

# Josephus on the Essenes

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Flavius Josephus was a first-century Jewish historian, politician and soldier whose literary works provide crucial documentation of Roman Palestine in the first century A.D. At age 29, he was appointed general of the Jewish forces in Galilee. He was eventually captured by Vespasian, who was at that time the supreme commander of the Roman army. Josephus capitulated and sought to ingratiate himself with the Roman general, [eventually becoming part of the imperial court in Rome](#). He was an eyewitness to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple by the Roman army in 70 A.D. He spent the rest of his life in Rome pursuing his literary career, the surviving results of which comprise a vital source of historical information.

Josephus's commentaries on the laws and characteristics of the Essene community have been invaluable to scholars studying ancient Jewish laws and customs. They have also been the subject of much debate, particularly as they pertain to [the Dead Sea Scrolls](#). Researchers have relied heavily on Josephus's works as they try to determine [who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls](#), who inhabited Qumran, and whether or not [the authors of the scrolls and the community at Qumran](#) were in fact [one and the same](#).

Professor Steve Mason asserts in his article [“Did the Essenes Write the Dead Sea Scrolls? Don't Rely on Josephus”](#) (BAR, November/December 2008) that the texts of Josephus cannot be relied upon to support the conclusion that [the Essenes](#) were the authors of [the Dead Sea Scrolls](#) and the inhabitants of Qumran. So what *does* Josephus have to say about the Essene community? Following is a translated excerpt from *The Jewish War*, in which Josephus provides his main description of this fascinating group.



Steve Mason argues that the texts of Josephus cannot be relied upon to support the conclusion that the Essenes were the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the inhabitants of Qumran.

*Interested in the history and meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls? Find out what they tell us about the Bible, Christianity and Judaism when you download our [free Dead Sea Scrolls eBook](#).*

This deliberately literal translation of the Greek is from Steve Mason, *Flavius Josephus: translation and commentary*, vol. 1b: *Judean War* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

## ***The Jewish War, Book II, Chapter 8***

### **(8.2)**

**119** For three forms of philosophy are pursued among the Judeans: the members of one are Pharisees, of another Sadducees, and the third [school], who certainly are reputed to cultivate seriousness, are called Essenes; although Judeans by ancestry, they are even more mutually affectionate than the others. **120** Whereas these men shun the

pleasures as vice, they consider self-control and not succumbing to the passions virtue. And although there is among them a disdain for marriage, adopting the children of outsiders while they are still malleable enough for the lessons they regard them as family and instill in them their principles of character: **121** without doing away with marriage or the succession resulting from it, they nevertheless protect themselves from the wanton ways of women, having been persuaded that none of them preserves her faithfulness to one man.

**(8.3)**

**122** Since [they are] despisers of wealth—their communal stock is astonishing—, one cannot find a person among them who has more in terms of possessions. For by a law, those coming into the school must yield up their funds to the order, with the result that in all [their ranks] neither the humiliation of poverty nor the superiority of wealth is detectable, but the assets of each one have been mixed in together, as if they were brothers, to create one fund for all. **123** They consider olive oil a stain, and should anyone be accidentally smeared with it he scrubs his body, for they make it a point of honor to remain hard and dry, and to wear white always. Hand-elected are the curators of the communal affairs, and indivisible are they, each and every one, [in pursuing] their functions to the advantage of all.

**(8.4)**

**124** No one city is theirs, but they settle amply in each. And for those school-members who arrive from elsewhere, all that the community has is laid out for them in the same way as if they were their own things, and they go in and stay with those they have never even seen before as if they were the most intimate friends. **125** For this reason they make trips without carrying any baggage at all—though armed on account of the bandits. In each city a steward of the order appointed specially for the visitors is designated quartermaster for clothing and the other amenities. **126** Dress and also deportment of body: like children being educated with fear. They replace neither clothes nor footwear until the old set is ripped all over or worn through with age. **127** Among themselves, they neither shop for nor sell anything; but each one, after giving the things that he has to the one in need, takes in exchange anything useful that the other has. And even without this reciprocal giving, the transfer to them [of goods] from whomever they wish is unimpeded.

**(8.5)**

**128** Toward the Deity, at least: pious observances uniquely [expressed]. Before the sun rises, they utter nothing of the mundane things, but only certain ancestral prayers to him, as if begging him to come up. **129** After these things, they are dismissed by the curators to the various crafts that they have each come to know, and after they have worked strenuously until the fifth hour they are again assembled in one area, where they belt on linen covers and wash their bodies in frigid water. After this purification they gather in a private hall, into which none of those who hold different views may enter: now pure themselves, they approach the dining room as if it were some [kind of] sanctuary. **130** After they have seated themselves in silence, the baker serves the loaves in order, whereas the cook serves each person one dish of one food. **131** The priest offers a prayer before the food, and it is forbidden to taste anything before the prayer; when he has had his breakfast he offers another concluding prayer. While starting and also while finishing, then, they honor God as the sponsor of life. At that, laying aside their clothes as if they were holy, they apply themselves to their labors again until evening. **132** They dine in a similar way: when they have returned, they sit down with the visitors, if any happen to be present with them, and neither yelling nor disorder pollutes the house at any time, but they yield conversation to one another in order. **133** And to those from outside, the silence of those inside appears as a kind of shiver-inducing mystery. The reason for this is their continuous sobriety and the rationing of food and drink among them—to the point of fullness.

**(8.6)**

**134** As for other areas: although there is nothing that they do without the curators' having ordered it, these two things are matters of personal prerogative among them: [rendering] assistance and mercy. For helping those who are worthy, whenever they might need it, and also extending food to those who are in want are indeed left up to the

individual; but in the case of the relatives, such distribution is not allowed to be done without [permission from] the managers. **135** Of anger, just controllers; as for temper, able to contain it; of fidelity, masters; of peace, servants. And whereas everything spoken by them is more forceful than an oath, swearing itself they avoid, considering it worse than the false oath; for they declare to be already degraded one who is unworthy of belief without God. **136** They are extraordinarily keen about the compositions of the ancients, selecting especially those [oriented] toward the benefit of soul and body. On the basis of these and for the treatment of diseases, roots, apotropaic materials, and the special properties of stones are investigated.

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*The Dead Sea Scrolls have been called the greatest manuscript find of all time. Visit the [BAS Dead Sea Scrolls Page](#) for dozens of articles on the scrolls' significance, discovery and scholarship.*

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### **(8.7)**

**137** To those who are eager for their school, the entry-way is not a direct one, but they prescribe a regimen for the person who remains outside for a year, giving him a little hatchet as well as the aforementioned waist-covering and white clothing. **138** Whenever he should give proof of his self-control during this period, he approaches nearer to the regimen and indeed shares in the purer waters for purification, though he is not yet received into the functions of communal life. For after this demonstration of endurance, the character is tested for two further years, and after he has thus been shown worthy he is reckoned into the group. **139** Before he may touch the communal food, however, he swears dreadful oaths to them: first, that he will observe piety toward the deity; then, that he will maintain just actions toward humanity; that he will harm no one, whether by his own deliberation or under order; that he will hate the unjust and contend together with the just; **140** that he will always maintain faithfulness to all, especially to those in control, for without God it does not fall to anyone to hold office, and that, should he hold office, he will never abuse his authority—outshining his subordinates, whether by dress or by some form of extravagant appearance; **141** always to love the truth and expose the liars; that he will keep his hands pure from theft and his soul from unholy gain; that he will neither conceal anything from the school-members nor disclose anything of theirs to others, even if one should apply force to the point of death. **142** In addition to these, he swears that he will impart the precepts to no one otherwise than as he received them, that he will keep away from banditry, and that he will preserve intact their school's books and the names of the angels. With such oaths as these they completely secure those who join them.

### **(8.8)**

**143** Those they have convicted of sufficiently serious errors they expel from the order. And the one who has been reckoned out often perishes by a most pitiable fate. For, constrained by the oaths and customs, he is unable to partake of food from others. Eating grass and in hunger, his body wastes away and perishes. **144** That is why they have actually shown mercy and taken back many in their final gasps, regarding as sufficient for their errors this ordeal to the point of death.

### **(8.9)**

**145** Now with respect to trials, [they are] just and extremely precise: they render judgment after having assembled no fewer than a hundred, and something that has been determined by them is non-negotiable. There is a great reverence among them for—next to God—the name of the lawgiver, and if anyone insults him he is punished by death. **146** They make it point of honor to submit to the elders and to a majority. So if ten were seated together, one person would not speak if the nine were unwilling. **147** They guard against spitting into [their] middles or to the right side and against applying themselves to labors on the seventh days, even more than all other Judeans: for not only

do they prepare their own food one day before, so that they might not kindle a fire on that day, but they do not even dare to transport a container—or go to relieve themselves. **148** On the other days they dig a hole of a foot's depth with a trowel—this is what that small hatchet given by them to the neophytes is for—and wrapping their cloak around them completely, so as not to outrage the rays of God, they relieve themselves into it [the hole]. **149** After that, they haul back the excavated earth into the hole. (When they do this, they pick out for themselves the more deserted spots.) Even though the secretion of excrement is certainly a natural function, it is customary to wash themselves off after it as if they have become polluted.

**(8.10)**

**150** They are divided into four classes, according to their duration in the training, and the later-joiners are so inferior to the earlier-joiners that if they should touch them, the latter wash themselves off as if they have mingled with a foreigner. **151** [They are] long-lived, most of them passing 100 years—as a result, it seems to me at least, of the simplicity of their regimen and their orderliness. Despisers of terrors, triumphing over agonies by their wills, considering death—if it arrives with glory—better than deathlessness. **152** The war against the Romans proved their souls in every way: during it, while being twisted and also bent, burned and also broken, and passing through all the torture-chamber instruments, with the aim that they might insult the lawgiver or eat something not customary, they did not put up with suffering either one: not once gratifying those who were tormenting [them], or crying. **153** But smiling in their agonies and making fun of those who were inflicting the tortures, they would cheerfully dismiss their souls, [knowing] that they would get them back again.

**(8.11)**

**154** For the view has become tenaciously held among them that whereas our bodies are perishable and their matter impermanent, our souls endure forever, deathless: they get entangled, having emanated from the most refined ether, as if drawn down by a certain charm into the prisons that are bodies. **155** But when they are released from the restraints of the flesh, as if freed from a long period of slavery, then they rejoice and are carried upwards in suspension. For the good, on the one hand, sharing the view of the sons of Greece they portray the lifestyle reserved beyond Oceanus and a place burdened by neither rain nor snow nor heat, but which a continually blowing mild west wind from Oceanus refreshes. For the base, on the other hand, they separate off a murky, stormy recess filled with unending retributions. **156** It was according to the same notion that the Greeks appear to me to have laid on the Islands of the Blessed for their most courageous men, whom they call heroes and demi-gods, and for the souls of the worthless the region of the impious in Hades, in which connection they tell tales about the punishments of certain men—Sisyphuses and Tantaluses, Ixions and Tityuses—establishing in the first place the [notion of] eternal souls and, on that basis, persuasion toward virtue and dissuasion from vice. **157** For the good become even better in the hope of a reward also after death, whereas the impulses of the bad are impeded by anxiety, as they expect that even if they escape detection while living, after their demise they will be subject to deathless retribution. **158** These matters, then, the Essenes theologize with respect to the soul, laying down an irresistible bait for those who have once tasted of their wisdom.

**(8.12)**

**159** There are also among them those who profess to foretell what is to come, being thoroughly trained in holy books, various purifications, and concise sayings of prophets. Rarely if ever do they fail in their predictions.

**(8.13)**

**160** There is also a different order of Essenes. Though agreeing with the others about regimen and customs and legal matters, it has separated in its opinion about marriage. For they hold that those who do not marry cut off the greatest part of life, the succession, and more: if all were to think the same way, the line would very quickly die out. **161** To be sure, testing the brides in a three-year interval, once they have been purified three times as a test of their being able to bear children, they take them in this manner; but they do not continue having intercourse with those

who are pregnant, demonstrating that the need for marrying is not because of pleasure, but for children. Baths [are taken] by the women wrapping clothes around themselves, just as by the men in a waist-covering. Such are the customs of this order.

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For more, read Steve Mason, [“Did the Essenes Write the Dead Sea Scrolls?”](#) *Biblical Archaeology Review*, November/December 2008.

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