

**Sources for Judean Religion Under the Roman Empire:
Community, Audience, Authority, and Attitude toward Gentiles**

1. The tractate *Avot* (“Fathers”), chapter 1, from the *Mishnah* (“Repetition,” “Exercise,” or “Study,” a collection of normative Jewish teachings compiled in the early third century AD)

1. Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly.¹ They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah. 2. Shimon the Righteous² was one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly. He used to say: On three things the world is sustained: on the Torah, on the (Temple) service, and on deeds of loving kindness. 3. Antigonus of Socho received the Torah from Shimon the Righteous. He used to say: Be not like servants who minister unto their master for the sake of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve their master not upon the condition of receiving a reward; and let the fear of Heaven be upon you. 4. Yosi ben Yoezer of Tzeredah and Yosi ben Yochanan of Jerusalem received the Torah from them. Yosi ben Yoezer of Tzeredah said: Let your house be a meetinghouse for the sages and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst. 5. Yosi ben Yochanan of Jerusalem said: Let your house be wide open and let the poor be members of thy household; and do not talk much with women. This was said about one's own wife; how much more so about the wife of one's neighbor. Therefore the sages have said: He who talks too much with women brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Torah and will in the end inherit Gehenna. 6. Joshua ben Perachyah and Nittai the Arbelite received the Torah from them. Joshua ben Perachyah said: Provide for yourself a teacher and get yourself a friend; and judge every man towards merit....10. Shemayah and Avtalion received the Torah from them. Shemayah said: Love work; hate domination; and seek not undue intimacy with the government. ... 12. Hillel and Shammai received the Torah from them. Hillel said: Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow creatures and bringing them close to the Torah. ...15. Shammai said: Make your study of the Torah a fixed habit. Say little and do much, and receive all men with a cheerful face. 16. Rabban Gamaliel said: Provide yourself with a teacher and remove yourself from doubt, and do not accustom yourself to give tithes by estimation. 17. Shimon his son said: All my days have I grown up among the wise and I have not found anything better for a man than silence. Studying Torah is not the most important thing rather fulfilling it. Whoever multiplies words causes sin....2.1 Rabbi said: Which is the straightway that a man should choose? That which is an honor to him and gets him honor from men.

¹ A group of 120 elders who returned from Judah's exile in Babylon in the fifth-century BC with the priest-scribe Ezra and then refined Judah's law.

² The names that follow are a series of Judean teachers in chronological order from around 300 BC to the early second century AD. “Rabbi” of 2.1 refers to Judah the Patriarch, who is credited with compiling the Mishnah around AD 200.

2. The Damascus Document; from the Dead Sea Scrolls (second-first centuries BC)

(Column 1) And now, listen, all those who know justice, and understand the actions of God; for he has a dispute with all flesh and will carry out judgment on those who spurn him. For when they were unfaithful in forsaking him, he hid his face from Israel and from his sanctuary and delivered them up to the sword. However, when he remembered the covenant of the very first, he saved a remnant for Israel and did not deliver them up to destruction....And they realized their sin and knew that they were guilty men; but they were like blind persons and like those who grope for the path over twenty years. And God appraised their deeds, because they sought him with a perfect heart and raised up for them a Teacher of Righteousness, in order to direct them in the path of his heart. And he made known to the last generations what he had done for the last generation, the congregation of traitors....The is the time about which it has been written:³ “like a stray heifer so has Israel strayed,” when the Scoffer arose, who scattered the waters of lies over Israel and made them veer off into a wilderness without path, flattening the everlasting heights, diverging from tracks of justice and removing the boundary with which the very first had marked their inheritance, so that the curses of his covenant would adhere to them, to deliver them up to the sword carrying out the vengeance of the covenant. For they sought easy interpretations, chose illusions, scrutinized loopholes, chose the handsome neck, acquitted the guilty and sentenced the just, violated the covenant, broke the precept, colluded together against the life of the just man, their soul abominated all those who walk in perfection, they hunted them down with the sword and provoked the dispute of the people. And kindled was the wrath of God against his congregation, laying waste all its great number, for his deeds were unclean in front of him....

(Col. 3) With those who remained steadfast in God’s precepts, and those who were left among them, God established his covenant with Israel forever, revealing to them hidden matters in which all Israel had gone astray: his holy Sabbaths and his glorious feasts, his just stipulations and his truthful paths, and the wishes of his will which man must do in order to live by them....But they had deviled themselves with hidden sin and unclean paths....But God... atoned for their failings and pardoned their sins. And he built for them a safe home in Israel, such as there has not been since ancient times, not even till now....Those who remained steadfast in it will acquire eternal life, and all the glory of Adam is for them. As God established for them by means of Ezekiel the prophet, saying:⁴ “The priests and the Levites and the sons of Zadok who maintained the service of my temple when the children of Israel strayed far away from me, shall offer the fat and the blood.” “The priests” are the converts of Israel who left the land of Judah; and “the Levites” are those who joined them; and the sons of Zadok are the chosen of Israel, “those called by name” who stood up at the end of days....

(Col. 19) ...Each one did what was right [in his own] eyes and each one has chosen the stubbornness of his heart. They did not keep apart from the people and from their sins. And they rebelled with insolence, walking on the path of the wicket, about whom God says, “Their wine is the serpents’ venom and the head of cruel, harsh asps.” The serpents are the kings of the peoples and the wine, their paths and the asps’ head is the head of the kings of Greece, which comes to carry out vengeance against them....

³ Hosea 4.16 in the Hebrew Bible.

⁴ Ezekiel 44.15 in the Hebrew Bible.

3. Philo of Alexandria (a Judean-Egyptian philosopher, active AD 20-50), *Life of Moses*

(Book I.1) I have conceived the idea of writing the life of Moses, who, according to the account of some persons, was the lawgiver of the Jews, but according to others only an interpreter of the sacred laws, the greatest and most perfect man that ever lived, having a desire to make his character fully known to those who ought not to remain in ignorance respecting him, (2) for the glory of the laws which he left behind him has reached over the whole world, and has penetrated to the very furthest limits of the universe; and those who do really and truly understand him are not many, perhaps partly out of envy, or else from the disposition so common to many persons of resisting the commands which are delivered by lawgivers in different states, since the historians who have flourished among the Greeks have not chosen to think him worthy of mention....(19) And when the king's daughter saw that he was more perfect than could have been expected at his age, and when from his appearance she conceived greater good will than ever towards him, she adopted him as her son, having first put in practice all sorts of contrivances to increase the apparent bulk of her belly....(20) Therefore the child being now thought worthy of a royal education and a royal attendance, was not, like a mere child, long delighted with toys and objects of laughter and amusement.... (21) And immediately he had all kinds of masters, one after another, some coming of their own accord from the neighbouring countries and the different districts of Egypt, and some being even procured from Greece by the temptation of large presents. But in a short time he surpassed all their knowledge, anticipating all their lessons by the excellent natural endowments of his own genius.... (23) Accordingly he speedily learnt arithmetic, and geometry, and the whole science of rhythm and harmony and metre, and the whole of music, by means of the use of musical instruments, and by lectures on the different arts, and by explanations of each topic; and lessons on these subjects were given him by Egyptian philosophers, who also taught him the philosophy which is contained in symbols, which they exhibit in those sacred characters of hieroglyphics, as they are called, and also that philosophy which is conversant about that respect which they pay to animals which they invest with the honours due to God. And all the other branches of the encyclical education he learnt from Greeks; and the philosophers from the adjacent countries taught him Assyrian literature and the knowledge of the heavenly bodies so much studied by the Chaldaeans. (24) And this knowledge he derived also from the Egyptians, who study mathematics above all things, and he learnt with great accuracy the state of that art among both the Chaldaeans and Egyptians, making himself acquainted with the points in which they agree with and differ from each other....

(Book II.193)⁵ A certain man, illegitimately born of two unequal parents, namely, an Egyptian father and a Jewish mother, and who disregarded the national and hereditary customs which he had learnt from her, as it is reported, inclined to the Egyptian impiety, being seized with admiration for the ungodly practices of the men of that nation; (194) for the Egyptians, almost alone of all men, set up the earth as a rival of the heaven considering the former as entitled to honours equal with those of the gods, and giving the latter no especial honour...(196) Accordingly, this man of mixed race, having had a quarrel with some one of the consecrated and well-instructed house of Israel, becoming carried away by his anger, and unable to restrain himself, and being also an admirer and follower of the impiety of the Egyptians, extended his impiety from earth to heaven, cursing it with his accursed, and

⁵ Compare this passage to Leviticus 24.10-15 in the Hebrew Bible.

polluted, and defiled soul, and with his wicked tongue, and with the whole power of all his vocal organs in the superfluity of his ungodliness;... (201) On this account Moses ordered the man to be thrown into prison and bound with chains; and then he addressed propitiatory prayers to God, begging him to be merciful to the necessities of the external senses (by means of which we both see what it is not proper to see, and hear what it is not lawful to hear), and to point out what the author of such a strange and unprecedented blasphemy and impiety ought to suffer. (202) And God commanded him to be stoned, considering, as I imagine, the punishment of stoning to be a suitable and appropriate one for a man who had a stony and hardened heart...(203) But after the punishment of this impious murderer, a new commandment was enacted, which had never before been thought worthy of being reduced to writing; but unexpected innovations cause new laws to be devised for the repression of their evils. At all events, the following law was immediately introduced: "Whoever curses God shall be guilty of sin, and whoever names the name of the Lord shall Die."... (205) But, as it seems, he is not now speaking of that God [*in the first half of this command*] who was the first being who had any existence, and the Father of the universe, but of those who are accounted gods in the different cities; and they are falsely called gods, being only made by the arts of painters and sculptors, for the whole inhabited world is full of statues and images, and erections of that kind, of whom it is necessary however to abstain from speaking ill, in order that no one of the disciples of Moses may ever become accustomed at all to treat the appellation of God with disrespect; for that name is always most deserving to obtain the victory, and is especially worthy of love. (206) But if any one were, I will not say to blaspheme against the Lord of gods and men, but were even to dare to utter his name unseasonably, he must endure the punishment of death....

4. A Greek inscription from Aphrodisias (in modern Turkey). Building is from the third century AD; inscription is on a stone block (photograph below) has been dated to between the late second and fifth centuries AD. Face A is earlier than Face B.

Text of Face A

1-5 God the helper

[. . (?)]

the ones listed below (members) of
the decany⁶ of the disciples of the law
(also known as) those who fervently
praise God,

6-8 erected for the relief of suffering in
the community from their own
funds (this) memorial

9 Iael, president with (his/her)
son Iosouas, head
Theodotus Palatinos with (his) son
Hilarianos

⁶ A committee of ten members.

- Samouel, leader of the decany [restoration uncertain],
proselyte Ioses,⁷ son of Iesseos
15 Beniamin, psalm-singer [restoration uncertain]
Ioudas, the sweet-tempered
Ioses, proselyte
Sabbatios, son of Amachios
Emmonios, God-worshipper⁸
Antoninos, God-worshipper
20 Samoeul, son of Politianos
[six names added later]

Text of Face B

- [Three fragmentary lines]
Ioseph (son of) Zenon
5 Zenon Iakov * Manases Ioph
Ioudas (son of) Eusebios
Eorrasios (son of) Kallikarpos
Biotikos * Ioudas (son of)
Amphianos
Eugenios, goldsmith
10 [approximately forty-one more names]
...
34 And those who are Godfearers
Zenon councillor⁹
Tertullos, councillor * Diogenes,
35 councillor
Onesimos, councillor * Zenon (son
of) Logianos (?) councillor
Antipeos, councillor * Antichos,
councillor
Romanos, councillor * Aponerios, councillor
40 ... [approximately forty-one more names]



⁷ Usually considered to refer to a full convert to Judean religion (i.e. undergoing circumcision and practicing the whole of the Jewish Torah).

⁸ Usually understood to mean a non-Judean who respected and participated in Judean religion but did not fully observe the Torah (i.e. not undergoing circumcision).

⁹ Refers to a member of the local upper-class, who was elected to the city council of Aphrodisias.