

Tiberius Iulius Alexander

Jacob L Wright
Emory University
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When Vespasian left the siege of Jerusalem to return to Rome as Emperor, he left behind, to assist his inexperienced son Titus, a powerful political figure and able military commander: Tiberius Iulius Alexander. The career of Tiberius illustrates the advantages of dwelling simultaneously in two worlds: the Roman and the Jewish.

Tiberius was a highborn Egyptian Jew. His father, Alexander, came from the Fayum region, where his ancestors for generations had served Hellenistic rulers. The family had received Roman citizenship from Julius Caesar (or perhaps Augustus). Alexander's older brother was the Jewish philosopher Philo. Alexander himself was associated with the most important figures in the city, assisting Antonia the Younger (mother of the Emperor Claudius) as *epitropos*. He served as Alabarch, and was known as "Alexander the Alabarch." He was well connected in Rome and Jerusalem. From his great wealth, he made generous donations (for example, to overlay nine Temple gates with gold and silver).

The younger brother of Tiberius, Marcus Julius, was a successful businessman like his father Alexander. He received the hand of the princess Berenice (Berenike), daughter of King Agrippa I of Judah. Marcus died soon thereafter, and Berenice went on to marry two other men; her last husband, Polemon II, King of Cilicia, even had himself circumcised for her, though she deserted him soon thereafter. She eventually attracted the attention of Titus, eleven years her junior, after his victories in Galilee. Though she became his fiancée and later accompanied him to Rome, the populace did not accept her, and Titus sent her away – twice.

Titus probably kept Tiberius as an advisor after the Judea campaign. A papyrus dated after 70 calls him *praefectus Praetoria*, which as most agree, means that Vespasian or Titus appointed him Commander of the Praetorian Guard. As such, he was one of the most powerful figures in the Roman Empire; the highest-ranking Jew in all antiquity. The name and titles of Tiberius were apparently inscribed on triumphal statues at the Forum. As the British papyrologist E G Turner wrote of the evidence of Tiberius's commemoration in Rome, "Such hobnobbing with the *triumphales* must surely mean that [Tiberius] had his share of *ornamenta triumphalia* in the triumph of AD 71, when the Table of the Shewbread and the Seven-Branched Candlestick [from the Jerusalem Temple] were paraded through the streets of Rome" (p63). Juvenal's first *Satire*, composed decades after the death of Tiberius, probably refers to this inscription. In keeping with his xenophobia, the Roman poet invites those searching for afternoon amusement in Rome to deface it (1:129-131).

That Tiberius does not figure even more prominently in Roman history may be explained, with Turner, on the assumption that “In Roman eyes, he united the triple handicap of being an Egyptian, an Alexandrian Greek, and a Jew; as brother of a former husband of Berenice and a friend of Agrippa, he may have shared the responsibility, and can scarcely have avoided the odium, popularly attached to the fancied promoters of the liaison between a Titus in his thirties and the Jewish princess in her middle fifties” (p64). Nevertheless, the son of Tiberius may be mentioned in a couple of sources (Arval Acts and Cassius Dio), and if so, he occupied the senatorial rank of praetorian legate.

Tiberius himself could look back upon a remarkable career as a member of the equestrian order. He began in c42 as Epistrategos of the Thebiad in Egypt. Four years later, he became Procurator of Judea. During his short tenure in office, he effectively suppressed the insurrection led by Jewish nationalists. His allegiance to the Roman Empire, expressed in his willingness to take decisive punitive actions even against Jews, anticipates his service to Rome during the wars with Judah some two decades later. In the meantime, he rose to the highest rank in the army. The details of his career during these years are largely unknown. An inscription from Tyre refers to him as procurator provinciae Syriae. For the year 63, a passage from the Annals of Tacitus commemorates the participation of this *inlustris eques Romanus* (“distinguished Roman knight:”) and *minister bello* (“war commissioner”) in a previous mission to Parthia as one of the leading officers in the eastern army commanded by Corbulo in Armenia (Annals 15:28).

In 66, during the outbreak of the First Jewish-Roman War in Judea and the ensuing unrest between Jewish and Greek populations in Egypt, Emperor Nero appointed him to the high office of Prefect of Egypt. Several sources witness to his relatively mild and effective rule. For example, in 68, he issued an edict – inscribed *inter alia* on the walls of the Temple of Hibis in the el-Khargeh Oasis – as an act of benevolence to win the favor of the new Emperor Galba and of the local populace. One statement reflects the political competition in Alexandria and Egypt: “Ever since I set foot in this city I have been lobbied by pressure groups . . .” Documents from much later periods – one was written no less than 130 years after his rule – cite his decisions as distinguished precedents. Especially noteworthy is that he seems to have championed the legal rights of women, in matters of dowries and personal liturgies.

In contrast to this reliable evidence, Josephus ascribes to Tiberius a much bloodier tenure in Alexandria. In his *Jewish War*, Josephus tells at length how the Egyptian prefect responded to an episode of violence between Jews and Greeks that occurred in 68 (2:490-498): instead of immediately sending soldiers, he first warned the Jews who were threatening retaliation for Greek improprieties, yet because his warning went unheeded, Tiberius dispatched two Roman legions with 5,000 Libyan auxiliaries, authorizing them to kill and plunder and torch the houses of the Jews. Josephus describes a slaughter of some 50,000 Jews, including infants, before Tiberius commanded a cessation of violence. Josephus’ account bears an unmistakably polemical stamp.

The influence of Tiberius was critical to the rise of Vespasian and the Flavian emperors. His realm in Egypt served as the breadbasket for Rome. Because he controlled the grain shipments to Rome, and commanded two legions of the imperial army he was in a position to exercise great influence in imperial politics. Hence it is not surprising to learn that Vespasian, who was occupied with the campaign in Judea, corresponded with Tiberius (quite likely through Berenice, in addition to his confidant Basilides) and formed an alliance with him. On July 1st of the year 69, the date later celebrated as Vespasian's accession (*dies imperii*), Tiberius ordered his legions and the general population to swear allegiance to Vespasian as Emperor, an action imitated by many others throughout the eastern provinces in the following weeks. With the support of Egypt and the armies in the East, Vespasian left Judea and set out for Rome. He stopped first at Alexandria, where he was received with great pomp and splendor. Since Titus, barely 30 years old, was not up to the task of conducting the Judean campaign alone, Vespasian appointed the older, highly respected, and politically powerful Tiberius to serve as his closest military and political advisor.

In his *Jewish War*, Josephus identifies two reasons for his appointment to this position of second-in-command (5:45-46). Tiberius was known for his skill in handling similar crises, but more importantly he had a history of allegiance to Vespasian. He was the Emperor's earliest ally, even "when things were uncertain and fortune had not yet decided in his favor." This is an important point; Josephus took pride in having prophesied during the reign of Nero that Vespasian would become Emperor. When this proved true, he was released from prison and patronized at the court (4:622-629). Expressions of allegiance are most effective when the outcome is yet uncertain.

What about Tiberius' role in the destruction of the Temple? Josephus shows Titus witnessing how his efforts to "spare a foreign temple" brought about losses for his soldiers. He therefore orders the gates of the Temple to be burned (6:228) – the same gates that Tiberius' father had once paid to be plated with precious metals (5:205). At a strategy council, Titus (supported by Tiberius and others) opposes a suggestion to destroy the Temple (6:236-243). Titus orders his men to quench the fire (6:243); Josephus notes that Tiberius and others supported Titus in this policy (6:236-243). Despite this, the Temple in the end is set ablaze by a lone Roman soldier, acting out of a "certain divine fury" in keeping with a fate long ago decreed by God. Efforts to regain control of the violence-possessed legions were to no avail (6:249-259).

In this matter, Josephus exonerates both Titus and Tiberius from any culpability in the destruction of the Temple. If Josephus wrote his *Jewish War* in 75 in Rome under the patronage of Vespasian and Titus (see his *Vita* 358-364), one could explain why his history is consistently positive in its portrayal of these two Roman rulers. Reliable traditions (from Sulpicius Severus and Tacitus) present Titus himself ordering the destruction of the Temple. In contrast to what he says about the Roman emperors, Josephus is much more ambivalent with respect to Tiberius. I noted above the explicit polemics in Josephus' approach to the crisis between Jews and Greeks during his tenure as Egyptian prefect. Here, Vespasian and Titus are not involved. In contrast, the decision to appoint Tiberius to second-in-command and his involvement in the events of 70 is presented as above reproach. To do otherwise would have implicated the Roman emperors.

In his *Antiquities*, Josephus not only reveals more about the role of Tiberius' family in Jewish history, but is also, as several have noted, more critical of Tiberius. The reason is probably that when this new history was published (c94), his patrons Vespasian and Titus were long dead. And in this account we can better see how Josephus may have felt all along about Tiberius, who held such a position of power during the destruction of Jerusalem. In *War*, Josephus claims that Tiberius did "not alter the ancient laws and kept the nation in tranquility" (2:220). The account of that period in *Antiquities* not only tells how Tiberius ordered the crucifixion of Jacob and Simon for inciting a revolt against the Roman census, but also compares him unfavorably with his more pious father. In contradiction to his earlier statement, he asserts that Tiberius "did not remain steadfast in his ancestral customs" (20:101-103).

What we know about both Tiberius and his father is that, like Philo, they were thoroughly educated in Jewish and Greek literature as well as Roman and Egyptian history and culture. All three moved with ease in imperial pagan circles, in both Alexandria and Rome. Perhaps Tiberius went to greater lengths than his father and uncle to get ahead in his career. The preamble of his aforementioned edict concludes by proclaiming "the gods have preserved the whole inhabited world safe for this most sacred occasion." From the beginning of his career in 42, we have a relief that he as epistrategos and the Egyptian prefect set up on the eastern wall of the great temple at Denderah. It portrays Claudius offering a garland to the Egyptian-Hellenistic deities Khonsu and Seb (Geb); the dedication was made by Tiberius and the prefect. In an official document (CPJ 418a) he expressed gratitude to Serapis son of Ammon. Though his uncle would likely have disapproved of many of his actions – some scholars believe that Philo addressed several of his writings to Tiberius – many Jews in his circles may not have been troubled by his participation in pagan cults and culture. It is what one would have expected from a public figure in Egypt and Rome.

We should probably not classify him as an "ex-Jew" who "went to war against his former Jewish brethren" (Turner, p59). That his father was an esteemed donor to the Jerusalem Temple and that his brother married the Judean princess Berenice, and on the other hand that he was impartial in punishing Judeans and Jews as procurator and prefect, made him ideal to represent Roman interests in Egypt and Judah. If he had severed all ties to the Jewish people, he would have been ineffective for Rome. The same goes for others: Berenice apparently saw no conflict between her allegiance to her people, for whom she risked her life, and her love for Titus, the conqueror of Jerusalem. Josephus himself proudly describes the favor he won with Vespasian and later with Titus, whom he accompanied on his triumphal return to Rome. Such boundary crossing is perhaps disconcerting, yet it is often politically beneficial. It deserves a more nuanced understanding from later ages.

Works Cited

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