

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 I

Josephus begins by establishing the deep antiquity of the Jewish people, arguing that their history predates that of the Greeks. He cites Egyptian, Phoenician, and Chaldean records to support the long-standing nature of Jewish civilization, contrasting their consistent historical traditions with the relatively recent and often contradictory accounts of Greek historians. He argues that the lack of Greek mention of Jews is due to the Greeks' own late development in historical record-keeping, not the Jews' non-existence. He sets the stage for refuting general calumnies by asserting the credibility and ancient origins of Jewish culture.

Book II

This book directly confronts the specific accusations made by Apion and other anti-Jewish writers. Josephus systematically dismantles charges regarding the Exodus narrative, the founding of Jerusalem, and alleged misanthropy. He refutes claims of ritual murder and criticizes Apion's historical inaccuracies and logical fallacies. Josephus praises the Jewish Lawgiver, Moses, and the enduring nature of Jewish customs, asserting the moral and philosophical superiority of Jewish monotheism and its divinely ordained laws over the polytheistic and mutable laws of other nations, concluding with a strong defense of Jewish piety and communal life.

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.