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It's Greek to Them The Apocrypha in the Eyes of the Sages

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Sources of the Hanukkah Story

Today Hanukkah is perhaps the best-known Jewish holiday throughout the world. However, despite its popularity, Hanukkah is the holiday with the least textual basis. The story of Hanukkah does not appear in the Tanakh. And while there is a Talmudic tractate named for the one-day festival of Purim (*"Massekhet Megillah"*), only a few pages of the Babylonian Talmud (B. Shabbat 21b-23a) are devoted to Hanukkah, including one small paragraph describing the historical event, and a few pages dealing with the laws of lighting Hanukkah candles.

The Hanukkah tale in the Talmud only tells part of the story: only the miracle of the oil is mentioned. The story of the military victory, described in the siddur as the deliverance of "the many at the hands of the few", is entirely left out. To complete our knowledge of Hanukkah we need to consult the Books of the Maccabees contained in the "Apocrypha," a collection of books which have some similarities to the books of the Tanakh, but were not canonized by the Sages.

Is reading the Books of Maccabees, or other non-canonical works, permitted?

Talmudic sources show that the Sages discouraged and sometimes forbade the use of non-canonical texts, and thus the question arises as to the permissibility of consulting the books of Maccabees to learn about Hanukkah.

In the Mishnah (Sanhedrin X, 1), Rabbi Akiva issues a shocking statement: one who reads "*Sefarim Hitzonim*" ("external books") has no share in the world to come! **[Source 1]** While it is difficult to precisely identify what Rabbi Akiva means by the "*Sefarim HaHitzonim*", it is possible that "*Sefarim Hitzonim*" refers to the Apocrypha or parts thereof (ἀπόκρυφα – "those hidden away" being an approximate Greek translation of the Hebrew term which means "external books" or "the books left out"). Would that mean that reading the Books of Maccabees is forbidden?

Further Talmudic investigation reveals that not only are "*Sefarim Hitzonim*" forbidden; the study of *any* wisdom found in a book other than the Tanakh is forbidden. Some Talmudic passages take this attitude so far as to even forbid studying *anything* that isn't actually Torah! **[Sources 5,6,8]** This seems to contradict what we know about respected Torah authorities such as

Maimonides, Nahmanides and others, who, in addition to being learned in Torah were also known as physicians, philosophers, etc.

A close examination of these Talmudic texts using the principal commentaries and keeping an eye on their chronology will help us understand the intention of these statements, and how they should affect our lives today.

Greek Wisdom

The earliest prohibition against reading non-Tanakh literature is found in a Baraita **[Source 5]** stating that during the Hasmonean dynasty teaching "*Hokhmat Yevanit*" – "Greek wisdom" was prohibited. In this source, Greek *language* was not forbidden, only "Greek *wisdom*". Rashi understands "Greek wisdom" as "the language of wisdom, which courtiers speak, and the rest of the nation doesn't understand". Presumably, Rashi is referring to Greek rhetoric, a highly stylized form of speech which most ordinary people would not be able to understand. This fits the story found in the Baraita, where a traitor used "*Hokhmat Yevanit*" to pass a secret to the enemy without his compatriots understanding what he was saying. As a result of this incident of treason the Hasmoneans forbade teaching ways of speaking that would mainly be used for the purpose of trickery.

The next ban occurred during the "War of Quietus" in 115-117 C.E. **[Source 6]**. This Mishnah describes an edict forbidding teaching one's child the Greek *language*. But the Talmud is quick to correct that. Bringing up other traditions **[Source 7]** which show that speaking in Greek is permitted, it concludes, once again, that teaching or speaking the *language* is not forbidden, but only "*Hokhmat Yevanit*". (The Talmud further notes that there are exceptions even to this rule. Those close to the government, such as the family of Rabban Gamliel, are permitted to learn "*Hokhmat Yevanit*".)

Studying Torah Day and Night: the anecdote

Lastly, an anecdote appears in the Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 99b **[Source 8]**, in which Rabbi Yishmael is asked by his nephew if he may learn "*Hokhmat Yevanit*", since he already completed the entire Torah. Rabbi Yishmael answers him by quoting the verse (Joshua 1:8) "And you shall study it day and night," – studying anything other than Torah may only be done at a time that is neither day nor night, i.e., never. The Gemara points out that this is not a unanimous opinion, for there are other explanations of the verse from Joshua: R. Shemuel bar Nahmani understands the verse as a blessing, not a commandment – God blessed Joshua to merit continuous study of Torah. Earlier on this page of Talmud we find an opinion that the verse contains a commandment to study Torah at *some point* during the day, and *some point* during the night. In times of difficulty, if someone recited the Shema morning and evening, they have fulfilled the commandment to study Torah at least in a minimally acceptable way. Rabbi Yishmael's opinion, therefore, is a minority opinion.

This story also appears in the Jerusalem Talmud (Pe'ah I, 1) **[Source 9]**, and there the conclusion is even clearer. Noting that people have a Biblical obligation to teach their children a trade, which would not be possible if were forbidden to stop learning Torah day or night, the Talmud explains that the real reason for forbidding studying *Hokhmat Yevanit* is not the verse from Joshua, but rather the fear that this could assist future traitors. The Yerushalmi even permits teaching one's daughters *Yevanit*, since women were not suspected of treason.

How can we reconcile this story in the Bavli and the Yerushalmi with the two previously-mentioned passages **[Sources 5 & 6]**, which, chronologically, would have preceded this incident? Why would a student ask his uncle if he may study something that a Baraita and a Mishnah already forbade? When the Gemara mentions that R. Shemuel bar Nahmani disagrees with Rabbi Yishmael, why is there no mention of the curse of the Hasmoneans or the edict at the time of Quietus's war?

It seems that both Talmuds understand that even in the times of the Hasmoneans and Quietus, there never truly was a complete ban against non-Torah studies, particularly if they could be useful for one's profession; the rabbis were actually only concerned with the danger of training future informers. Even the most contested subject, *Hokhmat Yevanit* was allowed to be studied by the members of Rabban Gamliel's household, since they maintained close ties with the government. **[Source 7]**

"*Sefarim Hitzonim*"

And what about Rabbi Akiva's harsh statement **[Source 1]**, that one who reads "*Sefarim Hitzonim*" loses her or his portion in the world to come? The Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 100b) **[Source 2]** asserts that this refers specifically to "*Sifrei Minim*" – books of sectarians or heretics (at the time these were, most probably, the Gospels or early Gnostic texts – see Rashi). The Gemara then goes on to report that Rav Yosef said one is also forbidden to read the book of Ben Sira, another book found today in the Apocrypha. After some debate, Rav Yosef himself then modifies his previous statement, saying "the good parts of it may be read". The conclusion is that heretical books must not be read, while neutral, secular books may be read as long as it is for some benefit.

The Yerushalmi's understanding of the Mishnah in Sanhedrin (X, 1) differs. **[See Source 3]** To the Yerushalmi, the banned "External Books" consist of the works of Ben Sira and Ben La'anah and the like. The Yerushalmi permits reading "the works of Homer and any books written thereafter." An explanation is given: "for they were given to read, not to toil over." It seems that the Yerushalmi permits a Jew to read Homer because it is clearly secular literature, as opposed to Ben Sira which is religious in nature and Biblical in style but not accepted into the canon. In my opinion we should read the Yerushalmi in light of *Kohelet Rabbah* which forbids reading *anything* other than the 24 books of the Tanakh, does not mention that Homer is permitted, and gives the reason "for they were given to read, not to toil over" as the reason for *forbidding* any

other books. **[Source 4]** *Reading* Ben Sira or other similar books is not forbidden; toiling over them, *studying* them the way one studies Bible, is forbidden. There actually was no prohibition to merely read them, if one could do so in the same way one read Homer.

Interestingly, the Meiri (12th century Talmudic commentator in Provence), in his commentary on the Mishnah of Sanhedrin, qualifies Rabbi Akiva's statement that reading "*Sefarim Hitzonim*" disinherits one from his or her *olam haba* (world to come), saying that Rabbi Akiva forbids reading those in order to "follow in their ways and beliefs", but if one reads merely "to understand and to rule" (since sometimes halakhic decisions depend on such knowledge), it is in fact permissible. Even reading "*Sifrei Minim*" would be permitted if done in this way.

The Status of the Books of Maccabees

We cannot be certain to which books Rabbi Akiva referred when he forbade reading "*Sefarim Hitzonim*". According to the Bavli's understanding, non-canonical books (or parts of books) which are not heretical and are useful are not forbidden. According to this interpretation, the books of the Maccabees would be permitted. And although it would seem that the Yerushalmi and especially Kohelet Rabbah *would* include Maccabees and the other Apocrypha in the "*Sefarim HaHitzonim*", merely reading them without treating them like Tanakh would still be permitted. We can therefore conclude that according to all, casually reading Maccabees for the purpose of better understanding Hanukkah is acceptable.

Hanukkah: the Battle for the "Pure" Judaism?

When the Syrian-Greeks invaded the Land of Israel, they tried to Hellenize (modernize) Judaism in a drastic way – they forbade the study of Torah and the observance of Shabbat, and placed an idol in the Temple. The Hasmoneans reacted by going to the other extreme, even killing Hellenized Jews. They tried to develop a "pure" form of Judaism that kept all outside influences out. Throughout the Talmudic period there were attempts at prohibiting the use of non-Torah texts and sources, but as we have seen in each of these instances, the attempt was not successful. "Useful" secular and non-canonical sources remained permitted. Judaism was never meant to be completely divorced from the rest of the world, as long as its principles and beliefs remained intact.

It is ironic that had the Jews followed the Hasmoneans' strict rulings as recorded in *Massekhet Sotah*, we might not know about much of the story of the Hanukkah festival which they themselves instituted. Interestingly, *the* Jewish holiday which *could* be seen as celebrating religious extremism and intolerance is actually the one for which understanding it requires reliance and consulting non-Biblical and non-Talmudic texts. The story of those who fought against the Greeks is known to us today only because it was preserved in Greek!

Happy Hanukkah

חנוכה שמח