear lest all the populace in every country, taking what was done in Egypt as a model and as an excuse, might insult those Jews who were their fellow citizens, by introducing new regulations with respect to their synagogues and their national customs.”**

• *Flaccus 1:47*

The Jews did not fight back but appealed to Flaccus and every Roman official in Alexandria. They argued that they could not show piety, loyalty, and gratitude to Caesar in their synagogues because of ritual pollution of the image/idol.

**“... the report about the destruction of the synagogues, which took its rise in Alexandria would be immediately spread over all the districts of Egypt, and would extend from that country to the east and to the oriental nations, and from the borders of the land in the other direction, and from the Mareotic district which is the frontier of Libya, towards the setting of the sun and the western nations. For no one country can contain the whole Jewish nation, by reason of its populousness.”**

• *Flaccus 1:45*

Flaccus could not be deterred from his policy and hatred toward the Jews of Alexandria. Then he made mistakes. A particular life-long friend of Emperor Caligula, King Herod Agrippa I (later mentioned in Acts chapter 12), was traveling to Judea by ship and stopped off at Alexandria. The Jews told Agrippa what was happening to them: murder, rapine, offense to Jewish religious practices. Flaccus first offended Agrippa's office as a King appointed by Caligula, and second, he then personally offended Agrippa because he was a Jew. King Agrippa told his good friend Caligula (*Flaccus* 1:103). Caligula had Flaccus removed and executed.

### **... Seeds of a Future Crisis**

Flaccus' actions offended Caligula's imperial dignity, and threatened the peace in Alexandria and the political stability of all the Jews in the Roman Empire. Flaccus' hatred towards the Jews seems to have planted a seed in Caligula's mind that took root when he went mad. Flaccus' demand that Caesar's statue be put in the synagogues of Alexandria was later understood differently by Caligula. After madness came upon him Caligula began to wonder, why the Jews did not want his statue in their synagogues. Were they being truly disloyal?

In 37 AD the Jews endured persecution with peaceful resistance. A few years later in 40–41 AD the Jews were again peaceful when provoked with the threat of Caligula's statue being placed in the Temple in Jerusalem. Caligula commanded what must have seemed to be a direct fulfillment of prophecy, threatening every Jew and early Christian of the time. This was the period described in “The Importance of First Century History.” Later, horrific violence took place in 66 AD in the Jewish rebellion against Rome. Peace was no longer the response.

In our future we will see similar “first peaceful, then violent” scenarios playing out as various peoples in the world confront evil on a national and international level. In the Middle East nations will be ripped apart and new nations will be formed with new re-drawn boundaries, changed demographics, and a heightened sense of purpose in the world. Just as God worked in the 1st century AD to achieve His goals then, so too in our future we will see His will and His purposes fulfilled as they are in heaven.

David Sielaff  
[david@askelm.com](mailto:david@askelm.com)