

THE PHILOSOPHICAL SECTS IN FIRST-CENTURY JUDAISM

Josephus, Jewish Wars 2; Antiquities 18.1

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Josephus was a Jewish author who wrote in the latter part of the first century CE. He famously chronicled the “Wars of the Jews” in one major work and their full history in his *Antiquities of the Jews*. These excerpts feature his famous (to Bible geeks) description of the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes (“Essens” in the spelling of this translation, and Zealots – the three/four sects of Judaism in his time. As we approach in Session 4 the Pharisee called Saul who became the Apostle Paul, it will be important to understand his life as a Pharisee. Josephus offers our most detailed description of this sect from outside the early Christian writings. Here are Josephus’ two descriptions.

Jewish Wars 2

<https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/war-2.html>

For there are three philosophical sects among the Jews. The followers of the first of which are the Pharisees, of the second, the Sadducees, and the third sect, which pretends to a severer discipline, are called Essens. These last are Jews by birth, and seem to have a greater affection for one another than the other sects have. These Essens 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 fit 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 behaviour of women, and are persuaded that none of them preserve their fidelity to one man.

3. 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 be common to the whole order, insomuch that among them all there is no appearance of poverty, or excess of riches, but every one’s possessions are intermingled with every other’s possessions, and so there is, as it were, one patrimony among all the brethren. They think that oil is a defilement; and if any one of them be anointed, without his own approbation, it is wiped off his body; for they think to be sweaty is a good thing, as they do also to be clothed in white garments.

They also have stewards appointed, to take care of their common affairs, who every one of them have no separate business for any, but what is for the uses of them all.

4. They have no one 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. For which reason they carry nothing at all with them when they travel into remote parts, though still they take their weapons with them, for fear of thieves. Accordingly there is, in every city where they live, one appointed particularly to take care of strangers, and to provide garments and other necessaries for them. But the habit and management of their bodies is such as children use who are in fear of their masters. Nor do they allow of the change of garments, or of shoes, till be first torn to pieces, or worn out by time. Nor do they either buy or sell any thing to one another, but every one of them gives what he hath to him that wanteth it, and receives from him again in lieu of it what may be convenient for himself; and although there be no requital made, they are fully allowed to take what they want of whomsoever they please.

5. And as for their piety towards God, it is very extraordinary; for before sun-rising 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. After this every one of them are sent away by their curators to exercise some of those arts wherein they are skilled, in which they labour with great diligence till the fifth hour. After which they assemble themselves together again into one place, and when they have clothed themselves in white veils, they then bathe their bodies in cold water. And after this purification is over, they every one meet together in an apartment of their own, into which it is not permitted to any of another sect to enter; while they go, after a pure manner, into the dining-room, as into a certain holy temple, and quietly set themselves down; upon which the baker lays them loaves in order; the cook also brings a single plate of one sort of food, and sets it before every one of them; but a priest says grace before meat; and it is unlawful for any one to taste of the food before grace be said. The same priest, when he hath dined, says grace again after meat; and when they begin, and when they end, they praise God, as he that bestows their food upon them; after which they lay aside their [white] garments, and betake themselves to their labours again till the evening; then they return home to supper, after the same manner, and if there be any strangers there, they sit down with them. Nor is there ever any clamour or disturbance to pollute their house, but they give every one leave to speak in their turn; which silence thus kept in their house appears to foreigners like some tremendous mystery; the cause of which is that

perpetual sobriety they exercise, and the same settled measure of meat and drink that is allotted them, and that such as is abundantly sufficient for them.

6. And truly, as for other things, they do nothing but according to the injunctions of their curators; only these two things are done among them at everyone's own free will, which are to assist those that want it, and to shew mercy; for they are permitted of their own accord to afford succour to such as deserve it, when they stand in need of it, and to bestow food on those that are in distress; but they cannot give any thing to their kindred without the curators. They dispense their anger after a just manner, and restrain their passion. They are eminent for fidelity, and are the ministers of peace; whatsoever they say also is firmer than an oath; but swearing is avoided by them, and they esteem it worse than perjury; for they say, that he who cannot be believed without [swearing by] God, is already condemned. (4) They also take great pains in studying the writings of the ancients, and choose out of them what is most for the advantage of their soul and body, and they inquire after such roots and medicinal stones as may cure their distempers.

7. But now, if any one hath a mind to come over to their sect, he is not immediately admitted, but he is prescribed the same method of living which they use for a year, while he continues excluded, and they give him also a small hatchet, and the forementioned girdle, and the white garment. And when he hath given evidence, during that time, that he can observe their continence, he approaches nearer to their way of living, and is made a partaker of the waters of purification; yet is he not even now admitted to live with them; for after this demonstration of his fortitude, his temper is tried two more years, and if he appear to be worthy, they then admit him into their society. And before he is allowed to touch their common food, he is obliged to take tremendous oaths, that, in the first place, he will exercise piety towards God, and then that he will observe justice towards men, and that he will do no harm to any one, either of his own accord, or by the command of others; that he will always hate the wicked, and be assistant to the righteous; that he will ever shew fidelity to all men, and especially to those in authority; because no one obtains the government without God's assistance; and that if he be in authority, he will at no time whatever abuse his authority, nor endeavour to outshine his subjects either in his garments, or any other finery; that he will be perpetually a lover of truth, and propose to himself to reprove those that tell lies; that he will keep his hands clear from theft, and his soul from unlawful gains; and that he will neither conceal any thing from those of his own sect, nor discover any of their doctrines to others, no, not though any one should compel him so to do at the hazard of his life. Moreover he swears to communicate their doctrines to no one any otherwise than as he received them himself; that he will

abstain from robbery, and will equally preserve the books belonging to their sect, and the names of the angels (5) [or messengers]. These are the oaths by which they secure their proselytes to themselves.

8. But for those that are caught in any heinous sins, they cast them out of their society, and he who is thus separated from them, does often die after a miserable manner; for as he is bound by the oath he hath taken, and by the customs he hath been engaged in, he is not at liberty to partake of that food that he meets with elsewhere, but is forced to eat grass, and to famish his body with hunger, till he perish; for which reason they receive many of them again, when they are at their last gasp, out of compassion to them, as thinking the miseries they have endured till they came to the very brink of death, to be a sufficient punishment for the sins they had been guilty of.

9. But in the judgments they exercise they are most accurate and just, nor do they pass sentence by the votes of a court that is fewer than an hundred. And as to what is once determined by that number, it is unalterable. What they most of all honour, after God himself, is the name of their legislator [Moses], whom if any one blaspheme he is punished capitally. They also think it a good thing to obey their elders, and the major part. Accordingly, if ten of them be sitting together, no one of them will speak while the other nine are against it. They also avoid spitting in the midst of them, or on the right side. Moreover, they are stricter than any other of the Jews in resting from their labours on the seventh day; for they not only get their food ready the day before, that they may not be obliged to kindle a fire on that day, but they will not remove any vessel out of its place, nor go to stool thereon. Nay, on other days they dig a small pit, a foot deep, with a paddle (which kind of hatchet is given them, when they are first admitted among them), and covering themselves round with their garment that they may not affront the divine rays of light, they ease themselves into that pit, after which they put the earth that was dug out again into the pit; and even this they do only in the more lonely places, which they choose out for this purpose; and although this easement of the body be natural, yet it is a rule with them to wash themselves after it, as if it were a defilement to them.

10. Now after the time of their preparatory trial is over, they are parted into four classes; and so far are the juniors inferior to the seniors, that if the seniors should be touched by the juniors, they must wash themselves, as if they had intermixed themselves with the company of a foreigner. They are long-lived also, insomuch that many of them live above an hundred years, by means of the simplicity of their diet, nay, as I think, by means of the regular course of life they observe also. They contemn

the miseries of life, and are above pain, by the generosity of their mind. And as for death, if it will be for their glory, they esteem it better than living always; and indeed our war with the Romans gave abundant evidence what great souls they had in their trials, wherein, although they were tortured and distorted, burnt and torn to pieces, and went through all kinds of instruments of torment, that they might be forced either to blaspheme their legislator, or to eat what was forbidden them, yet could they not be made to do either of them, no nor once to flatter their tormentors, or to shed a tear; but they smiled in their very pains, and laughed those to scorn who inflicted the torments upon them, and resigned up their souls, with great alacrity, as expecting to receive them again.

11. For their doctrine is this. That bodies are corruptible, and that the matter they are made of is not permanent; but that the souls are immortal, and continue for ever, and that they come out of the most subtil air, and are united to their bodies as to prisons, into which they are drawn by a certain natural inticement; but that when 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 opinions 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 wind, 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 brave men, whom they call heroes, and demi-gods; and to the souls of the wicked, the region of the ungodly in Hades, where their fables relate that certain persons, such as Sisyphus, and Tantalus, and Ixion, and Tityus, are punished; which is built on this first supposition, that souls are immortal; and thence are those exhortations to virtue, and dehortations from wickedness collected; whereby good men are bettered in the conduct of their life by the hope they have of reward after their death, and whereby the vehement inclinations of bad men to vice are restrained, by the fear and expectation they are in, that although they should lie concealed in this life, they should suffer immortal punishment after their death. These are the divine doctrines of the Essens [\(6\)](#) about the soul, which lay an unavoidable bait for such as have once had a taste of their philosophy.

12. There are also those among them who undertake to foretel 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. [\(7\)](#)

13. Moreover, there is another order of Essens, 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 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. However, they try their spouses for three years, and if they find that they have their natural purgations thrice, as trials that they are likely to be fruitful, they then actually marry them. But they do not use to accompany with their wives when they are with child, as a demonstration that they do not marry out of regard to pleasure, but for the sake of posterity. Now the women go into the baths with some of their garments on, as the men do with somewhat girded about them. And these are the customs of this order of Essens.

14. But then as to the two other orders at first mentioned, the Pharisees are those who are esteemed most skilful in the exact explication of their laws, and introduce the first sect. These ascribe all to 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 co-operate in every action. They say that all souls are incorruptible, but that the souls of good men only are 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 every one, 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 behaviour 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. (8)

Antiquities 18.1

<https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-18.html>

2. The Jews had, for a great while, had 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.

3. Now for the Pharisees, they live meanly, and despise delicacies in diet; and they follow the contract 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 any thing which they have introduced. And when they determine that all things are done by fate,² 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 man can act virtuously or viciously. They also believe that souls have an immortal vigour 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 live 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 give great attestations to them, on account of their intire virtuous conduct, both in the actions of their lives, and their discourses also.

4. But the doctrine of the Sadducees is this; that souls die with the bodies. Nor do they regard the observation of any thing 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.

5. The doctrine of the Essens 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: [\(3\)](#) 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 intirely 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 men, 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 any thing 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 live 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 domestick quarrels. But as they live by themselves, they minister one to another. They also appoint certain stewards to receive the incomes of their revenues, and of the fruits of the ground; such as are good men, and priests: who are to get their corn, and their food ready for them. They none of them differ from others of the Essens in their way of living: but do the most resemble those Dacæ, who are called Polistæ. [Dwellers in cities.]

6. But of the fourth sect of Jewish philosophy, Judas the Galilean was the author. These men agree in all other things with the Pharisaick 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 kinds of death; nor indeed do they heed the deaths of their relations and friends: nor can any such fear make them call any man lord. And since this immoveable resolution of theirs is well known to a great many, I shall speak no farther about that matter. Nor am I afraid that any thing I have said of them should be disbelieved: but rather fear that what I have said is beneath the resolution they shew 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.