

ANCIENT LITERATURE ON THE ESSENES

Several ancient authorities discussed the Essenes and their community in considerable detail. The principle sources are given here, including Philo and Josephus. The Essenes are also mentioned by Pliny, Solinus, Porphyry, Eusebius and Epiphanius during antiquity.¹ Although the direct Hebrew or Aramaic equivalent of “Essene” has not been found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, ancient and modern authors have consistently used the Greek name “Essaioi” (Essenes) to refer to this group, with varying explanations for its etymology.

Philo Judaeus (20 BCE–50 CE)

From *EVERY VIRTUOUS PERSON IS FREE*:

“There are some among them called Essenes—in number more than four thousand—from, as I think, an incorrect derivation from the Greek homonym *hosiotēs*, holiness, because they are above all others, worshippers of God. They do not sacrifice any animals, but rather endeavor to make their own minds fit for holy offering. They, in the first place, live in villages, avoiding cities on account of the habitual wickedness of the citizens, being sensible that as disease is contracted from breathing an impure atmosphere, so an incurable impression is made on the soul in such evil company.

“Some of them cultivate the earth, others are engaged in those diverse arts which promote peace, thus benefiting themselves and their neighbors. They do not lay up treasures of gold or silver, nor do they acquire large portions of land out of a desire for revenues, but provide themselves only with the absolute necessities of life. Although they are almost the only persons among humanity who are without wealth and possessions—and this by their own choice rather than want of success—yet they regard themselves as the richest, because they hold that the supply of our wants, and contentment of mind, are riches, as in truth they are.

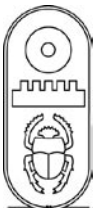
No Weapons of War in the Community

“No maker of arrows, darts, spears, swords, helmets, breast-plates, or shields—no manufacturer of arms or engines of war, nor any person whatever who makes things belonging to war, or even such things as might lead to wickedness in times of peace, is to be found among them. Traffic, inn keeping, or navigation, they never so much as dream of, because they repudiate every inducement to covetousness. There is not a single slave to be found among them, for all are free, and mutually serve each other. They condemn owners of slaves, not only as unjust, inasmuch as they corrupt the principle of equality, but also as impious, because they destroy the law of nature, which like a mother brought forth and nourished all alike, and made them all legitimate brothers and sisters, not only in word but in deed; but this relationship, treacherous covetousness, rendered over-bearing by success, has destroyed by engendering enmity instead of cordiality, and hatred instead of love....

“For...the seventh day is held holy, on which they abstain from all other work, and go to the sacred places called synagogues, sit according to order, the younger below the elder, and listen with becoming attention. Then one takes the Bible and reads it, and another of those who have the most experience comes forward and expounds it, passing over that which is not generally known, for they philosophize on most things in symbols according to the ancient zeal.

The Love of God is Made Manifest Among Them

“They are instructed in piety, holiness, righteousness, economy, politics, in knowledge of what is truly good, bad and indifferent, to choose things that are necessary,



and to avoid the contrary. They use therein a threefold rule and definition, viz.: love of God, love of virtue, and love of humanity. Of their love to God, they give innumerable demonstrations—e.g. their constant and unalterable holiness throughout the whole of their life; their avoidance of oaths and falsehoods, and their firm belief that God is the source of all good, but of nothing evil.

“Of their love of virtue they give proofs in their contempt for money, fame, and pleasures, their continence, endurance, in their satisfying their wants easily, simplicity, cheerfulness of temper, modesty, order, firmness, and every thing of the kind. As instances of their love of humanity, are to be mentioned their benevolence, equality, and their holding all things in common, which is beyond all description, and about which it will not be out of place to speak here a little.

The Essenes Hold All Things in Common

“First, then, no one has his or her own house, so that it also belongs to all. For, besides that, they all live together in sodalities; it is also open to those of the community who come from other places. Moreover, they all share one common treasury and store of provisions, common garments, and common food for all who eat together. Such a mode of sleeping together, living together, and eating together, could not be so easily established in fact among any other people; and indeed it would be impossible. For whatever they receive daily, if they work for wages, they do not retain it as their own, but give it to the common stock, and let everyone that likes make common use of it.

“Those that are sick are not neglected because they can earn nothing, but have what is necessary for their aid from the common stock, so that they ever fare richly without wanting anything. They manifest respect, reverence and care for the aged, just as children do for their parents, administering to them a thousand times with all plentifulness both with their hands and their counsels in their old age.”²

From CONCERNING THE JEWISH PEOPLE:

“Our lawgiver, Moses, formed innumerable disciples into a community called Essenes, who, as it appears, obtained this appellation by virtue of their holiness. They dwell in many cities of Judea, and in villages, and in large and populous communities. Their order is not founded upon natural descent, but upon admiration for virtue and sincere love for humanity. . . . there are properly speaking no newly born ones among the Essenes, no children, no youths, as the dispositions of these are unstable and liable to change from the imperfections incident to their age but they are all full grown adults. . . .

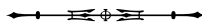
Freedom in their Way of Life

“They all dwell together in the same place, form themselves into companies, societies, combinations, and unions, and work together all their life for the common good of the community. The different members of the order are engaged in different employment; they work cheerfully and industriously, and never try to leave their employment on account of cold, heat, or any change of weather. They go to their daily work before the sun rises, and do not leave off till some time after it has set, when they return home rejoicing no less than those who have been exercising themselves in gymnastic contests.

“They believe that their employment is a sort of gymnastic exercise of more benefit to life, greater pleasure both to soul and body, and of a more enduring advantage than any mere athletic labors, because they can cheerfully continue in their work as a recreation even when youth and bodily strength are gone. Those who are acquainted with the cultivation of the land are engaged in agriculture; others, again, who understand the management of animals, attend to the flocks; some are skilful in the management of bees; and others again, are artisans and manufacturers, thus guarding against the want of anything. They do not omit anything, which is requisite to supply the absolute necessities of life.

“The appointed steward and general manager receives the wages which the different people get for their respective employments, and forthwith buys plenty of food and other necessaries of life. They eat at the same table, and have every day the same food, being lovers of frugality and moderation, and averse to luxury and extravagance as a disease of both mind and body. Not only is their table in common, but their dress too is in common. They have a store of rough cloaks in the winter, and in the summer cheap garments without sleeves, to which every one can go and freely take whichever kind he or she wants, for whatever belongs to one belongs to all, and whatever belongs to all belongs to each individual.

“If one of them is sick, that person is cured from the common resources, and is attended to by the general care and anxiety of the whole body. The elderly, even if they happen to be childless, end their lives in a most happy, prosperous, and tenderly cared for old age, as if they were not only the parents of many children, but were even also particularly happy in an affectionate offspring. They are looked upon by such a number of people as worthy of so much honor and provident regard, that they think themselves bound to care for them even more from inclination than from any tie of natural affection....”³



Flavius Josephus (37– post 100 CE)
From *THE JEWISH WAR*:

“There are three sects of philosophers among the Jews. The followers of the first are called Pharisees, of the second Sadducees, and of the third, who really seem to practice holiness, Essenes. Jews by birth, they love each other more than the others. They reject pleasure as an evil, and regard continence and not yielding to passions as virtues. Rather than marriage, they prefer to adopt the children of others while still tender and

susceptible of instruction, and regard them as their own relations, and train them in their practices. They do not, however, repudiate marriage, and its consequent succession of the race in themselves....

Attitude Towards Worldly Goods

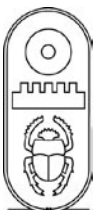
“They despise riches, have all things in common in a very admirable manner, and there is not one to be found among them who is richer than another; for it is a law that those who enter the sect must give up their possessions to the society as common property, so that there is not to be seen among them all, either the abjectness of poverty or the distinction of riches; but as every person’s goods are cast into a common treasury, they all, like siblings, have one heritage....

“They have no separate city, but some of them live anywhere; and if any of the society come from other places, whatever they have lies open for them, just as if it were their own; and they go to those whom they have never seen before as if they had been most intimate.

Religious Practices

“Their piety towards God is extraordinary, for they never speak about worldly matters before the sun rises, but offer up, with their faces towards it, some of the prayers transmitted by their forebears, as if they supplicated it to rise. Hereupon, they are all sent by the overseers, every one to work in the department in which one is skilled; and, having diligently labored till the fifth hour, assemble again together in one place, girt round with their linen apron, and have a baptism with cold water. After this lustration they resort to a special house, in which no one of another faith is admitted, and go to the refectory purified as into a holy temple. Having quietly taken their seats, the baker gives every one a loaf of bread according to order, and the cook places before each one a dish with one sort of food.

“The priest commences with prayer, and no one is allowed to taste the food before



grace is said. Thanks is also returned after the meal; for both at the commencement and at the conclusion they praise God as the giver of their food. Whereupon they put off their white garments as if they were sacred, and return again to their work until evening. On returning again they take their supper together, at which strangers, who happen to be in the place, are allowed to sit down with them. No noise or tumult ever desecrates their house, but they let every one take part in the conversation in turn; and the silence of those who are within appears to those that are without as some awful mystery. The cause of this is the uninterrupted sobriety, as well as the fact that their eating and drinking are so measured out as just to suffice the cravings of nature.

Helping the Needy and Showing Mercy Are Paramount

“While they do nothing without the injunctions of their overseers, yet there are two things in which they have free action, viz., helping the needy, and showing mercy; to help the deserving when they are in want, and to give food to the hungry, they have perfect liberty; but to give anything to their relations is not allowed without the permission of the overseers. They are just dispensers of their anger, curbers of their passions, representatives of fidelity, ministers of peace; and every word with them is of more force than an oath. They avoid taking an oath, and regard it as worse than perjury; for they say that a person who is not believed without calling on God to witness is already condemned of falsehood. They take extraordinarily great pains in studying the writings of the ancients, and select that especially which is beneficial both for the soul and body; hence they investigate medical roots and the property of minerals for the cure of distempers.

Admittance and Discipline in the Community

“When any desire to enter the sect, they are not immediately admitted, but

although they have to remain a whole year without, yet they are obliged to observe the sect’s ascetic rules of living, and the sect gives each petitioner an axe, an apron as mentioned above, and a white garment, if they have shown proof of continence during this time, they approach nearer to the Essenian life and partake of the holier water of purification; but they are still not as yet admitted to the sect’s common table. Having thus given proof of their perseverance, the conduct of each petitioner is tested for two more years, and, if found worthy, the petitioner is admitted into the society.

“However, before the initiate touches the common meal, the initiate swears, by most awful oaths, first to fear God, and next to exercise justice towards all people—neither to wrong any one of their own accord nor by the command of others; always to detest the wicked and side with the righteous; ever to keep faith inviolable with all others, especially with those in authority, for no one comes to office without the will of God; not to be proud of their power nor to outshine their subordinates, either in their garments or greater finery, if they themselves should attain to office; always to love truth and strive to reclaim all liars; to keep their hands clear from stealing, and their minds from unholy gain; not to conceal anything from the community, nor disclose anything belonging to them to those without, though it were at the hazard of their own lives.

“Initiates, moreover, swear not to communicate to anyone their doctrines in any other way than they have received them; to abstain from robbing the commonwealth; and equally to preserve the writings of the society and the names of the angels. By such oaths they bind those who enter the community.

“Such as are caught in heinous sins are excommunicated from the society; and the excommunicated frequently die a miserable death. For, being bound by oaths and customs, they cannot receive food from any

out of the society, so that they are forced to eat herbs till, their bodies being famished with hunger, they perish. Hence they compassionately receive many of them again when they are at their last gasp, thinking that suffering, approaching unto death, is sufficient for their sins.

“In their verdicts they are most exact and just, and never give sentence if there are less than a hundred of the community present: but what is then decreed is irrevocable. Next to God they have the highest veneration for the name of the lawgiver, Moses, and punish with death any one who blasphemes it. To submit to the elders and to the majority they regard as a duty: hence, when ten of them sit together, no one will speak if the other nine do not agree to it. They avoid spitting before the face, or to the right hand, and are also stricter than all other Jews not to touch any labor on the Sabbath day—for they not only prepare their Sabbath-day’s food the day before, that they may not kindle a fire on that day, but they will not move a vessel out of its place....

Four Segments of the Community

“They are divided, according to the time of leading this mode of life, into four different classes, and the juniors are so much inferior to the seniors, that the latter must wash themselves when they happen to touch the former, as if they had been defiled by a stranger. They live to a great age, so that many of them live to above a hundred years—arising from the simplicity of their diet, as it appears to me, and from their order. They despise suffering, and overcome pain by fortitude. Death, if connected with honor, they look upon as better than long life.

“Concerning the steadfastness of their minds in all cases, the war with the Romans has given ample proof; in which, though they were tortured, racked, burned, squeezed, and subjected to all the instruments of torment, that they might be forced to blaspheme the lawgiver or eat what was forbidden, yet they could not be made to do either of

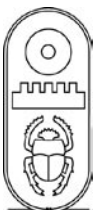
them; nor would they even once flatter their tormentors or shed a tear, but, smiling through their torments and mocking their tormentors, they cheerfully yielded up their souls, as those who would soon receive them back again.

The Immortality of the Soul

“For they firmly believe that the bodies perish and their substance is not enduring, but that the souls are immortal—continue forever and come out of the most subtle ether—are enveloped by their bodies, to which they are attracted through a natural inclination, as if by hedges—and that when freed from the bonds of the body, they, as if released from a long servitude, rejoice and mount upwards. In harmony with the opinion of the Greeks, they say that for the good souls there is a life beyond the ocean, and a region which is never molested either with showers or snow or intense heat—is always refreshed with the gentle gales of wind constantly breathing from the ocean; whilst to the wicked souls they assign a dark and cold corner, full of never-ceasing punishments.

“And it seems to be according to the same opinion that the Greeks assigned to their most valiant, whom they called heroes and demigods, the Island of the Blessed, but to the souls of the wicked the regions of the impious in Hades; as also their fables speak of several there punished, as Sisyphus and Tantalus and Ixion and Tityus. This they teach, partly because they believe that the souls are immortal, and partly for the encouragement of virtue and the discouragement of vice. For good people are made better in their lives by the hope of reward after their death, whilst the passions of the wicked are restrained by the fear they are in that, although they should be concealed in this life, after death they must suffer everlasting punishment....

“There are also some among them who undertake to foretell future events, having been



brought up from their youth in the study of the sacred Scripture, in divers purifications, and in the sayings of the prophets; and it is very seldom that they fail in their predictions.

“There is also another order of Essenes who, in their way of living, customs, and laws exactly agree with the others, excepting only that they differ from them about marriage. For they believe that those who do not marry cut off the principal part of human life—that is, succession—especially that, if all were of the same opinion, the whole race would soon be extinguished....”⁴

From *THE ANTIQUITIES OF THE JEWS*:

“The Essenes, as we call them, were also exempted from this necessity [of taking an oath of allegiance to Herod]. These people live the same kind of life that among the Greeks has been ordered by Pythagoras. I have discoursed more fully about them elsewhere.”⁵

Leaving All to God

“The doctrine of the Essenes delights in leaving all to God. They regard the soul as immortal, and say that the attainment to virtue must be fought for with all our might. Although they send consecrated gifts to the Temple, yet they never bring any sacrifice on account of the different rules of purity, which they observe; hence, being excluded from the common sanctuary, they offer sacrifices in themselves (spiritually). Otherwise, they are in their manner of life the best of people, and employ themselves wholly in the labor of agriculture.

“Their uprightness is to be admired above all others who endeavor to practice virtue; such uprightness...is not of recent date, but has existed among them from times of yore, striving most scrupulously not to disturb the community of goods, and that the rich should not enjoy more of the common property than the poor.”⁶

Endnotes:

¹ Christian Ginsburg, *The Essenes: Their History and Doctrines* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1864).

² Philo Judaeus. “Every Virtuous Person is Free.” 75-91. Translated in Ginsburg, 32-36. Philo texts from: Philo of Alexandria, *Opera Omnia*, Collected and edited by Thomas Mangey, (London: Erlangae, Svmv W. Waltheri, 1749), vol 2, 457 ff and 622 ff. Available online at www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book33.html.

³ Philo Judaeus. *Concerning the Jewish People*. Translated in Ginsburg, 36-40. Philo’s complete work has been lost, however, these fragments on the Essenes were preserved in Eusebius’s

Preparation for the Gospel, Book 8 Sec 11-18. Available online at www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book37.html.

⁴ Flavius Josephus. *The Jewish War*. Book 2, Chapter 8, Sections. 2-13. Translated in Ginsburg, 41-50. Available online at www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/josephus/war2.html.

⁵ Flavius Josephus. *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 13, Chapter 5, Section 9. Translated in Ginsburg, 49-50. The entire text of Josephus’s *Antiquities* is available online at <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/>.

⁶ Flavius Josephus. *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18, Chapter 1, Section 5. Translated in Ginsburg, 52-53.

