The Letter of Aristeas (selection)

Aristeas to Philocrates (Letter of Aristeas), ed. and trans. Moses Hadas (New York: Harper, 1951), 153–67
translation adapted by David M. Freidenreich

128 It is worthwhile to mention briefly the explanations [the high priest, Eleazar] gave in reply to our inquiries, for I believe that most people feel some curiosity concerning passages in the law dealing with food and drink and animals regarded as impure. 129 When we inquired, then, why it was that, creation being one, some things are regarded as impure for food and some even to the touch (for the Law is scrupulous in most things, but in these doubly scrupulous), he began his reply as follows:

130 "You observe what far-reaching effects are exercised by conversation and association: By associating with the evil, humans become perverted and are miserable their whole life long, but if they consort with the wise and prudent, they rise above ignorance and achieve progress in life. 131Our lawgiver, then, in the first place laid down the principles of piety and justice and expounded them point by point, not only by prohibitions but also through commandments, and he made clear the punishments and visitations that would be inflicted by God upon the guilty. 132But first of all he taught that God is one, and that His power is made manifest in all things, and that every place is filled with His sovereignty, and that nothing done by humans on earth secretly escapes His notice, but that all that anyone does and all that is to be is known to Him. 133When he had elaborated these points and made them plain he showed that even if a person but think of doing evil, and not only once the deed is done, he cannot escape notice; thus throughout the Law he displayed the power of God.

134"After he set down these premises he showed that all other peoples except ourselves believe that there are many gods, though humans are themselves much more powerful than the gods they vainly revere. 135They make idols of stone and wood and declare that these are images of persons who made discoveries useful in life, and they worship these obviously senseless images. 136That anyone should be made a god because of some invention he has contrived is altogether foolish; for such persons only took things already created and put them together and showed that they possessed further usefulness, but they did not themselves create the objects! Therefore, to deify fellow humans is idle and foolish. 137Even in our day there are many who are more inventive and more learned than the men of old, and yet they are the first to worship them. Those who devise and fashion such fables are usually regarded as the wisest of the Greeks. 138What need even to speak of other foolish people, Egyptians and their like, who have put their trust in wild beasts and most creeping creatures and animals and worship these, and to these offer sacrifice, whether alive or dead?

139"When therefore our lawgiver, equipped by God for insight into all things, had surveyed each particular, he fenced us about with unbreakable palisades and walls of iron to prevent our mixing with any of the other nations in any way, so that we might remain pure in body and in spirit, free from false beliefs, worshipping the one God omnipotent over all creation. 140Therefore the priests who are the guides of the Egyptians, who looked closely into many things and are experienced with such matters, have named us, 'people of God,' a title applicable only to those who revere the true God, not to those who are concerned with food and drink and clothing, 141who are focused on these things. Among our people, however, these things are reckoned as

worthless. Throughout the whole of life we instead contemplate the sovereignty of God. [142]And therefore, so that we should be polluted by none nor become infected with perversions by associating with worthless persons, he has hedged us about on all sides with prescribed purifications in matters of food and drink and touch and hearing and sight. [143]In general all things are similarly constituted with respect to natural reason, as all are governed by a single power, yet in each and every case there is a profound logic for abstaining from some things and partaking of others. For the sake of illustration I will run over one or two details and provide an explanation.

[144]"Do not accept the contemptible idea that it was out of regard for mice and weasels and other such creatures that Moses ordained these laws with such scrupulous care. On the contrary, these laws have all been solemnly drawn up for the sake of justice, to promote holy contemplation and the perfection of character. [145]All of the winged creatures which we use—such as pigeons, doves, locusts, partridges, and also geese and similar fowl—are gentle and distinguished by cleanliness, and they feed of grain and pulse. [146]But you will find that all the winged creatures which are forbidden are wild and carnivorous and with their strength oppress the rest and procure their food with injustice at the expense of the tame birds mentioned above. And not only these, but they also seize lambs and kids, and they do violence to men too, both the dead and the living. [147]By calling these creatures 'impure,' he set up a symbol that those for whom the legislation was drawn up must practice righteousness in spirit. They must not trust in their own strength to oppress anyone, nor rob anyone of anything, but must guide their lives in accordance with justice, just as the gentle creatures among the birds above mentioned consume plants that grow from the earth and do not tyrannize to the destruction of their kindred.

[148]"By such examples, then, the lawgiver has provided for people of understanding a symbol that they must be just and achieve nothing by violence, nor, relying on their own strength, may they oppress others. [149]For if it is not even lawful to touch the aforementioned creatures because of their natural habits, must we not in every way guard our own characters from degenerating to a similar state? [150]All the regulations concerning what is permissible with reference to these and other creatures, then, he has set forth by way of allegory. For the 'parting of the hoof' (that is, the cloven foot) is a symbol to discriminate in each of our actions with a view to what is right; [151]for the strength of the whole body and its energy depend upon the shoulders and legs. Through these symbols he signifies that we must do all things with discrimination and with a view to righteousness. An additional signification is that we are set apart from all peoples, [152]for most of the rest of humanity defile themselves through their promiscuous unions, working great unrighteousness, and whole countries and cities pride themselves on these vices. Not only do they have intercourse with males, but they even defile mothers and daughters. We, however, have been kept apart from such things. [153]Moreover, the lawgiver has characterized those who possess the aforementioned trait of separation as possessing the trait of memory also. For to those who think, 'that which has a split hoof and chews its cud' clearly signifies memory, [154]as the chewing of the cud is nothing else than recalling life and its subsistence, since life appears to subsist through taking food. …

[161]"You have now received demonstration of the high worth of the doctrine concerning separation and memory, according to our interpretation of the parting of the hoof and the chewing of the cud. The legislation was not laid down at random or by some caprice of the

mind, but with a view to truth and as a token of right reason. [162]For by detailed injunctions concerning food and drink and touch he bids us to do nothing and hearken to nothing heedlessly and not, by misusing the power of reason, to resort to injustice. [163]In the case of animals too the same principle may be discovered. The character of the weasel and the mouse and the rest of those enumerated is injurious. [164]Mice ravage and injure everything, not only for their own feeding but in such a way that whatever they have set about injuring they make wholly useless to man. [165]The breed of weasels is peculiar, for besides the propensity mentioned they have a defiling characteristic: they conceive through the ears and give birth through the mouth. [166]And hence a similar characteristic in human beings is impure: when they have given body in speech to what they have received through hearing and have entangled others in evils, they have engendered no ordinary uncleanness and are themselves utterly tainted with the pollution of their impurity. Your king is quite right in putting such persons to death, as I am informed he does."

[167]And I said, "I suppose you mean the informers; he does indeed consistently visit torments and painful forms of death upon them." "Yes," he replied, "it is these people I mean. To watch for the destruction of others is an unholy thing. [168]Our law forbids us to injure anyone, by word or deed."

The points I have briefly run over have shown you that all these norms have been regulated with a view to justice and that nothing has been set down through Scripture heedlessly or in the spirit of myth, but rather in order that throughout our life and in our actions we may practice justice towards all men, being mindful of the sovereignty of God. [169]All that is said of food, then, and of impure creeping things and of animals is directed toward justice and just intercourse among humans.

[170] To me he seemed to make a defense in every respect excellent. With reference to the calves and rams and he-goats which were brought for sacrifice he added, moreover, that men must take these from the herds and flocks, and must sacrifice tame animals and nothing wild, so that those who offer the sacrifices, bearing in mind the symbolic meaning of the legislator, might be conscious of no arrogance in themselves. For it is of the entire character of his own soul that he who brings a sacrifice makes an offering. [171]His own discourse on these matters too I believe it is worth while to set down. Knowing your love of learning, my dear Philocrates, I have been induced to clarify the sanctity and the inherent character of the law.