I. Sects Abound! Descriptions of Jewish Sectarianism


At this time there were three sects among the Jews, who had different opinions concerning human actions; the one was called the sect of the Pharisees, another the sect of the Sadducees, and the other the sect of the Essenes. Now for the Pharisees, they say that some actions, but not all, are the work of fate, and some of them are in our own power, and that they are liable to fate, but are not caused by fate. But the sect of the Essenes affirm that fate governs all things, and that nothing befalls men but what is according to its determination. And for the Sadducees, they take away fate, and say that there is no such thing, and that the events of human affairs are not at its disposal; but they suppose that all our actions are in our own power, so that we are ourselves the cause of what is good, and receive what is evil from our own folly. However, I have given a more exact account of these opinions in the second book of the Jewish War.¹


What I would now explain is this, that the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the law of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them and say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers; and concerning these things it is that great disputes and differences have arisen among them, while the Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them, but the Pharisees have the multitude of their side; but about these two sects, and that of the Essenes, I have treated accurately in the second book of Jewish affairs.


There was a certain sect of men that were Jews, who valued themselves highly upon the exact skill they had in the law of their fathers, and made men believe they were highly favored by God...These men are those that are called the sect of the Pharisees, who were in a capacity of greatly opposing kings...accordingly, when all the people of the Jews gave assurance of their good will to Caesar, and to the king’s government, these very men did not swear, being above six thousand.

4. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18 1.2-4

The Jews had for a great while three sects of philosophy peculiar to themselves; the sect of the Essenes, and the sect of the Sadducees, and the third sort of opinions was that of those called Pharisees; of which sects although I have already spoken in the second book of the Jewish War, yet will I a little touch upon them now. Now, for the Pharisees, they live meanly, and despise delicacies in diet; and they follow the conduct of reason; and what that prescribes to them as good for them, they do; and they think they ought earnestly to strive to observe reason’s dictates for practice. They also pay a respect to such as are in years; nor are they so bold as to contradict them in anything which they have introduced; and, when they determine that all things are done by fate, they do not take away the freedom from men of acting as they think fit; since their notion is, that it hath pleased God to make a temperament, whereby what he wills is done, but so that the will of men can act virtuously or viciously. They also believe that souls have an

¹ All translations of Josephus are by William Whiston.
immortal vigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and life again; on account of which doctrines, they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people; and whatsoever they do about divine worship, prayers, and sacrifices, they perform them according to their direction; insomuch that the cities gave great attestations to them on account of their entire virtuous conduct, both in the actions of their lives and their discourses also.

But the doctrine of the Sadducees is this: That souls die with the bodies; nor do they regard the observation of anything besides what the law enjoins them; for they think it an instance of virtue to dispute with those teachers of philosophy whom they frequent; but this doctrine is received but by a few, yet by those still of the greatest dignity; but they are able to do almost nothing of themselves; for when they become magistrates, as they are unwillingly and by force sometimes obliged to be, they addict themselves to the notions of the Pharisees, because the multitude would not otherwise bear them.

The doctrine of the Essenes is this: That all things are best ascribed to God. They teach the immortality of souls, and esteem that the rewards of righteousness are to be earnestly striven for; and when they send what they have dedicated to God into the temple, they do not offer sacrifices, because they have more pure lustrations of their own; on which account they are excluded from the common court of the temple, but offer their sacrifices themselves; yet is their course of life better than that of other men; and they entirely addict themselves to husbandry. It also deserves our admiration, how much they exceed all other men that addict themselves to virtue, and this in righteousness; and indeed to such a degree, that as it hath never appeared among any other man, neither Greeks nor barbarians, no, not for a little time, so hath it endured a long while among them. This is demonstrated by that institution of theirs which will not suffer anything to hinder them from having all things in common; so that a rich man enjoys no more of his own wealth than he who hath nothing at all. There are about four thousand men that life in this way, and neither marry wives, nor are desirous to keep servants; as thinking the latter tempts men to be unjust, and the former gives the handle to domestic quarrels...

But of the fourth sect of Jewish philosophy, Judas the Galilean was the author. These men agree in all other things with the Pharisaic notions; but they have an inviolable attachment to liberty; and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord. They also do not value dying any kind of death, nor indeed do they heed the deaths of their relationships and friends, nor can any such fear make them call any man Lord; and since this immovable resolution of theirs is well known to a great many, I shall speak no farther about that matter; nor am I afraid that anything I have said of them should be disbelieved, but rather fear, that what I have said is beneath the resolution they show when they undergo pain; and it was in Gessius Florus’s time that the nation began to grow mad with this distemper, who was our procurator, and who occasioned the Jews to go wild with it by the abuse of his authority, and to make them revolt from the Romans; and these are the sects of Jewish philosophy.

5. Josephus, The Jewish War, II.8.2–14:

For there are three philosophical sects among the Jews. The followers of the first of whom are the Pharisees; of the second the Sadducees; and the third sect, who pretends to a severer discipline, and called Essenes. These last are Jews by birth and seem to have a greater affection for one another than the other sects have. These Essenes reject pleasures as an evil, but esteem continence, and the conquest over our passions, to be virtue. They neglect wedlock, but choose out other persons’ children, while they are pliable, and fir for learning; and esteem them to be of their kindred and form them according to their own manners. They do not absolutely deny the fitness of marriage, and the succession of mankind thereby continued; but they guard against the lascivious behavior of women and are persuaded that none of them preserve their fidelity to one man.

These men are despisers of riches, and so very communicative as raises our admiration. Nor is there any one to be found among them who hath more than another; for it is a law among them, that those who
come to them must let what they have to be common to the whole order, insomuch, that among them all there is no appearance of poverty or excess of riches....they have no certain city but many of them dwell in every city; and if any of their sect come from other places, what they have lies open for them, just as if it were their own; and they go into such as they never knew before, as if they had been ever so long acquainted with them....And as for their piety towards God, it is very extraordinary; for before sunrise they speak not a word about profane matters, but put up certain prayers which they have received from their forefathers, as if they made a supplication for its rising...

For their doctrine is this: That bodies are corruptible, and that the matter they are made of it not permanent; but that the souls are immortal, and continue forever; and that they come out of the most subtle air, and are united to their bodies as in prisons, into which they are drawn by a certain natural enticement; but that then they are set free from the bonds of the flesh, they then, as released from a long bondage, rejoice and mount upward. And this is like the opinion of the Greeks, that good souls have their habitations beyond the ocean, in a region that is neither oppressed with storms of rain, or snow, or with intense heat, but that this place is such as is refreshed by the gentle breathing of a west wing, that is perpetually blowing from the ocean; while they allot to bad souls a dark and tempestuous den, full of never-ceasing punishments. And indeed the Greeks seem to me to have followed the same notion, when they allot the islands of the blessed to their bracer men, whom they call heroes and demigods; and to the souls of the wicked, the region of the ungodly, in Hades....There are also those among them who undertake to foretell things to come, by reading the holy books, and using several sorts of purifications, and being perpetually conversant in the discourses of the prophets; and it is but seldom that they miss in their predictions. Moreover, there is another order of Essenes, who agree with the rest as to their way of living, and customs, and laws, but differ from them in the point of marriage, as thinking that by not marrying they cut off the principal part of the human life, which is the prospect of succession; nay rather, that if all men should be of the same opinion, the whole race of mankind would fail...

But then as to the other two other orders at first mentioned: the Pharisees are those who are esteemed most skillful in the exact explication of their laws, and introduce the first sect. These ascribe to all fate [or providence], and to God, and yet allow, that to act what is right, or the contrary, is principally in the power of men, although fate does cooperate in every action. They say that all souls are incorruptible; but that the souls of good men are only removed into other bodies, but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment. But the Sadducees are those that compose the second order, and take away fate entirely, and suppose that God is not concerned in our doing or not doing what is evil; and they say, that to act what is good, or what is evil, is at men’s own choice, and that the one or the other belongs so to everyone, that they may act as they please. They also take away the belief of the immortal duration of the soul, and the punishments and rewards in Hades. Moreover, the Pharisees are friendly to one another, and are for the exercise of concord and regard for the public. But the behavior of the Sadducees one towards another is in some degree wild; and their conversation with those that are of their own party is as barbarous as if they were strangers to them. And this is what I had to say concerning the philosophic sects among the Jews.

6. Josephus, Life, 2

When I was a child, and about fourteen years of age, I was commended by all for the love I had to learning; on which account the high priests and principal men of the city came then frequently to me together, in order to know my opinion about the accurate understandings of points of the law; and when I was about sixteen years old, I had a mind to make trial of the several sects that were among us. These sects are three: The first is that of the Pharisees, the second that of the Sadducees, and the third that of the Essenes, as we have frequently told you; for I thought that by this means I might, choose the best, if I were once acquainted with them all, so I contended myself with hard fare, and underwent great difficulties and went through them all. Nor did I content myself with these triasal only; but when I was informed that one, whose name was Banus, lived in the desert, and used no other clothing than grew upon trees, and had no other food than what grew of its own accord, and bathed himself in cold water frequently, both by night and by day, in order to preserve his chastity, I imitated him in those things, and
continue with him three years. So when I had accomplished my desires, I returned back to the city, being now nineteen years old, and began to conduct myself according to the rules of the sect of the Pharisees, which is kin to the sect of the Stoics, as the Greeks call them.²

7. Mishnah Yadayim 4:6-7:

The Sadducees said, "We blame [object to] you Pharisees, that ye declare the stream [which flows when water is poured from a clean vessel into an unclean one] to be clean." The Pharisees replied [with much better right], "We [may] blame [object to] you Sadducees, that ye declare a streamlet of water which flows from a burial ground to be clean."³

8. Philo of Alexandria, Hypothetica, 11:1–18

[The Essenes] live in many cities of Judaea and in many villages and grouped in great societies of many members. Their persuasion is not based on birth, for birth is not a descriptive mark of voluntary associations, but on their zeal for virtue and desire to promote brotherly love. Thus no Essene is a mere child nor even a stripling or newly bearded, since the characters of such are unstable with a waywardness corresponding to the immaturity of their age, but full grown and already verging on old age, no longer carried under by the tide of the body nor led by the passions, but enjoying the veritable, the only real freedom. This freedom is attested by their life. None of them allows himself to have any private property, either house or slave or estate or cattle or any of the other things which are amassed and abundantly procured by wealth, but they put everything together into the public stock and enjoy the benefit of them all in common.

They live together formed into clubs, bands of comradeship with common meals, and never cease to conduct all their affairs to serve the general weal. But they have various occupations at which they labour with untiring application and never plead cold or heat or any of the violent changes in the atmosphere as an excuse. Before the sun is risen they betake themselves to their familiar tasks and only when it sets force themselves to return, for they delight in them as much as do those who are entered for gymnastic competitions. For they consider that the exercises which they practise whatever they may be are more valuable to life, more pleasant to soul and body and more lasting than those of the athlete in as much as they can still be plied with vigor when that of the body is past its prime.

Some of them labor on the land skilled in sowing and planting, some as herdsmen taking charge of every kind of cattle and some superintend the swarms of bees. Others work at the handicrafts to avoid the sufferings which are forced upon us by our indispensable requirements and shrink from no innocent way of getting a livelihood. Each branch when it has received the wages of these so different occupations gives it to one person who has been appointed as treasurer. He takes it and at once buys what is necessary and provides food in abundance and anything else which human life requires. Thus having each day a common life and a common table they are content with the same conditions, lovers of frugality who shun expensive luxury as a disease of both body and soul.

And not only is their table in common but their clothing also. For in winter they have a stock of stout coats ready and in summer cheap vests, so that he who wishes may easily take any garment he likes, since what one has is held to belong to all and conversely what all have one has. Again if anyone is sick he is nursed at


³ Trans. Sefaria.org.
the common expense and tended with care and thoughtfulness by all. The old men too even if they are childless are treated as parents of a not merely numerous but very filial family and regularly close their life with an exceedingly prosperous and comfortable old age; so many are those who give them precedence and honour as their due and minister to them as a duty voluntarily and deliberately accepted rather than enforced by nature.

Furthermore they eschew marriage because they clearly discern it to be the sole or the principal danger to the maintenance of the communal life, as well as because they particularly practise continence. For no Essene takes a wife, because a wife is a selfish creature, excessively jealous and an adept at beguiling the morals of her husband and seducing him by her continued impostures. For by the fawning talk which she practises and the other ways in which she plays her part like an actress on the stage she first ensnares the sight and hearing, and when these subjects as it were have been duped she cajoles the sovereign mind...Such then is the life of the Essenes, a life so highly to be prized that not only commoners but also great kings look upon them with admiration and amazement, and the approbation and honors which they give add further veneration to their venerable name.  

9. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 5.15

(17.) Lying on the west of Asphaltites, and sufficiently distant to escape its noxious exhalations, are the Esseni, a people that live apart from the world, and marvelous beyond all others throughout the whole earth, for they have no women among them; to sexual desire they are strangers; money they have none; the palm-trees are their only companions. Day after day, however, their numbers are fully recruited by multitudes of strangers that resort to them, driven thither to adopt their usages by the tempests of fortune, and wearied with the miseries of life. Thus it is, that through thousands of ages, incredible to relate, this people eternally prolongs its existence, without a single birth taking place there; so fruitful a source of population to it is that weariness of life which is felt by others. (Trans. John Bostock; Perseus.Tufts.Edu)


I have discussed the Essenes, who persistently pursued the active life and excelled in all or, to put it more moderately, in most of its departments. I will now proceed at once in accordance with the sequence required by the subject to say what is needed about those who embraced the life of contemplation... The vocation of these philosophers is at once made clear from their title of therapeutae and Therapeutrdes, a name derived from θεραπεύω, either in the sense of "cure" because they profess an art of healing better than that current in the cities which cures only the bodies, while theirs treats also souls oppressed with grievous and well-nigh incurable diseases, inflicted by pleasures and desires and griefs and fears, by acts of covetousness, folly and injustice...

So when they have divested themselves of their possessions and have no longer ought to ensnare them they flee without a backward glance and leave their brothers, their children, their wives, their parents, the wide circle of their kinsfolk, the groups of friends around them, the fatherlands in which they were born and reared, since strong is the attraction of familiarity and very great its power to ensnare. And they do not migrate into another city like the unfortunate or worthless slaves who demand to be sold by their owners and so procure a change of masters but not freedom. For every city, even the best governed, is full of turmoil and disturbances innumerable which no one could endure who has ever been even once under the guidance of wisdom. Instead of this they pass their days outside the walls pursuing solitude in gardens or lonely bits of country, not from any acquired habit of misanthropical bitterness but because they know how unprofitable and mischievous are associations with persons of dissimilar character.

4 All translations of Philo are by C. D. Yonge.
This kind exists in many places in the inhabited world, for perfect goodness must be shared both by
Greeks and the world outside Greece, but it abounds in Egypt in each of the nomes as they are called and
especially round Alexandria. But the best of these votaries journey from every side to settle in a certain
very suitable place which they regard as their fatherland. This place is situated above the Mareotic Lake
on a somewhat low-lying hill very happily placed both because of its security and the pleasantly tempered
air. The safety is secured by the farm buildings and villages round about and the pleasantness of the air by
the continuous breezes which arise both from the lake which debouches into the sea and from the open
sea hard by. For the sea breezes are light, the lake breezes close and the two combining together produce a
most healthy condition of climate. The houses of the society thus collected are exceedingly simple,
providing protection against two of the most pressing dangers, the fiery heat of the sun and the icy cold of
the air. They are neither near together as in towns, since living at close quarters is troublesome and
displeasing to people who are seeking to satisfy their desire for solitude, nor yet at a great distance
because of the sense of fellowship which they cherish, and to render help to each other if robbers attack
them. In each house there is a consecrated room which is called a sanctuary or closet and closeted in this
they are initiated into the mysteries of the sanctified life. They take nothing into it, either drink or food or
any other of the things necessary for the needs of the body, but laws and oracles delivered through the
mouth of prophets, and psalms and any thing else which fosters and perfects knowledge and piety. They
keep the memory of God alive and never forget it, so that even in their dreams the picture is nothing else
but the loveliness of divine excellences and powers. Twice every day they pray, at dawn and at eventide;
at sunrise they pray for a fine bright day, fine and bright in the true sense of the heavenly daylight which
they pray may fill their minds... interval between early morning and evening is spent entirely in spiritual
exercise. They read the Holy Scriptures and seek wisdom from their ancestral philosophy by taking it as
an allegory, since they think that the words of the literal text are symbols of something whose hidden
nature is revealed by studying the underlying meaning. They have also writings of men of old, the
founders of their way of thinking, who left many memorials of the form used in allegorical interpretation
and these they take as a kind of archetype and imitate the method in which this principle is carried out.
And so they do not confine themselves to contemplation but also compose hymns and psalms to God in
all sorts of meters and melodies which they write down with the rhythms necessarily made more solemn.
For six days they seek wisdom by themselves in solitude in the closets mentioned above, never passing
the outside door of the house or even getting a distant view of it. But every seventh day they meet
together as for a general assembly and sit in order according to their age in the proper attitude, with their
hands inside the robe, the right hand between the breast and the chin and the left withdrawn along the
flank. Then the senior among them who also has the fullest knowledge of the doctrines which they profess
comes forward and with visage and voice alike quiet and composed gives a well-reasoned and wise
discourse. He does not make an exhibition of clever rhetoric like the orators or sophists of today but
follows careful examination by careful expression of the exact meaning of the thoughts, and this does not
lodge just outside the ears of the audience but passes through the hearing into the soul and there stays
securely. All of the others sit still and listen showing their approval merely by their looks or nods. This
common sanctuary in which they meet every seventh day is a double enclosure, one portion set apart for
the use of the men, the other for the women. For women too regularly make part of the audience with the
same ardor and the same sense of their calling. The wall between the two chambers rises up from the
ground to three or four cubits built in the form of a breast work, while the space above up to the roof is
left open. This arrangement serves two purposes; the modesty becoming to the female sex is preserved,
while the women sitting within ear-shot can easily follow what is said since there is nothing to obstruct
the voice of the speaker.
They lay self-control to be as it were the foundation of their soul and on it build the other virtues. None of
them would put food or drink to his lips before sunset since they hold that philosophy finds its right place
in the light, the needs of the body in the darkness, and therefore they assign the day to the one and some
small part of the night to the other. Some in whom the desire for studying wisdom is more deeply
implanted even only after three days remember to take food. Others so luxuriate and delight in the
banquet of truths which wisdom richly and lavishly supplies that they hold out for twice that time and
only after six days do they bring themselves to taste such sustenance as is absolutely necessary...But to
the seventh day as they consider it to be sacred and festal in the highest degree they have awarded special
privileges as its due, and on it after providing for the soul refresh the body also, which they do as a matter
of course with the cattle too by releasing them from their continuous labor.

II. But How Prevalent Is This Sectarianism?

1. Philo, *Flaccus*, 55

There are five districts in the city, named after the first five letters of the written alphabet, of these two are
called the quarters of the Jews, because the chief portion of the Jews lives in them. There are also a few
scattered Jews, but only a very few, living in some of the other districts. What then did they do? They
drove the Jews entirely out of four quarters, and crammed them all into a very small portion of one; and
by reason of their numbers they were dispersed over the sea-shore, and desert places, and among the
tombs, being deprived of all their property; while the populace, overrunning their desolate houses, turned
to plunder, and divided the booty among themselves as if they had obtained it in war. And as no one
hindered them, they broke open even the workshops of the Jews, which were all shut up because of their
mourning for Drusilla [the emperor’s sister] and carried off all that they found there, and bore it openly
through the middle of the market-place as if they had only been making use of their own property.

2. Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius*, 370

It was owing to these considerations that we were able to hold up our heads for a while, but there were
other circumstances which terrified us and kept us in great perplexity and distress to hear what the
emperor would decide, and what he would pronounce, and what kind of sentence he would ultimately
deliver; for he heard the general tenor of our arguments, though he disdained to attend to some of our
facts. But would it not be a terrible thing for the interests of all the Jews throughout the whole world to be
thrown into confusion by the treatment to which we, its five ambassadors, were exposed? For if he were
to give us up to our enemies, what other city could enjoy tranquility? What city would there be in which
the citizens would not attack the Jews living in it? What synagogue would be let uninjured? What state
would not overturn every principle of justice in respect of those of their countrymen who arrayed
themselves in opposition to the national laws and customs of the Jews? They will be overthrown, they
will be shipwrecked, they will be sent to the bottom, with all the particular laws of the nation, and those
too which are common to all and in accordance with the principles of justice recognized in every city.


It amazes me that some dare to charge the nation with an anti-social stance, a nation which has made such
an extensive use of fellowship and goodwill toward all people everywhere that they offer up prayers and
feasts and first fruits on behalf of the common race of human beings and serve the really self-existent God
both on behalf of themselves and of others who have run from the services which they should have
rendered. These are the things they do for the entire race of human beings.


There are some men, who, looking upon written laws as symbols of things appreciable by the intellect,
have studied some things with superfluous accuracy, and have treated others with neglectful
indifference...for although the seventh day is a lesson to teach us the power which exists in the uncreated
God, and also that the creature is entitled to rest from his labours, it does not follow that on that account
we may abrogate the laws which are established respecting it, so as to light a fire, or till land, or carry
burdens, or being accusations, or conduct suits at law, or demand a restoration of a deposit, or exact the
repayment of a debt, or do any other of the things which are usually permitted at times which are not days
of festival. Nor does it follow, because the feast is the symbol of the joy of the soul and of its gratitude
towards God, that we are to repudiate the assemblies ordained at the periodical seasons of the year; nor
because the rite of circumcision is an emblem of the excision of pleasures and of all the passions, and of
the destruction of that impious opinion, according to which the mind has imagined itself to be by itself
competent to produce offspring, does it follow that we are to annul the law which has been enacted about
circumcision. 5

5. Josephus, Antiquities, 14.7.2

And let no one wonder that there was so much wealth in our temple, since all the Jews throughout the
habitable earth, and those that worshipped God, nay, even those of Asia and Europe, sent their
contributions to it, and this from very ancient times. Nor is the largeness of these sums without its
attestation; nor is that greatness owing to our vanity, as raising it without ground to so great a height: but
there are many witnesses to it, and particularly Strabo of Cappadocia, who says thus... “there were four
classes of men among those of Cyrene; that of citizens, that of husbandmen, the third of strangers, and the
fourth of Jews. Now these Jews are already gotten into all cities; and it is hard to find a place in the
habitable earth that hath not admitted this tribe of men, and is not possessed by them: and it hath come to
pass that Egypt and Cyrene, as having the same governors, and great number of other nations, imitate
their way of living and maintain great bodies of these Jews in a peculiar manner, and grow up to greater
prosperity with them, and make use of the same laws with that nation also. Accordingly, the Jews have
places assigned them in Egypt, wherein they inhabit, besides what is peculiarly allotted to this nation at
Alexandria, which is a large part of that city. There is also an ethnarch allowed them, who governs the
nation, and distributes justice to them, and takes care of their contracts, and of the laws to them belonging,
as if he were the ruler of a free republic. In Egypt, therefore, this nation is powerful, because the Jews
were originally Egyptians, and because the land wherein they inhabit, since they went thence, is near to
Egypt.”

6. 2 Maccabees, 6:1–11:

Not long after this, the king sent an Athenian senator to compel the Jews to forsake the laws of their
ancestors and no longer to live by the laws of God; 2 also to pollute the temple in Jerusalem and to call it
the temple of Olympian Zeus, and to call the one in Gerizim the temple of Zeus-the-Friend-of-Strangers,
as did the people who lived in that place. Harsh and utterly grievous was the onslaught of evil. 4For the
temple was filled with debauchery and reveling by the Gentiles, who dallied with prostitutes and had
intercourse with women within the sacred precincts, and besides brought in things for sacrifice that were
unfit. 5The altar was covered with abominable offerings that were forbidden by the laws. 6People could
neither keep the sabbath, nor observe the festivals of their ancestors, nor so much as confess themselves
to be Jews. On the monthly celebration of the king’s birthday, the Jews were taken, under bitter constraint,
to partake of the sacrifices; and when a festival of Dionysus was celebrated, they were compelled to wear
wreaths of ivy and to walk in the procession in honour of Dionysus. 8At the suggestion of the people of
Ptolemais a decree was issued to the neighbouring Greek cities that they should adopt the same policy
towards the Jews and make them partake of the sacrifices, 9and should kill those who did not choose to
change over to Greek customs. One could see, therefore, the misery that had come upon them. 10For
example, two women were brought in for having circumcised their children. They publicly paraded them
around the city, with their babies hanging at their breasts, and then hurled them down headlong from the
wall. 11Others who had assembled in the caves nearby, in order to observe the seventh day secretly, were


8
betrayed to Philip and were all burned together, because their piety kept them from defending themselves, in view of their regard for that most holy day.

7. The Letter of Aristeas 9–11, 16–19, 139–159

Demetrius of Phalerum, the president of the king's library, received vast sums of money, for the purpose of collecting together, as far as he possibly could, all the books in the world. By means of purchase and transcription, he carried out, to the best of his ability, the purpose of the king. On one occasion when I was present he was asked, “How many thousand books are there in the library?” and he replied, “More than two hundred thousand, O king, and I shall make endeavor in the immediate future to gather together the remainder also, so that the total of five hundred thousand may be reached. I am told that the laws of the Jews are worth transcribing and deserve a place in your library.” “What is to prevent you from doing this?” replied the king. “Everything that is necessary has been placed at your disposal.” “They need to be translated,” answered Demetrius, “for in the country of the Jews they use a peculiar alphabet (just as the Egyptians, too, have a special form of letters) and speak a peculiar dialect. They are supposed to use the Syriac tongue, but this is not the case; their language is quite different.” And the king when he understood all the facts of the case ordered a letter to be written to the Jewish High Priest that his purpose (which has already been described) might be accomplished...

These people worship God the overseer and creator of all, whom all men worship including ourselves, O King except that we have a different name. Their name for him is Zeus and Jove… Sosibius and some of those present thus said, “It is worthy of your magnanimity to offer the release of these men as a thank offering to the Most High God. You are highly honored by the Lord of all, and have been glorified beyond your ancestors, so if you make even the greatest thank offerings, it befits you.”...

Now our Lawgiver being a wise man and specially endowed by God to understand all things, took a comprehensive view of each particular detail, and fenced us round with impregnable ramparts and walls of iron, that we might not mingle at all with any of the other nations, but remain pure in body and soul, free from all vain imaginations, worshiping the one Almighty God above the whole creation. Hence the leading Egyptian priests having looked carefully into many matters, and being cognizant with (our) affairs, call us "men of God". This is a title which does not belong to the rest of mankind but only to those who worship the true God. The rest are men not of God but of meats and drinks and clothing. For their whole disposition leads them to find solace in these things. Among our people such things are reckoned of no account, but throughout their whole life their main consideration is the sovereignty of God. Therefore lest we should be corrupted by any abomination, or our lives be perverted by evil communications, he hedged us round on all sides by rules of purity, affecting alike what we eat, or drink, or touch, or hear, or see. For though, speaking generally, all things are alike in their natural constitution, since they are all governed by one and the same power, yet there is a deep reason in each individual case why we abstain from the use of certain things and enjoy the common use of others. For the sake of illustration I will run over one or two points and explain them to you. For you must not fall into the degrading idea that it was out of regard to mice and weasels and other such things that Moses drew up his laws with such exceeding care. All these ordinances were made for the sake of righteousness to aid the quest for virtue and the perfecting of character. For all the birds that we use are tame and distinguished by their cleanliness, feeding on various kinds of grain and pulse, such as for instance pigeons, turtle-doves, locusts, partridges, geese also, and all other birds of this class. But the birds which are forbidden you will find to be wild and carnivorous, tyrannizing over the others by the strength which they possess, and cruelly obtaining food by preying on the tame birds enumerated above and not only so, but they seize lambs and kids, and injure human beings too, whether dead or alive, and so by naming them unclean, he gave a sign by means of them that those, for whom the legislation was ordained, must practice righteousness in their hearts and not tyrannize over any one in reliance upon their own strength nor rob them of anything, but steer their course of life in accordance with justice…Our legislator taught us therefore that it is by such methods as these that indications are given to the wise, that they must be just and effect nothing by violence, and refrain from tyrannizing over others in reliance upon their own
strength. Wherefore all the rules which he has laid down with regard to what is permitted in the case of these birds and other animals, he has enacted with the object of teaching us a moral lesson. For the division of the hoof and the separation of the claws are intended to teach us that we must discriminate between our individual actions with a view to the practice of virtue. For the strength of our whole body and its activity depend upon our shoulders and limbs. Therefore he compels us to recognize that we must perform all our actions with discrimination according to the standard of righteousness -more especially because we have been distinctly separated from the rest of mankind. For most other men defile themselves by promiscuous intercourse, thereby working great iniquity, and whole countries and cities pride themselves upon such vices. For they not only have intercourse with men but they defile their own mothers and even their daughters. But we have been kept separate from such sins. And the people who have been separated in the aforementioned way are also characterized by the Lawgiver as possessing the gift of memory. For all animals "which are cloven-footed and chew the cud" represent to the initiated the symbol of memory. For the act of chewing the cud is nothing else than the reminiscence of life and existence. For life is wont to be sustained by means of food wherefore he exhorts us in the Scripture also in these words: "Thou shalt surely remember the Lord that wrought in thee those great and wonderful things". For when they are properly conceived, they are manifestly great and glorious; first the construction of the body and the disposition of the food and the separation of each individual limb and, far more, the organization of the senses, the operation and invisible movement of the mind, the rapidity of its particular actions and its discovery of the arts, display an infinite resourcefulness. Wherefore he exhorts us to remember that the aforesaid parts are kept together by the divine power with consummate skill. For he has marked out every time and place that we may continually remember the God who rules and preserves (us). For in the matter of meats and drinks he bids us first of all offer part as a sacrifice and then forthwith enjoy our meal. Moreover, upon our garments he has given us a symbol of remembrance, and in like manner he has ordered us to put the divine oracles upon our gates and doors as a remembrance of God.