Against Apion

by Flavius Josephus · Language: EN

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Overview

Against Apion (Latin: Contra Apionem) is an apologetic work written by the Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, likely completed around 97-98 CE. Its primary purpose is to defend the antiquity, customs, and laws of the Jewish people against various anti-Jewish slanders prevalent in the Hellenistic world, particularly those propagated by the Alexandrian grammarian Apion. Josephus meticulously refutes the accusations made by Apion and other critics, who questioned the Jews' ancient origins, accused them of misanthropy, and distorted their history and religious practices.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first part, Josephus establishes the deep antiquity of the Jewish nation, drawing upon non-Jewish sources like Egyptian, Phoenician, and Chaldean records, and contrasting the consistent Jewish historical tradition with the often contradictory and more recent Greek historical accounts. He argues that the Greeks themselves acknowledged the greater antiquity of Eastern cultures. The second part directly addresses and systematically dismantles the specific calumnies leveled by Apion, such as the distorted narrative of the Exodus, claims of ritual murder, and criticisms of Jewish laws and customs. Josephus champions the moral and philosophical superiority of Jewish monotheism and its divinely ordained laws, presenting Judaism as a venerable and rational way of life. The work is a crucial primary source for understanding Jewish identity in the Roman Empire, the origins of anti-Semitism, and Josephus's historical methodology, offering profound insights into the cultural and religious clashes of the ancient world.

Key Takeaways

- Antiquity and consistent historical records were central to establishing a culture's legitimacy and respect in the ancient world.
- Josephus meticulously refutes slanders against the Jewish people by presenting counter-evidence, logical arguments, and appeals to external historical sources.
- The work highlights the prevalence of anti-Jewish sentiment and stereotypes in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods.
- Josephus champions the superiority of Jewish law and monotheistic principles over polytheistic Greek philosophies and mutable customs.
- Understanding the historical context and the nature of ancient apologetics is crucial for interpreting accusations and defenses from that era.

• The book serves as a foundational text for Jewish apologetics, demonstrating a sophisticated defense of religious and cultural identity.

• Josephus emphasizes the unique and enduring nature of Jewish law, which he argues fosters piety, justice, and community.

Chapter Summaries

Book 1, Sections 1-59: Introduction and the Antiquity of the Jews

Josephus begins by stating his purpose: to defend the Jewish people and their history against false accusations and slanders, particularly those made by Apion. He emphasizes the reliability and antiquity of Jewish historical records, which he argues are meticulously preserved by priests and prophets, unlike the often inconsistent and later historiography of the Greeks. He asserts that the Jews have a continuous and unbroken historical tradition, predating many other nations, and that their records are more trustworthy than the fragmented accounts of Greek writers who often contradict each other or invent stories. He sets the stage for demonstrating the ancient origins of the Jewish nation through external testimonies.

Book 1, Sections 60-105: Greek Ignorance and Manetho's Account

Josephus argues that early Greek writers had limited knowledge of foreign nations, and their historical accounts are often late and unreliable. He then addresses the Egyptian historian Manetho, acknowledging his mention of the Jews but refuting his distorted and malicious account of the Hyksos (shepherd kings) and the Exodus. Josephus provides a more accurate version of these events, drawing on other Egyptian sources, to counter Manetho's portrayal of the Jews as a diseased and rebellious people expelled from Egypt. He highlights Manetho's inconsistencies and the chronological errors in his writings, defending the Jewish narrative of their departure from Egypt.

Book 1, Sections 106-160: Further Testimonies and Refutations

Josephus continues to cite various non-Jewish writers who mention the Jews, both positively and negatively. He brings forward testimonies from authors like Hecataeus of Abdera, Theophrastus, Clearchus, and others, who acknowledge the Jews' unique customs, wisdom, and antiquity. He systematically refutes hostile accounts, particularly those by Lysimachus and Chaeremon, who presented the Exodus as an expulsion of lepers and criminals. Josephus exposes the absurdity and malice behind these slanders, demonstrating their lack of historical basis and their reliance on prejudice rather than fact, further solidifying the defense of Jewish historical integrity.

Book 1, Sections 161-218: The Reliability of Jewish Records and Greek Plagiarism

Josephus reiterates the superior reliability of Jewish historical records, which are carefully preserved and transmitted through a priestly lineage, ensuring their accuracy and continuity. He contrasts this with the fragmented and often contradictory nature of Greek historical writing. He

suggests that many Greek philosophers and lawgivers, including Pythagoras, Plato, and others, borrowed ideas and principles from Jewish traditions without proper attribution. Josephus argues that the antiquity and wisdom of Jewish law and philosophy influenced the broader ancient world, even if unacknowledged, thereby establishing the intellectual and historical precedence of the Jewish people. He concludes Book 1 by preparing for a direct refutation of Apion's specific slanders.

Book 2, Sections 1-88: Refutation of Apion's Calumnies about the Temple

Josephus introduces Apion as a malicious and ignorant detractor, exposing his character flaws and lack of credibility. He then systematically refutes Apion's most infamous slanders against the Jews. These include the absurd accusation that Jews worshipped an ass's head in the Temple, and the grotesque claim that they annually kidnapped a Greek, fattened him, sacrificed him, consumed his flesh, and swore an oath of hatred against Greeks. Josephus meticulously dismantles these fabrications, highlighting their lack of evidence, their inherent absurdity, and Apion's own inconsistencies, demonstrating them to be products of pure malice and anti-Jewish prejudice.

Book 2, Sections 89-144: Apion's Falsehoods about Jewish Customs and History

Josephus continues to dismantle Apion's other accusations, such as claims about Jewish idleness, their supposed lack of contributions to society, and distortions of Jewish history, particularly concerning the Exodus and the founding of Jerusalem. Apion had also claimed Jews were not citizens in Alexandria. Josephus exposes Apion's ignorance regarding Jewish customs, laws, and historical events, showing how Apion either misinterpreted or deliberately fabricated information. He contrasts Apion's baseless slanders with the actual practices and historical facts of the Jewish people, further discrediting Apion as a reliable source and revealing his deep-seated animosity.

Book 2, Sections 145-192: The Excellence of the Mosaic Law

Josephus shifts from refutation to a positive exposition of the Jewish Law, emphasizing its divine origin and ethical superiority. He describes Moses as a divinely inspired lawgiver who established a unique "theocracy," where God is the sole ruler. He explains the monotheistic nature of Judaism and the comprehensive ethical and moral principles embedded in the Law, which govern all aspects of life, from religious observances to civil conduct and personal morality. Josephus argues that these laws are designed to foster piety, justice, and a virtuous society, promoting a deep connection between the individual and God.

Book 2, Sections 193-235: Comparison of Jewish Law with Greek Laws

Josephus contrasts the unity, stability, and divine origin of Jewish law with the diverse, often contradictory, and human-made laws of various Greek city-states. He argues that while Greek laws are numerous and often change, Jewish law is singular, consistent, and immutable, leading to a more stable and harmonious society. He highlights how Jewish law fosters virtues such as

temperance, courage, justice, and piety, leading to a well-ordered community. Josephus suggests that the comprehensive nature of Jewish law, covering both public and private life, makes it superior to the fragmented legal systems of other nations.

Book 2, Sections 236-296: Virtues of Jewish Life and Universal Appeal

Josephus elaborates on how Jewish law promotes specific virtues, such as respect for parents, the importance of educating children, and the sanctity of oaths. He discusses the Jewish emphasis on community, charity, and the readiness to die for their laws and traditions. He argues that the Jewish way of life, guided by divine law, cultivates individuals who are disciplined, ethical, and devoted. Josephus concludes by asserting the universal appeal and influence of Jewish principles, even on those who do not fully adopt them, and reiterates the steadfastness of the Jews in adhering to their traditions, inviting others to recognize the wisdom and antiquity of their heritage.

Themes

- Defense of Judaism
- Antiquity of Jewish history
- Cultural identity and pride
- Historical accuracy vs. slander
- Monotheism vs. Polytheism
- Superiority of Jewish Law

Notable Quotes

- "For our forefathers, having given up the pursuit of other things, devoted themselves to this alone, to learn the laws and the pious worship of God, and to teach them to their children." — Josephus explains the Jewish dedication to their laws and religious education, contrasting it with the pursuits of other nations.
- "For what is there of more consequence for us than to have a true knowledge of the laws, and to be able to interpret them?" — Josephus emphasizes the central importance of understanding and adhering to the divine laws in Jewish life.
- "We have but one God, the Creator of the universe, who is eternal, immutable, and incomprehensible." — Josephus articulates the core tenet of Jewish monotheism, distinguishing it from the polytheistic beliefs of the Greeks and Romans.
- "For it is a matter of common sense that those who are the first to invent anything, and to bring it to perfection, are also the first to be honored for it." — Josephus uses this argument to assert the priority and therefore the greater authority and venerability of Jewish traditions over later Greek ones.

• "For our legislator, who was a man of divine character, and who was superior to all other legislators, did not only instruct us in the knowledge of God, but also in the practice of virtue." — Josephus praises Moses as the ultimate lawgiver, highlighting the comprehensive nature of Jewish law in both theology and ethics.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Against Apion about?

Against Apion is a work by Flavius Josephus defending the Jewish people, their history, customs, and laws against anti-Jewish slanders prevalent in the Hellenistic world. Josephus specifically refutes the accusations made by the Alexandrian grammarian Apion and other critics, asserting the antiquity and moral superiority of Judaism.

Is Against Apion worth reading?

Yes, it is highly worth reading for anyone interested in ancient history, Jewish studies, the origins of religious apologetics, or the history of anti-Semitism. It provides invaluable insight into the cultural and religious conflicts of the Roman period and Josephus's sophisticated defense of his people.

How does Against Apion end?

Spoiler: Josephus concludes by asserting the enduring truth and moral superiority of Jewish law and customs, having systematically refuted all the slanders against his people. He emphasizes the unique and divine origin of Jewish law, contrasting it with the mutable laws of other nations, and highlights its capacity to foster piety, justice, and communal harmony.

Who should read Against Apion?

This book is essential reading for students and scholars of ancient history, Jewish history, early Christianity, classical literature, and philosophy. It also appeals to anyone interested in the historical roots of religious apologetics, cultural identity, and the challenges faced by minority groups in ancient societies.

How long does it take to read Against Apion?

Given its length and the density of its arguments, a realistic reading time for 'Against Apion' would be approximately 240 minutes (4 hours) for a thorough understanding, though it can be read more quickly if skimming.

Questions & Answers

What is the primary purpose of Josephus's "Against Apion"?

The primary purpose of "Against Apion" is to defend the Jewish people and their traditions against widespread anti-Jewish slanders and misconceptions prevalent in the Hellenistic world. Josephus aims to demonstrate the antiquity, nobility, and philosophical depth of Jewish history and law, refuting specific accusations made by critics like Apion, Manetho, and Chaeremon. He seeks to correct historical inaccuracies and present a positive image of Judaism to a Greco-Roman audience, asserting its unique contributions and moral superiority over pagan customs.

Who was Apion, and what was his significance?

Apion was an Egyptian grammarian and anti-Jewish polemicist from the first century CE, known for his eloquent but hostile writings against the Jews. He was a prominent figure in Alexandria and represented a significant voice of anti-Semitism in the Roman Empire. Josephus chose to name his work "Against Apion" because Apion's accusations were particularly virulent, influential, and representative of the broader anti-Jewish sentiment Josephus sought to counter. Apion's slanders included claims of Jewish idleness, disloyalty, and ritual practices like ass-worship and human sacrifice.

What were some of the main accusations Apion and other Hellenistic writers made against the Jews?

Apion and other critics accused Jews of various offenses, including being recent arrivals in Egypt, having no ancient history, being expelled from Egypt due to disease (rather than a divine Exodus), practicing human sacrifice (specifically, annually sacrificing a Greek in the Temple), worshipping an ass's head in their Temple, being disloyal to rulers, being misanthropic, and being generally uncultured and superstitious. These slanders aimed to delegitimize Jewish claims to antiquity and moral standing, fueling prejudice and hostility.

How does Josephus argue for the antiquity of the Jewish people?

Josephus argues for Jewish antiquity by citing ancient non-Jewish sources, particularly Egyptian and Phoenician records, which he claims corroborate the long history of the Jews. He meticulously details the genealogies and historical timelines from the Hebrew Bible, comparing them favorably to the often inconsistent and recent historical accounts of the Greeks. He emphasizes that Jewish records were preserved accurately by priests, unlike the fragmented and often contradictory histories of other nations, thereby establishing the Jews as an ancient and venerable people.

What is Josephus's view on the reliability of Greek historians compared to Jewish records?

Josephus views Greek historians as generally unreliable, often inconsistent, and prone to invention or flattery. He points out their lack of ancient records, their late development of historical writing, and their frequent contradictions regarding their own origins and events. In contrast, he asserts the superior reliability of Jewish records, which he claims were meticulously preserved by a priestly class dedicated to truth, passed down through generations, and divinely

inspired. He argues that the consistency and antiquity of Jewish records far surpass the fragmented and often self-serving narratives of Greek writers.

How does Josephus defend Moses as a lawgiver?

Josephus defends Moses as an ancient and divinely inspired lawgiver, arguing that his laws are superior to those of other nations in their wisdom, justice, and enduring nature. He highlights Moses's unique contribution in establishing a "theocracy" where God is the sole ruler, and laws are immutable and universally applicable. Josephus emphasizes that Moses's laws promote piety, justice, self-control, and communal harmony, contrasting them with the often transient and less comprehensive legal systems of the Greeks and other peoples.

What is the concept of "theocracy" as presented by Josephus?

Josephus introduces and elaborates on the concept of "theocracy" to describe the unique form of government established by Moses for the Jewish people. He explains that in a theocracy, God is the supreme ruler, and all laws are derived directly from divine will. This system ensures that the entire community is dedicated to piety, justice, and adherence to God's commandments. Josephus argues that this form of governance fosters unparalleled stability, moral rectitude, and unity, making it superior to monarchies, oligarchies, or democracies.

How does Josephus address the Exodus narrative in response to critics?

Josephus defends the Exodus narrative by presenting it as a historical event, supported by ancient Egyptian records, albeit often distorted by hostile writers like Manetho. He refutes the slanderous claims that the Jews were expelled as lepers or criminals, asserting their departure was a divinely ordained liberation from slavery. He meticulously dissects and corrects the misrepresentations of the Exodus story by his opponents, emphasizing the Jews' ancient origins and their journey to establish their own land under divine guidance.

What specific slanders regarding Jewish practices does Josephus refute?

Josephus refutes several specific slanders, including the accusation that Jews worshipped an ass's head in their Temple, that they annually captured and ritually sacrificed a Greek foreigner, and that they were misanthropic and disloyal. He systematically dismantles these claims by appealing to the actual practices of Judaism, the nature of the Temple, and the moral principles enshrined in Jewish law, demonstrating their absurdity and malicious intent. He also refutes claims of Jewish idleness and lack of contribution to society.

What role do Egyptian historical records play in Josephus's argument?

Egyptian historical records play a crucial role in Josephus's argument for Jewish antiquity. He frequently cites ancient Egyptian historians, such as Manetho, to demonstrate that non-Jewish sources acknowledge the long presence and significant events involving the Jewish people, even if these accounts are often distorted by prejudice. Josephus uses these records to establish a historical basis for the Exodus and the early history of the Jews, while simultaneously correcting

the misrepresentations found within them, particularly those that portray Jews negatively.

How does Josephus compare Jewish law and customs to those of other nations?

Josephus consistently argues for the superiority of Jewish law and customs over those of other nations. He highlights the monotheistic nature of Judaism, its emphasis on piety, justice, self-control, and the comprehensive nature of its laws, which govern all aspects of life. He contrasts this with the polytheism, moral laxity, and often inconsistent laws of the Greeks and Romans, asserting that Jewish laws are more ancient, divinely inspired, and conducive to a virtuous and stable society.

What is the tone and style of "Against Apion"?

The tone of "Against Apion" is polemical, defensive, and assertive. Josephus employs a scholarly yet passionate style, meticulously citing sources, dissecting arguments, and refuting accusations with logical reasoning and historical evidence. While primarily defensive, it also carries an apologetic and even proud tone as Josephus champions the virtues of his people and their traditions. His language is often direct and forceful, reflecting the seriousness with which he addresses the slanders against Judaism.

What is the historical context in which Josephus wrote this work?

Josephus wrote "Against Apion" in the late first century CE, likely after 93 CE, in Rome. This was a period following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and the suppression of the Jewish revolt. Anti-Jewish sentiment was high, fueled by Roman propaganda and existing Hellenistic prejudices. Josephus, a Jewish historian who had aligned with the Romans, sought to defend his people's reputation and demonstrate their ancient and noble heritage to a Greco-Roman audience, hoping to foster understanding and counter hostility.

How does Josephus explain the Jewish practice of monotheism?

Josephus explains Jewish monotheism as a fundamental and ancient principle established by Moses, where there is only one God, the creator and sustainer of the universe. He emphasizes that this God is invisible, incorporeal, and beyond human representation, thus explaining the absence of idols in Jewish worship. Josephus argues that this pure form of worship is superior to the polytheism and idolatry of other nations, fostering a deeper sense of piety, reverence, and moral conduct among the Jewish people.

What is the lasting importance or legacy of "Against Apion"?

The lasting importance of "Against Apion" lies in its role as a foundational work of Jewish apologetics. It provides invaluable insight into the nature of ancient anti-Semitism and the arguments used to counter it. It preserves fragments of otherwise lost ancient texts and offers Josephus's unique perspective on Jewish history and identity. The work remains a crucial source for understanding the intellectual and cultural interactions between Jews and the Greco-Roman world, and its defense of Jewish antiquity and law continues to be studied for its historical and

theological significance.

Does Josephus discuss the Septuagint in this work?

Yes, Josephus discusses the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, in "Against Apion." He refers to its creation under Ptolemy Philadelphus, emphasizing the king's admiration for Jewish law and the meticulous process by which the translation was made by seventy-two elders. Josephus uses the Septuagint's existence and its royal patronage as further evidence of the antiquity and esteemed nature of Jewish scriptures, countering claims that Jewish texts were obscure or recently fabricated.

How does Josephus counter the claim that Jews are misanthropic?

Josephus counters the claim that Jews are misanthropic by highlighting the universal moral principles embedded in Jewish law, such as hospitality, charity, and justice, which extend to all people. He argues that while Jews maintain their distinct customs, their laws promote a virtuous life that benefits society as a whole. He points out that the accusations of misanthropy often stem from a misunderstanding of Jewish dietary laws and Sabbath observance, which critics misinterpreted as exclusiveness rather than religious devotion.

What is Josephus's argument regarding the consistency and stability of Jewish laws?

Josephus argues that Jewish laws, established by Moses, are uniquely consistent and stable, having remained unchanged for millennia. He contrasts this with the frequent alterations and inconsistencies in the laws of other nations, which are often subject to political whims or popular opinion. He attributes this stability to the divine origin of Jewish law and the unwavering commitment of the Jewish people to uphold it, demonstrating its enduring wisdom and effectiveness in guiding a virtuous life.

What does Josephus say about the Jewish dietary laws?

Josephus explains that Jewish dietary laws are not arbitrary but serve to promote purity, self-control, and a distinct way of life. He argues that these laws, along with other customs, foster a sense of discipline and devotion to God, distinguishing the Jewish people and reinforcing their unique identity. He refutes the notion that these laws are a sign of misanthropy or superstition, instead presenting them as integral to a comprehensive system designed to cultivate moral and spiritual excellence.

What is the overall structure of the book?

The book is divided into two main parts. Book I primarily focuses on establishing the antiquity of the Jewish people and the reliability of their historical records, refuting general accusations of recent origin and lack of history. Josephus cites various ancient authors to support his claims. Book II then addresses specific slanders and calumnies, particularly those made by Apion and other critics, such as accusations of ass-worship, ritual murder, and disloyalty. Josephus systematically dismantles each accusation with historical evidence, logical arguments, and

explanations of Jewish practices.