

ABSTRACT

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The Therapeutae of Philo's *De Vita Contemplativa* are reported to have eaten simple meals consisting of bread, salt and herbs. (The texts will be examined and discussed briefly). Each of these three elements has some potential symbolic significance (and will be discussed briefly as such), but the meal as a whole seems to represent an ascetic ideal comparable with other ancient models. Philo himself gives as many as three rationales for this diet. First, it is a sort of response to the needs of the body and the natural impulses of hunger and thirst; the meal is presented not merely as moderate but as a form of opposition to those desires, a kind of conscientious objection to them. Second and in close relation to the first, the ascetic diet of the Therapeutae is seen as a sort of technical response to the body's make-up and its propensity to respond to certain foods and drinks in certain ways; this diet is understood to lead to appropriate conduct, unlike other foods and drinks that excite desire. Third, the diet of the Therapeutae is presented in some symbolic relationship, involving both imitation and difference, to the showbread of the Jerusalem Temple. This relation to sacrificial food is particularly interesting and bears comparison with other philosophically-related asceticism in Greco-Roman antiquity, which often seems to have an uneasy relationship to the "cuisine of sacrifice." This last point will be discussed further with some comparative material.