

Hypothetica: Apology for the Jews

Philo of Alexandria



APOLOGY FOR THE JEWS

From Eusebius, P.E. 8.5.11 ff.

(5.11) And first of all I will adduce what Philo says respecting the journey of the Jews into Egypt, of which he has given an account, following that which is given by Moses in the first book of the Pentateuch, to which he has affixed the superscription, “hypothetically;” where, arguing in behalf of the Jews as if he were addressing himself to their accusers, he speaks in the following manner, affirming, —

(6.1) That their ancient ancestor, the original founder of their race, was a Chaldaean; and that this people emigrated from Egypt, after having in former times left its abode in Syria, being very numerous and consisting of countless myriads of people; and that when the land was no longer able to contain them, and moreover when a high spirit began to show itself in the dispositions of their young men, and when, besides this, God himself by visions and dreams began to show them that he willed that they should depart, and when, as the Deity brought it about, nothing was less an object of desire to them than their ancient native land; on that account this ancestor of theirs departed and journeyed into Egypt, whether in consequence of some express determination of God, or whether it was in consequence of some prophetic instinct of his own; so that from that time to the present the nation has had an existence and a durability, and has become so exceedingly populous, as it is at this moment.

(6.2) And then, after a few more sentences, he says, — And they were led in this journey and emigration of theirs by a man who, if you will have it so, was in no respect superior to the generality of his fellow countrymen, so incessantly did they reproach him as a trickster and one who deceived them with words. An admirable amount and kind of trickery and deceit no doubt it was, by which he not only completely saved the whole people which was oppressed by want of water and hunger, and by ignorance of the way, and in a complete state of destitution of all things, and led them forward as if in all prosperity, and conducted them through all the nations lying around, and kept them without any quarrelling with one another, and in a state of complete subordination and obedience to himself. (6.3) And this too, not for a short time, but for a period of such length, that it is not likely that even a single family would continue in perfect unanimity and prosperity for such a time; for no thirst, no hunger, no decay of body, nor fear of the future, no

ignorance of what was to befall them, ever excited that deceived people, who were being led, as some will have it, to their destruction, to rise against him who was deceiving them. Yet what would you have us say? (6.4) That he had such excessive art, or such great eloquence of speech, or such shrewdness, that he could triumph over so many difficulties of such a nature, which seemed likely to lead to the destruction of them all? Surely you must confess, either that the natures of the men under him were not utterly ignorant or obstinate, but were obedient and not inclined to neglect a prudent care of the future; or else that they were as wicked and perverse as possible, but that God softened their obstinacy, and was, as it were, a leader to them in respect both of the present and of the future. For that of these alternatives which appears to you to be the truest of the two, appears equally to contribute to the praise, and honour, and admiration of the whole nation. (6.5) These things, then, are what I have to say about this exodus. But when they came into this land, how they were settled here, and how they got possession of the country, they show in their sacred records. And I moreover do not think it necessary to describe it as by way of history, but rather to enter into some speculations concerning them as to what was their natural and likely course. (6.6) For which of these two alternatives will you embrace? That while they were still very numerous, although at last they were evilly afflicted, still, while they were powerful and had arms in their hands, they took the country by force, fighting with and defeating both the Syrians and Phoenicians who met them in that their land? Or shall we suppose that they were unwarlike, and destitute of manly courage, and altogether deficient in point of numbers, and destitute of any supplies for war; but that they met with respectful treatment from those nations, and obtained their land from them, who willingly surrendered it to them? and that then immediately, or at no distant period, they built a temple, and did everything else which has any bearing on religion and piety? (6.7) For these circumstances, as it seems, would prove them to have been a God-loving people, and beloved by God, and confessed to be such even by their enemies; for those people into whose territories they had suddenly come, as if to deprive them of them, were of necessity their enemies. (6.8) And if they met with respectful treatment and honour from them, how can we deny that they surpassed all other men in good fortune? And what shall we say after this in the second place, or in the third place? Shall we speak of their admirable code

of laws, of their obedience, or of their devotion, and justice, and holiness, and piety? But in truth they looked upon that man, whoever he was, who gave them these laws, with such excessive admiration and veneration, that whatever he approved of they immediately thought best also. (6.9) Therefore, whether he spoke, being influenced by his own reason, or because he was inspired by the Deity, they referred every word of his to God. And though many years have passed, I cannot tell the exact number, but more than two thousand, still they have never altered one word of what was written by him, but would rather endure to die ten thousand times than to do any thing in opposition to his laws and to the customs which he established. (6.10) After Philo has said this, he proceeds to give an abridgment of the constitution established in the nation of the Jews by the laws of Moses, speaking thus: —

(7.1) Now, is there anything among that people resembling these circumstances, anything which appears to be of a mild and gentle character, and which admits of invocations of justice, and pleas, and delays, and of assessments of damages, and on the other hand of counter assessments? Not a word, but every thing is simple, plain, and straightforward. If you indulge in illicit connexions, if you commit adultery, if you do violence to a child (for do not speak of doing so to a boy, but even to a female child); and in like manner, if you prostitute yourself, if you suffer any thing disgraceful contrary to what becomes your age, or appear to do so, or are about to do so, death is the penalty for such wickedness. (7.2) Again, if you behave with insult towards a slave, or towards a free person, if you confine such an one in bonds, if you lead him away and sell him, if you steal any thing, whether common or sacred, if you commit acts of impiety, not only by your deeds but even by any chance word, I will not venture to say against God himself (may God be merciful to us, and of the same opinion about these matters), but against your father, or your mother, or your benefactor, death is equally the penalty. And that too, not a common, or ordinary, or natural death; but he who has merely uttered a single impious word must be stoned, as having committed no inferior impiety. (7.3) He also gives many other injunctions, such as these, that wives shall serve their husbands, not indeed in any particular so as to be insulted by them, but in the spirit of reasonable obedience in all things; that parents shall govern their children for their preservation and benefit; that every one shall be the lord of his own possessions, provided he has not dedicated them to God, nor

spoken of God as their owner; but if he has vowed them only by a single word, then it is not lawful for him to lay hands upon or to touch them, but he must at once separate himself from them all. (7.4) May I never be guilty of plundering the things which belong to God, or of stealing what has been offered and dedicated to him by others. And even, as I have said before, if a single word to that effect has unintentionally fallen from a man, he must, instead of taking away from what is already dedicated, add some offering of his own; for if he has said the word, he, by so speaking, deprives himself of every thing. But if he repents, or wishes to recall and amend what he has said, he shall be deprived also of his very life. (7.5) And the same principle extends to other things, of which he is the owner. If a man by any words dedicates that which is requisite to support a wife, she shall be sacred and entitled to receive the support. If a father makes such a promise to his son, or a master to his servant, the rule is the same. And the way in which a man may be released from any promise or vow which he has made in such a manner can only be in the most perfect and complete way, when the high priest discharges him from it; for he is the person entitled to receive it in due subordination to God. And the next way is that which consists in propitiating the mercy of God in behalf of those who are the more immediate owners of the thing vowed, so that he may not accept of what is thus dedicated, since it is necessary to them. (7.6) There are, besides these rules, ten thousand other precepts, which refer to the unwritten customs and ordinances of the nation. Moreover, it is ordained in the laws themselves that no one shall do to his neighbour what he would be unwilling to have done to himself. That a man shall not take up what he has not put down, neither out of a garden, nor out of a wine-press, nor out of a threshing-floor; and that absolutely no one shall take anything, whether it be great or small, out of a heap. That no one shall refuse fire to one who begs it of him. That no one shall cut off a stream of water, but that everyone shall contribute food to beggars and cripples, and that such shall have favour with God. (7.7) That no one shall keep any one from performing funeral honours to the dead, but shall even throw upon them so much earth as if sufficient to protect them from impiety: that no one shall violate or move, in any manner or degree whatever, the graves, or tombs, or memorials of those who are dead. That no one shall add bonds, or any evil, or heap any additional suffering on him who is in trouble. That no one shall eradicate the generative powers of a

man. That no one shall cause the offspring of women to be abortive by means of miscarriage, or by any other contrivance. That no one shall treat animals, in any respect, in a manner contrary to the injunctions imposed, whether by God or by a lawgiver. That no one shall cause his seed to disappear. That no one shall enslave his offspring. (7.8) That no one shall apply a false balance, or an inadequate measure, or bad money. That no one shall tell the secrets of his friends in a foreign land. Where, in God's name, are these yokes of oxen of ours gone? And look also at other commandments besides these. It is ordained, that no one shall fix the residence of the parents apart from that of the children, not even if they are prisoners of war; nor that of a wife from that of her husband, even though a man may be her master, having purchased her lawfully. (7.9) These commandments now are of a more solemn and important character, but there are others of apparently a trivial and ordinary kind. It is not lawful, says the lawgiver, to strip a nest wholly of its young; it is not lawful to reject the supplication of animals of any kind whatever, which flee to you for refuge, not even if any of them are very insignificant. You may say, perhaps, that these things are of no consequence whatever, but still, at least, the law which speaks of these particulars is of importance, and deserving of all imaginable care and attention; and the declarations are important, and so are the curses which threaten those who violate these laws with destruction; and God looks over all such matters, and is an avenger and punisher on every occasion and in every place. (7.10) And then after a few more sentences he adds, — And if it should happen that during a whole day, or I should rather say, not one day only but many, and those too not coming immediately one after another, but with intervals between them, even intervals of a week at a time, the custom, as is always natural, which is drawn from ordinary days prevails. Do you not wonder, that not a single one of all these commandments has been violated? (7.11) Is not this a mark of great temperance and self-restraint, derived to them from practice alone, so that they act towards one another with perfect equality, and are able to derive strength from those actions if it be necessary? Surely not so; but the lawgiver thought that it ought to be derived from some great and admirable circumstance, that they should not only be competent to do other things in the same manner, but should also be imbued with a thorough knowledge of their national laws and customs. (7.12) What then did he do on this sabbath day? he commanded all the people

to assemble together in the same place, and sitting down with one another, to listen to the laws with order and reverence, in order that no one should be ignorant of anything that is contained in them; (7.13) and, in fact, they do constantly assemble together, and they do sit down one with another, the multitude in general in silence, except when it is customary to say any words of good omen, by way of assent to what is being read. And then some priest who is present, or some one of the elders, reads the sacred laws to them, and interprets each of them separately till eventide; and then when separate they depart, having gained some skill in the sacred laws, and having made great advancements towards piety. (7.14) Do not these objects appear to you to be of greater importance than any other pursuit can possibly be? Therefore they do not go to interpreters of laws to learn what they ought to do; and even without asking, they are in no ignorance respecting the laws, so as to be likely, through following their own inclinations, to do wrong; but if you violate or alter any one of the laws, or if you ask any one of them about their national laws or customs, they can all tell you at once, without any difficulty; and the husband appears to be a master, endowed with sufficient authority to explain these laws to his wife, a father to teach them to his children, and a master to his servants. (7.15) And again, it is easy to speak in the same manner with respect to the seventh year, though, perhaps, one is not to say exactly the same things, for they do not abstain from all work as they do on the sabbath days, only they leave their land fallow till the next year, in order that so it may become productive; for they think that thus it becomes much better after having had this rest, and then that it may be cultivated again, and not be dried up and exhausted by the uninterrupted continuance of cultivation; (7.16) and you may see that a similar practice conduces to strength of body, for not only do intervals of relaxation contribute to health, but you may see too that physicians also enjoin a degree of rest at times from work; for what is incessant, and uninterrupted, and always the same, is likely to be injurious, especially in the case of hard work, the cultivation of the land. (7.17) And a proof of this is, that if any one were to recommend the people to cultivate the land itself much more, and to add this seventh year also, and should promise them that the usual crops of fruit should reward their labours, they still would not adopt his advice, for they think that they are not alone entitled to rest from their labours, and yet even if they were to do so, it would be nothing strange; but

they think that their land also deserves a certain degree of rest and exemption, in order again to receive a fresh beginning of care and cultivation; (7.18) since, in God's name, what could hinder them from letting it out during the year of jubilee thus proposed, and then receiving its annual produce once a year from those who rented and cultivated it? But as I said before, they will not admit of any such expedient in any manner or degree whatever, out of care, as it seems to me, for the welfare of the land; (7.19) and this is truly a very great proof of their humanity and moderation. For, since they themselves rest from their labours during that year, they think that it is not right either to collect the fruits or crops which are produced, nor to lay up any thing which has not accrued to them from their own labours; but, as if God provided for them while the land is thus enjoying rest and regulating itself according to its will, they think that any one who chooses or who is in want, any traveller or stranger, may gather the fruit that year with impunity. (7.20) However, this is enough to say to you on these matters; for, as to the fact of this law existing among them with regard to the seventh day and seventh year, you will not inquire of me, as you have perhaps heard it often from many persons, both physicians, and investigators of natural history, and philosophers, who discuss this law about the seventh year, as to the effect which it has on the nature of the universe, and especially on the nature of man. This is what he says about the seventh day ... I shall be contented with the testimony of Philo on the present occasion, which he has given about the matter which I am here explaining in many passages of his treatises. And now do you take that work which he has written in defence of the Jewish nation, and read the following sentences in it.

(11.1) But our lawgiver trained an innumerable body of his pupils to partake in those things, who are called Essenes, being, as I imagine, honoured with this appellation because of their exceeding holiness. And they dwell in many cities of Judaea, and in many villages, and in great and populous communities. (11.2) And this sect of them is not an hereditary of family connexion; for family ties are not spoken of with reference to acts voluntarily performed; but it is adopted because of their admiration for virtue and love of gentleness and humanity. (11.3) At all events, there are no children among the Essenes, no, nor any youths or persons only just entering upon manhood; since the dispositions of all such persons are unstable and liable to change, from the

imperfections incident to their age, but they are all full-grown men, and even already declining towards old age, such as are no longer carried away by the impetuosity of their bodily passions, and are not under the influence of the appetites, but such as enjoy a genuine freedom, the only true and real liberty. (11.4) And a proof of this is to be found in their life of perfect freedom; no one among them ventures at all to acquire any property whatever of his own, neither house, nor slave, nor farm, nor flocks and herds, nor any thing of any sort which can be looked upon as the fountain or provision of riches; but they bring them together into the middle as a common stock, and enjoy one common general benefit from it all. (11.5) And they all dwell in the same place, making clubs, and societies, and combinations, and unions with one another, and doing every thing throughout their whole lives with reference to the general advantage; (11.6) but the different members of this body have different employments in which they occupy themselves, and labour without hesitation and without cessation, making no mention of either cold, or heat, or any changes of weather or temperature as an excuse for desisting from their tasks. But before the sun rises they betake themselves to their daily work, and they do not quit it till some time after it has set, when they return home rejoicing no less than those who have been exercising themselves in gymnastic contests; (11.7) for they imagine that whatever they devote themselves to as a practice is a sort of gymnastic exercise of more advantage to life, and more pleasant both to soul and body, and of more enduring benefit and equability, than mere athletic labours, inasmuch as such toil does not cease to be practised with delight when the age of vigour of body is passed; (11.8) for there are some of them who are devoted to the practice of agriculture, being skilful in such things as pertain to the sowing and cultivation of lands; others again are shepherds, or cowherds, and experienced in the management of every kind of animal; some are cunning in what relates to swarms of bees; (11.9) others again are artisans and handicraftsmen, in order to guard against suffering from the want of anything of which there is at times an actual need; and these men omit and delay nothing, which is requisite for the innocent supply of the necessities of life. (11.10) Accordingly, each of these men, who differ so widely in their respective employments, when they have received their wages give them up to one person who is appointed the universal steward and general manager; and he, when he has received the money, immediately goes and purchases

what is necessary and furnishes them with food in abundance, and all other things of which the life of mankind stands in need. (11.11) And those who live together and eat at the same table are day after day contented with the same things, being lovers of frugality and moderation, and averse to all sumptuousness and extravagance as a disease of both mind and body. (11.12) And not only are their tables in common but also their dress; for in the winter there are thick cloaks found, and in the summer light cheap mantles, so that whoever wants one is at liberty without restraint to go and take whichever kind he chooses; since what belongs to one belongs to all, and on the other hand whatever belongs to the whole body belongs to each individual. (11.13) And again, if any one of them is sick he is cured from the common resources, being attended to by the general care and anxiety of the whole body. Accordingly the old men, even if they happen to be childless, as if they were not only the fathers of many children but were even also particularly happy in an affectionate offspring, are accustomed to end their lives in a most happy and prosperous and carefully attended old age, being looked upon by such a number of people as worthy of so much honour and provident regard that they think themselves bound to care for them even more from inclination than from any tie of natural affection. (11.14) Again, perceiving with more than ordinary acuteness and accuracy, what is alone or at least above all other things calculated to dissolve such associations, they repudiate marriage; and at the same time they practise continence in an eminent degree; for no one of the Essenes ever marries a wife, because woman is a selfish creature and one addicted to jealousy in an immoderate degree, and terribly calculated to agitate and overturn the natural inclinations of a man, and to mislead him by her continual tricks; (11.15) for as she is always studying deceitful speeches and all other kinds of hypocrisy, like an actress on the stage, when she is alluring the eyes and ears of her husband, she proceeds to cajole his predominant mind after the servants have been deceived. (11.16) And again, if there are children she becomes full of pride and all kinds of license in her speech, and all the obscure sayings which she previously meditated in irony in a disguised manner she now begins to utter with audacious confidence; and becoming utterly shameless she proceeds to acts of violence, and does numbers of actions of which every one is hostile to such associations; (11.17) for the man who is bound under the influence of the charms of a woman, or of children, by the

necessary ties of nature, being overwhelmed by the impulses of affection, is no longer the same person towards others, but is entirely changed, having, without being aware of it, become a slave instead of a free man. (11.18) This now is the enviable system of life of these Essenes, so that not only private individuals but even mighty kings, admiring the men, venerate their sect, and increase their dignity and majesty in a still higher degree by their approbation and by the honours which they confer on them.