Chapter 1

The Gentile-Jew

Nero’s Nuptials: A Thought Experiment

Few Roman emperors are as well known today as the one who ruled Rome from 54 CE until his suicide in 68 CE, Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus Germanicus. Thanks in large part to the unflattering, albeit prejudiced, descriptions of his reign from the Roman historians Suetonius, Tacitus, and Cassius Dio, Nero has become a symbol of extravagance and despotism in Western culture, an icon of power run amok. Witness the 1951 epic Quo Vadis? (based on Henry Sienkiewicz’s Nobel prize–winning novel), in which Peter Ustinov gives the timeless cinematic portrayal of Nero as an arrogant, insatiable, and diabolical tyrant who thrills in the suffering of others and in his own orgiastic frenzies.1

Less notorious in popular culture is Nero’s second wife, Poppaea Augusta Sabina, who married the emperor in 62 CE already pregnant with their first child. According to the same Roman historians, Poppaea was no less indulgent, cold-blooded, or ambitious than her husband. She capitalized on her exquisite beauty and feminine wiles to secure her position as empress, urging Nero first to murder his mother, Agrippina, and then to banish (and ultimately execute) his first wife, Octavia.2 Admittedly, not every ancient source paints so uncomplimentary a portrait of Poppaea. Graffiti from Poppaea’s hometown of Pompeii, which not coincidently gained the advantageous status of colonia during Nero’s reign, salutes her impact on imperial decrees.3 The Jewish historian Josephus, who claims to have known Poppaea personally, extols her as a “pious woman” and praises what he believes to be her advocacy on behalf of Jewish subjects in the empire.4

Ultimately, whether Josephus, his Roman counterparts, or the graffiti at Pompeii most accurately represents Poppaea is of little concern here. Each source has an axe to grind and the accounts have been shaped accordingly. I introduce the relatively obscure Poppaea in order to provide historical context for the thought experiment from which I will launch

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this chapter’s exploration of the category “Gentile-Jew.” The experiment requires the suspension of disbelief, so I beg the reader’s indulgence:

Imagine, as best you can, the imperial wedding of Nero and Poppaea in 62 CE. No doubt it was a spectacular gala, as both figures reportedly relished extravagance. Now imagine that every subject of the empire has accepted an invitation to the event. Marshaling forty million or so bodies into one place would be impossible, of course, but fortunately the mind’s eye is unconstrained by such physical limitations. Now picture the (very long) reception line that forms to receive the happy couple. Again, the amount of time required to shake forty million pairs of hands need not detain us. Lastly, and this part is the most important part of the experiment, imagine that Poppaea, who according to Josephus had a soft spot in her heart for Jews and their causes, has requested that the Jews of the empire be placed first in line. “Jews to the front,” she commands the centurions, as the miles-long column takes its form. Jews stream toward the front of the line while non-Jews weave their way to the rear.

Can you picture such a line? What does it look like? The part of the line in which I am especially interested is the dividing line between the Jews and the non-Jews. Based on a speculative estimation of the Jewish population of the empire at the time, the point of transition would fall close to the front of the line, probably after a million or so souls. But what does that transition look like? Is there a single point in the line, two identifiable persons, where the changeover from Jew to non-Jew takes place?

The assumption guiding this chapter is that the answer is quite simply “no.” We could rather easily arrange this reception line in such a way that the first hands shaken by Nero and Poppaea would be indisputably Jewish and the last hands indisputably Gentile, but precisely when the subjects switched from Jewish to Gentile would be impossible to determine. At no point in their procession through the line would Nero and Poppaea be able say, “Here is the last Jew in the line, and here the first non-Jew.” On the contrary, between the obvious Jews in the front and the obvious Gentiles at the rear, we could situate a host of figures whose identification as Jews would be contested and ambiguous—figures who are not entirely Jews but not entirely Gentiles, subjects whom I will characterize as “Gentile-Jews.”

Some readers may recognize this thought experiment. It is a variation of the “wave theory” of identity put forward recently by Daniel Boyarin, a prominent voice in the study of ancient Jewish identity. Notably, however, Boyarin is less interested in the identification of Jews vis-à-vis non-Jews in the first century CE than of Jews versus Christians in the second through fifth centuries CE. According to Boyarin, Judaism and