In the fateful years after 70 CE when Yohanan ben Zakkai and a small group of rabbinic sages in Yavneh began to formulate a new theology in reaction to the destruction of the Temple, another pious Jew of similar background, Flavius Josephus, composed a passionate tract in which he tried to define the essential character of Judaism. Among the prime characteristics singled out by Josephus for praise in the *Contra Apionem* was the remarkable unanimity of Jews in their ideas about the nature of God and the correct way to worship him (*C.Ap.* 2.179–81):

To this cause above all we owe our admirable harmony. Unity and identity of religious belief, perfect uniformity in habits and customs, produce a very beautiful concord in human character. Among us alone will be heard no contradictory statements about God, such as are common among other nations, not only on the lips of ordinary individuals under the impulse of some passing mood, but even boldly propounded by philosophers; some putting forward crushing arguments against the very existence of God, others depriving Him of His providential care for mankind. Among us alone will be seen no difference in the conduct of our lives. With us all act alike, all profess the same doctrine about God, one which is in harmony with our Law and affirms that all things are under His eye. Even our womenfolk and dependants would tell you that piety must be the motive of all our occupations in life. (Loeb translation).

Doubtless Josephus exaggerated for the sake of his argument, for he asserted in *C.Ap.* that one of the signs that Jewish religious traditions were superior to Greek was the confusing variety of the latter, and he could afford to idealise Judaism because he does not seem

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to have envisaged any Jewish readers of this work who might have contradicted him. But precisely the importance of this claim in Josephus’ apologetic makes implausible any suggestion that it lacked foundation altogether.

Josephus’ assertion of the theological unanimity of the Jews is all the more striking because of his willing confession in each of his three other published works (the War, the Antiquities and the Life) that Judaism embraced at least three distinctive philosophies or tendencies (Pharisaism, Sadduceeism and Essenism), which differed both with regard to practice (i.e. halakha) and belief (e.g. about divine intervention in human affairs and life after death). Josephus referred to two of these earlier writings in a number of places in Contra Apionem, so he was presumably prepared for his readers to compare his apparently contradictory evaluations of variety within Judaism. It is thus reasonable to assume that he did not himself see his different accounts as contradictory: in some sense, the Jews of these different haireseis all agreed on the theological principles fundamental to Judaism. Thus Josephus himself, despite his profession of adherence to the views of the Pharisees in his public life, could write with admiration about other types of Judaism, most notably the Essenes.

Josephus’ tolerance of variety within Judaism left only a little space for the concept of heresy. In his eyes there might be bad Jews, like Tiberius Julius Alexander, who lacked piety towards God in so far as he did not stand by ancestral customs, and there might be odd Jews, like Bannus, who espoused distinctive views, but although he wrote critically about the harshness of the Sadducees in their interpretation of the law, he did not condemn them altogether, and although he criticised false prophets for their misleading messages, he did not suggest that their theology of prophecy was itself at fault. The closest he came to condemning one type of Judaism as heresy

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3 On the readers at whom C. Apionem was aimed, see P. Bilde, Flavius Josephus (1988), pp. 120–1.
7 A.J. 20.100.
8 Vita 11.
9 A.J. 20.199.