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on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*

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Greek Wisdom in Babylonia

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Scholars of ancient Jewish history often invoke the “ban on Greek wisdom” in discussions of rabbinic attitudes to Hellenistic culture in the Greco-Roman world.¹ This paper argues that the passage that tells us of this ban belongs to a different time, place, and conflict and that it teaches us something significant about the cultural matrix of the Babylonian Talmud, the diversity among Babylonian Jews, and the dynamics between them and their Christian neighbors.

We know of a rabbinic objection to the instruction or study of Greek from the Mishnah, the Tosefta, and both Talmuds.² The Mishnah tells us that “during the war of Kitos,³ they decreed ... that a man may not teach

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¹ Important treatments include S. Lieberman, “The Alleged Ban on Greek Wisdom,” in *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission, Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the I Century BCE–IV Century CE* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), 100–14; E. E. Hallewy, “Concerning the Ban on Greek Wisdom” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 41 (1972): 269–74; D. Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians in Conflict* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 201–2, 215; M. Hirshman, *Torah for the Entire World* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999), 134–46; S. Stern, *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 176–81; R. J. Z. Werblowsky, “Greek Wisdom and Proficiency in Greek,” in *Paganisme, judaïsme, christianisme – influences et affrontements dans le monde antique: mélanges offerts à Marcel Simon* (Paris: de Boccard, 1978), 55–60. See more in the references below.

² I have restricted myself in this article to the specific literary trajectory of the sources opposing Greek learning in particular, as opposed to Gentile wisdom more generally. For a general discussion of Gentile wisdom in rabbinic literature, see Hirshman, *Torah*, 129–49.

³ Printed editions read “Titus”; “Kitos” according to MSS Kaufmann, Parma, and Cambridge. There is some debate about the identity of “Kitos” and the war named after him. A long list of scholars equates “Kitos” with Lusius Quietus, the governor of Judaea under Trajan, but even if that is correct, it is unclear what events are meant in the Mishnah here; see P. Schäfer, *The History of the Jews in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2003), 141–42 and M. Hadas-Lebel, *Jerusalem against Rome*, trans. R. Fréchet (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 164–66. D. Rokeah, “The War of Kitos: Towards the Clarification of a Philological-Historical Problem,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 23 (1972): 79–84, offers a critique of the Quietus identification and suggests that “Kitos” is Quintus Marcius Turbo and that the “War of Kitos” is the campaign against the Jews in Alexandria, in which he played a central role.

his son Greek” (mSot 9.15). We read in the Tosefta that an exception was made in the case of the Patriarch Rabban Gamaliel’s house, in which Greek was allowed to be taught to the sons since they are “dealing with the government” (tSot 15.8). The Tosefta also records another tradition, unrelated to this decree, which argues that the teaching of a Greek book comes into conflict with the instruction in Joshua 1:8 to “meditate on [the Torah] day and night” (tAZ 1.20).

Read with the Mishnah’s report on the ban, the contrast in the Tosefta between the study of Greek and the study of Torah suggests that the ban was motivated by an ideological tension between Jewish culture and Greek culture. The Palestinian Talmud’s discussion of the ban opens with the tradition from the Tosefta, but its ultimate function is to neutralize the cultural tension that underlies that tradition:

They asked Rabbi Yehoshua, “Is it permitted for a man to teach his son Greek?” He told them, “Let him teach him at a time which is neither day nor night. For it was written, ‘You shall meditate on it day and night’ (Josh 1:8).”

Based on this, a man would be forbidden to teach his son a profession because it is written “You shall meditate on it day and night” (Josh 1:8)! But Rabbi Yishmael taught, “‘Choose life’ (Deut 30:19) – this refers to a profession.”

Rabbi Abba son of Rabbi Hiyyah bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: (the prohibition on Greek was instituted) on account of informants.

Rabbi Abbahu in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: A man is permitted to teach his daughter Greek, because it is like a jewel for her. Shimeon b. Abba heard this and said: “Because Rabbi Abbahu wants to teach his daughter (Greek) he attributes this to Rabbi Yohanan!? Let (punishment) come upon me if I ever heard it⁴ from Rabbi Yohanan.” (ySot 9:15 24c = yPe’ah 1:1 15c)

The Yerushalmi argues that Rabbi Yehoshua’s application of Joshua 1:8 would also mean that learning a trade is prohibited, which is clearly not the case; this verse thus cannot serve as a reason for the ban. This implied analogy between the study of Greek and professional training also works to frame the conversation pragmatically rather than ideologically. The Talmud then adduces R. Yohanan’s explanation that the ban was decreed on account of informants who would communicate with the authorities in Greek. The passage concludes with a discussion of R. Abbahu’s attribution to R. Yohanan of a teaching that supports the instruction of Greek to one’s daughters. The Yerushalmi thus considers the possibility that the ban is motivated by a cultural opposition between Torah study and Greek learning, and rejects this possibility: the ban is a practical solution to a political problem, and

⁴ Reading with MS Vat. for ySot as well as most extant versions of yPe’ah: אם שמעתיה; מר’ יוחנן; MS Leiden for ySot has אם לא שמעתיה מר’ יוחנן, in which case this clause presents a response by R. Abbahu.

where there is less political danger (i.e., with women), the teaching of Greek may even be recommended.

In the Babylonian Talmud we hear of the ban in one discussion which appears in three different places (bSot 49b, bBK 82b–83a, and, in part, in bMen 64b):

Our rabbis taught: When the Hasmonean kings were besieging one another, and Hyrcanus was outside and Aristobulus inside, every day they would send down to them denars in a box, and they would send up to them the daily sacrifices. There was an elderly man there who was proficient in Greek wisdom. He spoke to them in Greek wisdom, saying, “As long as they are preoccupied with the cult, they will not be defeated by you.” The next day, they sent down the denars in the box and they sent up a pig. When it arrived halfway through the wall it stuck its fingernails⁵ in the wall and the Land of Israel jumped four hundred square *parasangs*. At that time they said, cursed is the person who rears pigs, and cursed is the man who teaches his son Greek wisdom

Is this so? But Rabbi said: Why use the Aramaic (טורסי) language in the land of Israel? Use either the holy tongue or Greek! And Rav Yossef said: Why use the Aramaic (ארמי) language in Babylonia? Use either the holy tongue or Persian!

Greek language and Greek wisdom are distinct.

And is Greek wisdom forbidden? But Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said in the name of Rabban Shimeon ben Gamaliel: What is that which is written, *Mine eye affecteth my soul, because of all the daughters of my city* (Lam 3:51)? There were a thousand pupils in my father’s house; five hundred studied Torah and five hundred studied Greek wisdom, and of these there remained only I here and the son of my father’s brother in Asia.

Those of the House of Rabban Gamaliel are different, for they were close to the government, and it was taught: ... those of Rabban Gamaliel’s house were permitted Greek wisdom since they are close to the government.

The discussion opens with a story about events in the Hasmonean civil war, which are then used as an *aetia* for the ban on pig rearing and on the teaching of Greek wisdom. The Talmud protests: how can we maintain that Greek is banned? We have a tradition from Rabbi (Yehuda) himself

⁵ The standard interpretation is that the pig “stuck (its nails)” in the wall both in the Bavli and in the Yerushalmi version of the story (yBer 4:1 7b and parallels). See, e.g., J. Rosenblum, “‘Why Do You Refuse to Eat Pork?’: Jews, Food, and Identity in Roman Palestine,” *JQR* 100 (2010): 95–110 (104). But Saul Lieberman (*Studies in Palestinian Talmudic Literature* [Hebrew], ed. D. Rosenthal [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991], 489–90 = *Leshonenu* 22 [1978]: 96–97) showed, based on manuscript readings, that the original verb here is “shrieked” rather than “stuck.” While Lieberman refers to both Talmuds (showing, e.g., that in at least one Bavli MS the nails are missing), I present here a translation of the Bavli following the common interpretation because it seems to me that this reading might be part of the composition rather than the transmission process of the Bavli, to the extent those can be separated.

who legitimizes, if not recommends, the use of Greek! A distinction is then made between Greek language and Greek wisdom. Rabbi's teaching endorses the former, but it is Greek wisdom which is banned. An objection is raised to that conclusion as well, adducing a tannaitic tradition which tells us that five-hundred pupils were studying Greek wisdom in Rabban Gamaliel's house. This objection is rejected, based on one of the Tosefta traditions mentioned above: the patriarch's house was excepted from the general policy because of their dealings with the government and therefore cannot be used as evidence for the legitimacy of Greek wisdom. The ban is therefore maintained.

“Greek Language and Greek Wisdom are Distinct”: Syriac Hellenism and the Bavli's Understanding of the Ban

A striking difference between the earlier texts of Palestinian literature and the Babylonian *sugya* is that while in the Mishnah and the Yerushalmi the ban is on the teaching of Greek (language), the Bavli discusses a ban on the teaching of “Greek wisdom” (חכמת יונית).⁶ In fact, the Bavli presents an explicit distinction between Greek language and Greek wisdom, and it insists that the ban applies only to the latter: “Greek language and Greek wisdom are distinct.”

The term “Greek wisdom” appears in the Bavli in *baraitot*, i.e., traditionally tannaitic sources. Yet the fact that it does not appear in any of the Palestinian compilations, and the fact that the distinction between Greek wisdom and language is central to the Talmud's own anonymous discussion, seem to indicate that the term was added to these *baraitot* in Babylonia. This kind of appropriation has been documented with respect to other *baraitot* in the Bavli by a number of scholars.⁷

The Bavli's understanding of the ban is at odds with the Yerushalmi's. It would be hard to interpret a ban on Greek *wisdom* as a measure taken to reduce the likelihood of informants during a time of political upheaval. The Bavli's formulation suggests precisely the cultural tension that the Yerushalmi is trying to neutralize.⁸ Furthermore, while the Palestinian Talmud

⁶ The fact that this term is only mentioned in the Bavli is recognized by Hallewy, “Concerning the Ban,” 273 (see more below on his work); and noted (without explanation) by Hirshman, *Torah*, 143.

⁷ See, e.g., S. Friedmann, “The Beraitot in the Babylonian Talmud and their Parallels in the Tosefta” [Hebrew], in *Atara L'haim: Studies in the Talmud and Medieval Rabbinic Literature in Honor of Professor Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky* [Hebrew], ed. D. Boyarin et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2000), 163–201, especially 196 on changes in terminology.

⁸ The Bavli too cites something similar to this Tosefta tradition, in the only other time Greek wisdom is mentioned in the Bavli. In bMen 99b, in a discussion about Josh 1:8, the

concludes by presenting the possibility that a wide group is not included in the prohibition (daughters as opposed to sons), the Bavli concludes by maintaining the prohibition's broad scope, barring only one historical exception (the Patriarch's house). It is difficult to ascertain which of these interpretations is closer to the real nature of the ban the Mishnah records. On the one hand, the Mishnah associates the ban with the "war of Kitos," which is what the Yerushalmi responds to when it suggests the ban is connected to a time of political conflict. On the other hand, as E. E. Hallelwsky has suggested, there is good reason to think that the ban was motivated by a cultural opposition of the type the Yerushalmi denies.⁹ The very distinction between "culture" and "politics," even though it is suggested in part by the Yerushalmi's rhetoric, is of course overdrawn when we come to describe the complexity of historical events. I focus here on the Talmuds' different interpretations of the ban regardless of its original nature.

What stands behind these differences between the Talmuds? Saul Lieberman, taking the historical contexts provided by the rabbinic texts at face value, posited two different bans: a ban on Greek wisdom, traced by the Talmud to the Hasmonean civil war, and a ban on Greek language, dated by the Mishnah to the "war of Kitos."¹⁰ Hallelwsky argued that the differences between the Talmuds can be explained by the fact that in Babylonia the question of the ban was "merely theoretical." He interprets the Bavli's distinction between "Greek wisdom" and "Greek language" as an artificial solution to the contradictions between the different rabbinic sources, a solution foreign to the Greco-Roman fusion between the study of language and the study of thought. Similarly, he argues that it was the remoteness of the question that allowed the Bavli to be more stringent than its relatively lenient Palestinian counterpart.¹¹ This essay argues for an opposite solution: the Bavli's unique treatment of this matter shows that this question was very much alive in its environment and that it responds to the particular form "Greek wisdom" acquired in its time and place.

Bavli cites ben Dama asking Rabbi Ishmael: "In a case of someone like me, who learned the whole Torah, what about learning Greek wisdom?"; Rabbi Ishmael answers with Josh 1:8, and then the Bavli comments that this disputes the interpretation that this verse is a blessing rather than a commandment. The *sugya* then moves on to the next topic. The brevity of the discussion makes it difficult to assess its stance on Greek wisdom; as Hallelwsky ("Concerning the Ban") commented, the very formulation of the question shows awareness of a prohibition. On the other hand, the Bavli at least allows for a positive response to ben Dama's question, if one follows the blessing interpretation of Josh 1:8.

⁹ See his critique of Lieberman, that the "Talmudic sources' innocent explanations" of the ban cannot be taken at face value and that the Palestinian ban is motivated by a negative ideological view of Greek culture ("Concerning the Ban," 269, 273).

¹⁰ Lieberman, "Alleged Ban," 101–2, and see the Tosafists cited there.

¹¹ Hallelwsky, "Concerning the Ban," 270 and n. 10, 273. See also Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians*, 202–3.

The phrase the Babylonian Talmud introduces to the rabbinic tradition, “Greek wisdom,” is known from Christian authors writing in Greek and Syriac. Similar formulations appear in Greek works before the rise of Christianity,¹² notably in Josephus,¹³ but it is in Christian literature that we meet a recurring term or trope. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells us that God has made foolish the “wisdom of the world,” contrasts this wisdom and the wisdom of God, and writes that “Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom” (1 Cor 1:20–22). While Paul himself does not call this “wisdom of the world” Greek wisdom explicitly, the context was suggestive enough for his interpreters to do so.¹⁴ The term is then used negatively in several related contexts: in the Christian polemic against pagans, Greek wisdom can denote either paganism *in toto* or more narrowly Greek philosophy;¹⁵ it stands for human logic as opposed to

¹² While the closest formulation to the one the Bavli uses is Ἑλλήνων σοφία or Ἑλληνικὴ σοφία (see more below), a similar formulation, Ἑλληνικὴ παιδεία, is found in early Greek literature referring either specifically to Greek education or more broadly to Greek learning or culture. The idea of Greek education itself is commonplace (see, e.g., Plato, *Leges* 654e, “περὶ παιδείας ὀρθῆς εἶθ’ Ἑλληνικῆς εἶτε βαρβαρικῆς”); Diogenes Laertius reports that Zeno of Citium (333–261 BCE), founder of the Stoic school, wrote a book “περὶ τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς παιδείας” (*Lives* 7.4). “Greek wisdom” appears in a number of later non-Christian authors to refer to the Greek cultural tradition in general. Athenaeus writes that “it is plain that the ancient ‘wisdom’ of the Greeks was given over especially to music” (14.632, trans. Gulick, *LCL* 222, p.411; the quotation marks Gulick puts around “wisdom” as well as his comment in note *e* there indicate that this term was not common in literature of the Classical period). Libanius tells us that Homer is “the common progenitor of Greek wisdom (τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς σοφίας)” (*Progymnasmata* 6:2; trans. C. A. Gibson, *Libanius’s Progymnasmata* [Atlanta: SBL, 2008], 127). Porphyry, quoted by Eusebius, begins a discussion on the Greek representation of Zeus with a citation from an Orphic hymn that he introduces with the phrase, “Look at the wisdom of the Greeks (Ἑλλήνων σοφίαν)” (*On Images, apud Eusebius, P. E.* 3.9).

¹³ See *Against Apion* 1.51, where Josephus reports that he sold his work to “a large number of my compatriots, persons well versed in Greek learning (Ἑλληνικῆς σοφίας)”; again this formulation is almost interchangeable with παιδεία, as we can see when Josephus challenges Justus for not publishing his work when “Agrippa and all his family, persons thoroughly conversant with Hellenic culture (Ἑλληνικῆς παιδείας) were still amongst us” (*Life* 359; translations cited from Thackeray, *LCL* 312, 183, and 133 respectively).

¹⁴ With specific reference to this passage, see, e.g., Origen, who writes that Paul is “addressing Greeks which prided themselves on Greek wisdom (Ἑλληνικὴ σοφία)” in *Contra Celsum* 3.47 (trans. H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953], 160); John Chrysostom explains why Paul “vehemently inveighed against the wisdom of the Greeks (τῶν Ἑλλήνων σοφίας)” (*Hom. Cor. I, V*; PG 61:42).

¹⁵ Thus in one place, Athanasius asks, “When did men begin to abandon the worship of idols ...? And when did the oracles among the Greeks and everywhere else cease ...? When did those who are called gods and heroes by the poets begin to be condemned as merely mortal men ...? When, in short, did the wisdom of the Greeks (τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἢ σοφία) become a folly?” (*De Incarnatione Verbi* 46.1–14; trans. R. W. Thomson, *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1971], 251; similar references at 48.39; 53.6; 55.5); but in another place, Greek wisdom is used more nar-

divine knowledge;¹⁶ in heresiology, Greek wisdom is the contaminant that is the origin of heresy;¹⁷ combining these two last elements, some authors use “Greek wisdom” to denounce what they see as a heretical application of logic and philosophical deliberation to the study of divinity by other Christians.¹⁸

The term also appears in the Syriac tradition, where we can trace it from West Syriac authors to East Syriac authors, closer to the Talmud’s creators both geographically and linguistically. Ephrem, one of the most famous authors of that tradition, writes, “Happy is he who has not tasted the venom of the wisdom of the Greeks” (ܩܘܠܘܢ ܩܘܠܘܢ; *Hymns on Faith* 2:24). According to Sebastian Brock, he is aiming at “heretical” applications of Greek logic to divine matters.¹⁹ The *Life of Ephraem* (5th–6th c.) offers a striking similarity to the Talmud in its negative attitude to “Greek wisdom” and neutral or positive attitude to Greek language, when it tells us in the same paragraph that Ephrem defeated the “wisdom of the Greeks” (ܩܘܠܘܢ ܩܘܠܘܢ) and then wrote melodies “in the Greek language” (ܩܘܠܘܢ ܩܘܠܘܢ);²⁰ the terminology is identical to the Bavli’s. Basil writes in *De Spiritu Sancto* that his opponents

rowly and more positively (even though it is still inferior to Christianity): “As for the wisdom of the Greeks (Ἑλληνικῆς σοφίας) and the grandiloquence of the philosophers ... whereas these wise men among the Greeks have written so much, yet have been unable to persuade even a few from near-by places about immortality and lives of virtue”; see also *Life of Anthony* 80.5.

¹⁶ See Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Gregory the Wonderworker*: “For if what was said were such that it could be comprehended by the power of human thoughts, it would in no way differ from Greek wisdom. For they are of the opinion that what they are able to comprehend is the same as what is” (PG 46:901; trans. M. Slusser, *St. Gregory Thaumaturgus: Life and Works* [Fathers of the Church 98; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998], 47).

¹⁷ Thus, e.g., Hippolytus, the heretics “took nothing from the Holy Scripture ... but rather their opinions have their origin in the wisdom of the Greeks (Ἑλλήνων σοφίας)” (Book 1, Proom., 8; M. Marcovich, *Hippolytus: Refutatio Omnium Haeresium* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986], 56). This in fact leads to the famous survey of philosophers and opinions.

¹⁸ See the examples of Basil and Ephrem below.

¹⁹ S. Brock, “From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning,” in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, ed. N. G. Garsoian et al. (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 17–34 (19). See also S. Griffith, “A Spiritual Father for the Whole Church: The Universal Appeal of St. Ephraem the Syrian,” *Hugoye* 1 (1998): par. 21.

²⁰ This is only in the recension recorded by MS Par. 235 but not in the (possibly later) MS Vat. 177 recension. See J. P. Amar, “The Syriac ‘Vita’ tradition of Ephrem the Syrian” (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1988), 157–59, for the text and see pp. 36–38 on the relationship between the recensions. Isho‘dad of Merv’s commentary on 1 Cor 16:22 brings this terminology to bear on Paul himself: referring to the apostle’s use of the expression *μαρὰν ἀθά*, Isho‘dad argues that Paul “wrote this word Maranatha in Syriac first to arouse them to diligence in searching the Scriptures; second, to repress their pride, because they boasted of the tongue and the wisdom of the Greeks” (ܩܘܠܘܢ ܩܘܠܘܢ ܩܘܠܘܢ).

have been led to error by study of foreigners or pagans (ἑξωθεν);²¹ the Syriac version, composed in the late fourth century, specifies that “they learned this novel and vain error from the wisdom of the Greeks.”²² The Syriac term appears in the broader sense (as Greek *Bildung*) in Elias’ *Life of John, Bishop of Tella*, where we hear how John’s mother wished him to be trained in the “wisdom of the Greeks.”²³ While John leaves that wisdom for Christian *askesis*,²⁴ Brock and Peter Brown have argued that this text shows the increasingly significant place of classical learning among Aramaic-speaking Christians.²⁵

John’s mother hoped that his classical education would give him access to a public career in the Roman Empire. But scholars such as Brock emphasize that the prestige of Greek learning was “by no means” confined to the Roman side of the border.²⁶ By the sixth century, Christians in the Persian Empire read and translated Greek works²⁷ and engaged in debates informed by Greek philosophy.²⁸ Most importantly for our purposes, the East Syrian Christian schools, which have been shown to share a great deal with the rabbinic academies of Babylonia,²⁹ included Aristotelian logic in their curriculum by the end of the sixth century.³⁰

²¹ *De Spiritu Sancto* 3.5. On the term used here, see B. Pruche, *Basile de Césarée: Traité du Saint-Esprit* (Sources Chrétiennes 17; Paris: Cerf, 1947), 113 n. 2; it is also common in Syriac texts (see below).

²² For text, see D. G. K. Taylor, *The Syriac Versions of De Spiritu Sancto by Basil of Caesarea*, 2 vols. (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 1:12; the translation is on 2:7.

²³ Elias, *Life of John of Tella* 39.22.

²⁴ This tension between education (in general and Greek in particular) and Christian holiness is not unique to the Syriac tradition and is employed in Greek *Vitae* as well. See S. Rubenson, “Philosophy and Simplicity: The Problem of Classical Education in Early Christian Biography,” in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, ed. T. Hägg and P. Rousseau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 110–39.

²⁵ Brock, “Antagonism to Assimilation,” 17; P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, ad 200–1000* (2d ed.; Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 313; see also A. H. Becker, *The Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 36–37.

²⁶ Quote from Brock, “Antagonism to Assimilation,” 21. See also J. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 164–205.

²⁷ See the examples quoted in Brock, “Antagonism to Assimilation,” 21–22. On the case of Paul the Persian, see J. Teixidor, *Aristote en syriaque: Paul le Perse, logicien du VI^e siècle* (Paris: CNRS, 2003).

²⁸ See Walker, *Legend*, 172–80.

²⁹ See most recently A. H. Becker, “The Comparative Study of ‘Scholasticism’ in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians,” *AJS Review* 34 (2010): 91–113. A classics treatment is I. Gafni, “Nestorian Literature as a Source for the History of the Babylonian Yeshivot” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 51 (1982), 567–76.

³⁰ Brock, “Antagonism to Assimilation,” 21–2; Becker, *Fear*, 92.

As Greek works and concepts made their way from the west to the Sasanian Empire – often through West Syrian intermediaries – so did the formulation “wisdom of the Greeks.” The sixth-century presbyter and exegete of the School of Nisibis, Barḥadbeshabba ‘Arabaya, tells us in his *Ecclesiastical History* that divine grace has led Theodore of Mopsuestia to the holy books only after he became proficient in philosophy and studied “all of the wisdom of the Greeks.”³¹ Though, much as in John’s case, Theodore’s engagement with Greek learning is transcended and replaced by divine learning, this detail serves to illustrate his precociousness, erudition, and wisdom. Such a representation of the author who became the “theological and exegetical authority par excellence for the East Syrians”³² may have stemmed from, and contributed to, the cultural capital of Greek learning in the Christian schools of the Sasanian Empire. Even if Barḥadbeshabba merely translates the formulation “wisdom of the Greeks” from one of his western sources,³³ this text still shows the legibility and ambivalent significance of this formulation in the East Syrian context.³⁴

Another East Syrian author, the seventh-century Dadisho of bet Qatraye, employed the same term against Greek learning and the effect of Aristotelian logic on Christian intellectual life. In a striking passage that Adam Becker has placed among other monastic texts criticizing the scholastic culture Barḥadbeshabba represents, Dadisho writes that demons, trying to distract the Egyptian desert fathers from the “meditation beneficial to the

³¹ F. Nau, *La seconde partie de l’histoire ecclésiastique de Barḥadbeshabba ‘Arabaia* (Patrologia orientalis 9:5; Paris: Brepols, 1913): 504.8.

³² Becker, *Fear*, 116.

³³ Sozomen similarly boasts Theodore’s philosophical and rhetorical training, but he does not use the formulation “wisdom of the Greeks”: Θεόδωρος, ἀνὴρ καὶ τῶν ἱερῶν βιβλίων καὶ τῆς ἄλλης παιδείας ῥητόρων τε καὶ φιλοσόφων ἰκανῶς ἐπιστήμων (*Ecclesiastical History* 8:2). On Barḥadbeshabba’s use of western sources, see Nau, *La Seconde Partie*, 500–1; A. H. Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 45–46.

³⁴ It may be noteworthy, however, that the *Cause of the Foundation of the Schools*, possibly written by the same Barḥadbeshabba, uses in similar contexts the equivalent formulation of “external” wisdom or books (cf. the Greek ἐξωθεν we have seen Basil use above). This term too appears both negatively and positively: the “evil Arius” received “foreign instruction” (ܐܘܪܝܘܫܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ), but also the head of the school, Elisha bar Qozbaye, “who was a great man, learned in all matters of the ecclesiastical and external books” (ܐܠܝܫܐ ܒܪ ܩܘܙܒܝܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ). See A. Scher, *La cause de la fondation des écoles par Mar Barḥadbeshabba ‘Arabaya* (Patrologia orientalis 4:4; Paris: Brepols, 1908): 376.7 (Arius) and 387.5 (Elisha). Since in the latter case there is no reason to think the author is relying on western sources, it is possible that this formulation was more “at home” with East Syrian authors than “wisdom of the Greeks” (see also F. Nau, *La première partie de l’Histoire de Barḥadbeshabba ‘Arabaia* [Patrologia orientalis 23:2; Paris: Brepols, 1932]: 243.13 [ܐܘܪܝܘܫܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ], though this concerns a western author). On the question of authorship and the identity between the author of the *Cause* and the *Ecclesiastical History*, see Becker, *Sources*, 11–16 and 181–91.

salvation of the life,” used as ammunition “the learning of the philosophers and the wisdom of the Greeks,” specifically “the books of Aristotle the Philosopher ..., the *Categories*, *Peri Hermeneias*, *Apodeiktikos* ... and the rest of such as these.”³⁵ Syriac-speaking Christians both in the Roman Empire and in the Sasanian Empire used the formulation “wisdom of the Greeks” to evoke Greek learning, most commonly philosophy, in texts that reflect the rise of such learning in Syriac culture.

The connection between our passage in the Bavli and the Syriac “wisdom of the Greeks” is not just circumstantial. The translation of Greek works into Syriac and the incorporation of Aristotelian philosophy into the Syriac school curriculum is precisely the context in which the Bavli’s distinction between “wisdom” and “language” makes sense. Scholars who understood this passage in a Palestinian or Roman context, where the study of Greek literature and thought was intertwined with the study of Greek language,³⁶ interpreted the Bavli’s distinction as an artificial dialectical move – a way out of the contradiction between the injunction against the teaching of Greek and Rabbi’s recommendation to use that language.³⁷ Considered in the context in which the Bavli was composed, however, the distinction refers to a well-documented aspect of intellectual life of late ancient Mesopotamia, in which Greek “wisdom” was studied in the Syriac language.

The talmudic passage immediately preceding the distinction between language and wisdom may also suggest this Syriac context. In that passage, the Talmud objects to the ban on Greek by adducing Rabbi’s teaching, which shows that the use of Greek was legitimized by a rabbinic authority. A second teaching, by Rav Yossef, is quoted here ostensibly only because of its similarity with Rabbi’s ruling. Each of the two traditions recommends

³⁵ See the edition by R. Draguet, *Commentaire du livre d’abba Isaïe (logoi I–XV) par Dadišo Qatraya* (Louvain: CSCO, 1972), 181.10–20. The quotes here are from the translation in Becker, *Fear*, 190; see the discussion there, 188–94, and in particular the example from Simeon quoted on p. 191. Dadisho is relying here on Evagrius, who presents the “wisdom of the Greeks” as an illicit passion and identifies it with Paul’s “wisdom of the world.” See Evagrius, *Antirrheticus* 8:37 (W. Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus* [Berlin: Weidmann, 1912], 356), quoted by Dadisho immediately after our passage (Draguet, *Commentaire*, 181.23–26).

³⁶ On language and education in the Roman Empire, see H. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. G. Lamb (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 255–64. The distinction between Greek language and culture or thought also applies to other contexts, such as the Roman one (see, e.g., Favorinus who says he “has affected, not merely the language but also the thought and manners and dress of the Greeks” (attributed to Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes* 37.25; cf. also Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.180–81). In education, however, especially in tannaitic Palestine (where we would locate the *baraita*), the two were inseparable; the partial “decline of Greek” happens later, elsewhere (see Marrou, *History of Education in Antiquity*, 259–62).

³⁷ Thus Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians*, 202–3; Hallewy, “Concerning the Ban,” 270 n. 10.

avoiding one language and offers two preferable languages. In both cases, the language questioned is an Aramaic dialect.

The Talmud is interested in this rejection of Aramaic at least as much as it is interested in Rabbi's espousal of Greek. If the composers of this passage only wanted to cite a rabbinic endorsement of Greek they could have chosen one of the mishnaic traditions that endorse or testify to the use of Greek in the most sacred contexts (see, e.g., the exceptional status of Greek as the only language except Hebrew in which Scripture can be written [mMeg 1.8] and the use of Greek in the Temple itself [mShek 3.2]) or one of the traditions that simply assume the use of Greek by Jews (e.g., mGit 9.7).³⁸ Instead, the composers of our *sugya* chose to cite one tradition which is only secondarily about Greek and another tradition which has nothing to do with Greek at all. While these statements about Aramaic are difficult to take at face value given the constant use of Aramaic by rabbis, the negative value this passage attaches to Aramaic cannot be denied,³⁹ and the audience of this text is thus invited to focus not on the endorsement of Greek but on the rejection of Aramaic. This focus gains legibility if the Greek wisdom with which the *sugya* is concerned was the Greek wisdom taught in an Aramaic dialect.

One objection to this contextualization of the term in the Bavli may be raised based on the most influential interpretation of the term "Greek wisdom," which sees it as a unique rabbinic term relating to a sophisticated register of Greek language or to knowledge of that language's grammar and rhetoric. Rashi already makes this suggestion in order to explain how the old man of the Hasmonian war story can be said to be *speaking* in Greek wisdom.⁴⁰ In modern scholarship, this interpretation relies on an oddity in the Hebrew formulation (חכמת יונית), which the translation "Greek wisdom" ignores: the word "wisdom" here appears in the construct form, חכמת,⁴¹ so

³⁸ See, on many of these traditions, W. Smelik, "Code-switching: The Public Reading of the Bible in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek," in *Was ist Ein Text? Alttestamentliche, ägyptologische und altorientalistische Perspektiven*, ed. L. Morenz and S. Schorch (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 123–51.

³⁹ On Aramaic and the rabbis in general, see W. Smelik, "Language, Locus, and Translation between the Talmudim," *Journal for the Aramaic Bible* 3 (2001): 212–21; S. Fraade, "Rabbinic Views on the Practice of Targum and Multilingualism in the Jewish Galilee of the Third-Sixth Centuries," in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. Levine (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 253–86; Fraade, "Before and after Babel: Linguistic Exceptionalism and Pluralism in Early Rabbinic Literature and Jewish Antiquity," *Diné Israel* 28 (2011): 31–68 and 61 on our passage in particular; J. Yahalom, *Poetry and Society in Jewish Galilee of Late Antiquity* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999), 33–55.

⁴⁰ Rashi on bSot 49b, "Greek wisdom: a language of wisdom that is spoken by palace people (בני פלטיין) but the rest of the people cannot understand it."

⁴¹ This is the form in almost all manuscripts of the Bavli, though see more below. MS Hamburg for bBK has the grammatically easier חכמה יונית ("Greek wisdom"), but that

a more literal translation would be “wisdom of Greek.” Rokeah, for example, understands this formulation as an abbreviation of something like “the wisdom of Greek language” or “art of Greek language.”⁴² Dov Rafel, for the same reason, interprets it more specifically as “rhetoric.”⁴³ While not making the argument themselves, many other scholars accept this kind of explanation: Burton Visotzky, for example, glosses the term as “grammar and rhetoric,”⁴⁴ and Seth Schwartz refers to a ban on “rhetorical training.”⁴⁵

It is more likely, in my opinion, that the Bavli’s *ḥokhmat yevanit* is a version of the term common in Greek and Syriac, than that the rabbis came up with a nearly identical term to describe an otherwise unknown category of Greek language or rhetoric.⁴⁶ In light of the comparison between the Palestinian sources and the Babylonian *sugya* above, it seems probable that the *baraita* about a man “speaking in Greek wisdom” originally had him speaking in Greek and that this *baraita* was rewritten to reflect the new understanding of the ban proposed by the Bavli’s *stam*.⁴⁷ As for the grammatical form of the term, the very fact that it feels odd in the Bavli’s language might betray its foreign origin. But how was this form achieved? Discussions of this problem focus on the construct form of the word “wisdom” (חכמת). This form in itself is not problematic and accurately translates the most common form of the term in Syriac, which is not “Greek wisdom,” but rather “wisdom of the Greeks” (ܘܚܘܡܐ ܕܗܘܢܐܘܢ or ܘܚܘܡܐ ܕܗܘܢܐܘܢ,

is probably a correction introduced by that particular transmission (which is prone to “correcting” unusual forms and introducing more conventional ones; see S. Friedman, *BT Bava Mezi’a VI: Critical Edition with Comprehensive Commentary* [Hebrew], 2 vols. [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1990–1996], 2:64). References to talmudic manuscripts in this paper are based on the online Talmudic Text Databank of the Lieberman Institute.

⁴² Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians*, 204.

⁴³ D. Rafel, “Greek Wisdom – Rhetoric” [Hebrew], *JSJT* 2 (1983): 317–22 (here 321–22).

⁴⁴ B. Visotzky, *Fathers of the World: Essays in Rabbinic and Patristic Literatures* (WUNT 80; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 3.

⁴⁵ S. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 BCE to 640 CE* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 118 n. 51.

⁴⁶ To be sure, some of the Christian formulations of the term may pertain to rhetorical training or to philosophical fields pertaining to language – I object here only to the separation between the Bavli and the Greek sources and the idea that the Bavli is referring to a particular dialect of Greek or to a particular grammar of Greek. Rafel (“Greek Wisdom – Rhetoric”) does acknowledge the Greek term but nonetheless offers an interpretation based solely on the rabbinic occurrences. Hallewy also notes the Greek term (“Concerning the Ban,” 272–73), but he is not concerned with its meaning. Since both focus on Palestine, they do not discuss the Syriac instances.

⁴⁷ See also Vered Noam’s forthcoming analysis of the differences between the version of the story in Josephus and the version in the Bavli, which reaches the same conclusion. The chapter will be published in a work co-authored with Tal Ilan on Josephus in rabbinic literature.

translating Ἑλληνων σοφία and equivalent terms).⁴⁸ When the Hebrew term is compared with the Syriac term, what stands out is the form of the word “Greek” (יונית): the Hebrew presents a feminine singular adjective where the Syriac and its Greek original present a noun in the plural. An accurate translation of the term would be חכמת היונים or חכמת יונים. This form is in fact recorded in some versions of our *sugya*, though those versions probably do not represent the original text.⁴⁹ What I think made *hokhmat yevanit* appealing, perhaps even what led to the creation of this form, is that it is a hybrid which assimilates the new, borrowed term the Bavli introduces to its sources with the language of the tannaitic sources themselves, all of which use *yevanit* as they deal with Greek language. This form creates a smoother interpretive transition from a ban on *yevanit* in the Mishnah to a ban on *hokhmat yevanit* in the Talmud.

Our *sugya* therefore contains an objection unprecedented in the rabbinic tradition to the study of Greek thought – an objection which is common in Christian sources and which is made in a time, place, and manner that points to the Syriac tradition in particular. Whether or not the Bavli’s *hokhmat yevanit* is borrowed from Syriac, the distinction the Bavli presents between the study of Greek language and the study of Greek thought best fits a cultural context in which Greek was studied in translation. If previous treatments assumed that for the Bavli, the ban on Greek wisdom was merely “a theoretical question,” the context of Syriac Hellenic learning suggests a different interpretation.

“Five Hundred Studied Torah and Five Hundred Studied Greek Wisdom”: Writing Greek Wisdom into Rabbinic History

The most surprising aspect of the Bavli’s passage is not this unprecedented objection or its context, but rather that it might also contain an unprec-

⁴⁸ The formulation in Greek is often Ἑλληναῖς σοφία, which would be חכמה יונית; but as far as I could find, the form common in Syriac is “wisdom of the Greeks.”

⁴⁹ See MS Oxford to bSot 49b: לשון יונית לחוד חכמת יונים לחוד; Vatican 116 to bBK 82b: זקן אחד שהיה מכיר חכמת יוונים; and fr. ebr. 14 from the Archivio Storico Comunale at Bazzano, to bBK 82b, where the ending of the word יונים is visible (on the fragment, see M. Perani and E. Sagradini, *Talmudic and Midrashic Fragments from the “Italian Genizah”: Reunification of the Manuscripts and Catalogue* [Florence: Giuntina, 2004], 80–81). But in all these cases “יונים” is recorded for only one of the instances of the phrase in the *sugya* and could certainly represent scribal errors (e.g., a wrong spelling out of the abbreviation חכמת יונית). It is interesting that a similar variation with this unusual form appears with יונית in a different context. In bNid 30b, we read יונית שנתחייבו מלכת יונית בקלפטר מלכת יונית (bNid 30b), while MS Vatican 111 there reads יונית מלכות יונית.

edented embrace of Greek learning, in the form of the *baraita* on Rabban Gamaliel's academy. This embrace is most evident when we compare this *baraita* to other versions of the same tradition in earlier Palestinian compositions as well as in another Babylonian *sugya*:

yTa'an 4:6 69a

(cf. Lam. Rab. 2:4; 3:17; bGit 58a)

bSot 49b (and parallels)

Rabban Shimeon ben Gamaliel says: "There were five hundred schools in Beithar, and in the smallest of them were not less than five hundred children, and they were saying, 'Should the haters come attack us, we will come towards them with these pencils and poke their eyes!' But when sins brought it about, they wound up each one of them in his own scroll and burned him, and from all of them no one remains but me." And he read about himself, *Mine eye affecteth my soul, because of all the daughters of my city* (Lam 3:51).

Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said in the name of Rabban Shimeon b. Gamaliel: "What is that which is written, *Mine eye affecteth my soul, because of all the daughters of my city* (Lam 3:51)? There were a thousand pupils in my father's house; five hundred studied Torah and five hundred studied Greek wisdom, and of these there remained only I here and the son of my father's brother in Asia!"

Noah Hakham demonstrated that these passages present different literary treatments of a brief common source.⁵⁰ For our purpose, the most important difference is that the account of the curriculum of Beithar, in which we are told that five hundred or half of the students devoted themselves to the "wisdom of the Greeks," appears only in our *sugya*.

This elaboration on the curriculum seems secondary. The appearance of the midrash on Lamentations 3:51 in all versions indicates that the original focus of the tradition was the violent end of the golden age of learning in Beithar rather than the content of the learning itself. In the Yerushalmi's version and its parallels, the glory of Beithar's schools is only mentioned so that the extent of the destruction could be appreciated; even in our version, the detail of the curriculum seems to have no connection to Rabban Shimeon's lamentation. This secondary nature of this elaboration, the fact that it appears only in the Bavli's version, and its employment of the term "Greek wisdom" – which, as we have seen, appears only in the Babylonian Talmud – all suggest that the curricular detail is a Babylonian addition.

This Babylonian *baraita* merges a Palestinian midrash on Lamentations 3:51 attributed to Rabban Shimeon with the tradition about the permission given to Rabban Shimeon's father to teach his sons Greek (tSot 15.8). The exception allowed for a single family becomes a full-fledged program with

⁵⁰ N. Hakham, "Raban Shimeon ben Gamaliel in Beitar" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 74 (2005): 547–64.

hundreds of students; the practical study which accommodates political duties becomes something that can parallel Torah study (“five hundred studied Torah and five hundred studied Greek wisdom”). By now, we can also take for granted the transformation of “Greek” to “Greek wisdom.”

A similar projection of Greek education into the past can be observed in Christian lives such as the Syriac *Life of St. Ephrem*, the text cited above for its distinction between “Greek language” and “Greek wisdom.” Brock writes that one of the measures this text takes “to update the portrait of the saint to meet sixth-century expectations” is the transformation of Ephrem, “this provincial from the eastern provinces of the Empire, who lacked a Greek-style education and had no direct contact with other great names of the fourth century,” into a figure who is “not only a rhetor to rival the Greeks, but also an international traveler, visiting St. Basil in Cappadocia, and St. Bishoi in Egypt.”⁵¹ This account follows the line of later *Lives* of later saints. The *Life* of the sixth-century East Syrian saint Mar Aba, for example, tells us that he was educated in Greek, travelled widely to acquire wisdom, and disputed sages in Athens who were proficient in foreign wisdom.⁵² In other words, the *Life of Ephraem* makes Ephrem a person of distinction in the sense of its own time, and this includes a Greek education.

The Babylonian *baraita* claims the same cultural capital for the rabbinic past. The rabbis who imagined a school of Greek wisdom in tannaitic Beithar boast the classical education of their intellectual and spiritual ancestors. Whoever adapted the *baraita* exploited the coincidence that the rabbi who is reporting the spectacular age of learning in Beithar is also a member of a family that another tradition associates with the study of Greek; he merged the two traditions in order to present a picture of rabbinic history that would meet his own expectations of what would constitute such a golden age.

It is possible to read our *baraita* as bearing the opposite message. On this reading, Beithar’s cruel fate is a punishment for the study of Greek wisdom, and the *baraita* is telling us a cautionary tale about this study rather than celebrating it as part of a golden age of Torah. One advantage of this reading is that it explains or even justifies the disturbingly violent end of Beithar’s schools.⁵³ The Yerushalmi’s version, too, is concerned with this problem of justification, commenting that “sins brought it (=the destruction) about.”

⁵¹ S. Brock, “St. Ephrem in the Eyes of Later Syriac Liturgical Tradition,” *Hugoye* 1 (1999): par. 3.

⁵² P. Bedjan, *Histoire de Mar Jabalaba, de trois autres patriarches, d’un prêtre et de deux laïques nestoriens* (Paris: Harrassowitz, 1895), 218–19. Brock, “Antagonism to Assimilation,” 21, seems to take this description as more or less reliable.

⁵³ This direction was suggested to me by Richard Kalmin. It appears also in Samuel Eidels’ *Novellae* to bBK (*ad loc.*), though he raises it only to reject it (see next note).

The Babylonian introduction of Greek wisdom could be intended, in this sense, to specify the sins about which the Yerushalmi is vague.

Despite the appeal of this interpretation, I prefer the reading suggested above. The *baraita* does not in any explicit way distinguish between the study of Torah and the study of Greek wisdom. The parallel versions of the story clearly offer a contrast between the magnificent learning of the students, described in a positive way, and the incomprehensible tragedy that befalls them. Unless we read the *baraita* with the assumption that Greek wisdom is bad (which, we should recall, we know only from the Bavli, rather than Palestinian sources), there is no reason to posit that in this version, unlike the parallel versions, the learning itself results in the destruction. As Moses exclaims when he learns of Rabbi Aqiva's martyrdom in another talmudic story (bMen 29b), the *baraita* invites us to ask, "Such (great) Torah and such (horrible) 'reward'?"⁵⁴

The Bavli itself takes the *baraita* as presenting a positive position on Greek wisdom, even if this position is then limited to the house of the Patriarch. It quotes Rabban Gamaliel's testimony in order to support the objection to the prohibition of that study raised immediately before ("And is Greek wisdom prohibited? But Shmuel said ..."). While the plot of the *baraita* has the potential to be read as presenting Greek wisdom negatively, the Talmud never exploits it. The Bavli's reading of its sources should not, of course, determine the way we read them, but here it merits serious consideration precisely because it would be in the Bavli's interest to read the *baraita* as punishing the students for the sin of Greek wisdom.

If the reading proposed here of the *baraita* is correct, this *baraita* is at odds with the *sugya* in which it appears: the *sugya* as a whole objects to the study of Greek wisdom, while the reworked *baraita* enshrines this study in a golden age of rabbinic learning (this same tension led Saul Lieberman to conclude that the *baraita* reflects the actual curriculum in Beithar⁵⁵). In other words, while both the *sugya* and the *baraita* are the products of Babylonian literary creation, they imply opposed attitudes to the study of Greek wisdom. In fact, this conflict explains the polemical tone the Bavli takes here: the composition of a *sugya* that introduces a stringent ban on the study of Greek wisdom makes much more sense in an environment in which Jews actually venerate or practice such a study.

⁵⁴ Another argument, made by Eidels in his *Novellae* to bBK is that "the house of Rabban Gamaliel's father, who were patriarchs, certainly would not let their sons study Greek wisdom if there was a possibility that it is prohibited." We do not have to accept Eidels' assumption about the Patriarchs' rabbinic normativity to argue that the *baraita* would assume it; in other words, it would be odd of a rabbinic story to have Rabban Gamaliel's house engage in such undesired activity without commenting further on the problem.

⁵⁵ Lieberman, "Alleged Ban," 104.

To be sure, this projection of Greek learning to the rabbinic past does not necessarily demonstrate that the Jews who composed this *baraita* were themselves immersed in such learning. It is possible they were simply claiming for their tradition cultural capital which had considerable social value in their environment. Even this would tell us something about the degree to which the Christian and Jewish scholastic communities were integrated. But the severe language which our *sugya* employs against Greek wisdom, especially the harsh tone of the story with which it begins, seems to indicate that there is more at stake – that it is militating against a practice which had at least some currency in the Jewish community itself.

As we have seen, both attitudes, the opposition to Greek wisdom and its embrace, can be found in the Christian literature produced in the Bavli's environment: on the one hand, "Greek wisdom" is a term employed negatively and associated either with "pagan wisdom" or heretical Christianity; on the other hand, Greek philosophy received a prominent place in the Syriac curriculum. It is possible, then, to understand the conversation between the composers of the *baraita* and the composers of the *sugya* simply as a Jewish instance of the same debate: Mesopotamian Jews, like their Christians neighbors, were debating the limits, value, and legitimacy of the engagement with Greek letters.

Conclusion

We have seen that the term Greek wisdom is first attested in the Babylonian Talmud, and it seems reasonable to posit that it was introduced into rabbinic discourse in late ancient Mesopotamia even as it is attributed to earlier Palestinian sources. Syriac Christian authors close to the Talmud in time and place use a similar term in texts that reflect and negotiate the increasingly important role of Greek sciences and philosophy in these authors' culture. It is likely that the Talmud's introduction of this term into earlier sources is connected with these Syriac texts, both because of the possibility that the term the Bavli uses is borrowed from Syriac and because of the possibility that the Talmud's distinction between "Greek language" and "Greek wisdom" reflects the study of Greek philosophy in translation. I have also suggested that Babylonian Jews, like their Christian neighbors, were divided about the value of Greek learning and that the *baraita* attributed to Rabban Shimeon ben Gamaliel reflects the side which embraced Greek wisdom in one way or another.

This paper follows the recent scholarly turn to the Bavli's engagement with Christian culture. In *Jesus in the Talmud*, Peter Schäfer has shown that the Talmud pursues a polemical parody of the gospels that is absent in

Palestinian sources. Moreover, Schäfer argues that the Bavli's polemic was informed by the political situation of the Jewish and Christian communities in the Sasanian Empire, and its particular form may have been indebted to a Syriac text, the *Diatessaron*.⁵⁶ Richard Kalmin has analyzed rabbinic positions and literary motifs to argue that, especially beginning with the fourth century, literature originating in the Roman Empire has shaped the world of the Babylonian rabbis. "Babylonia," Kalmin writes, "became part of the emerging cultural unity that was gradually forming in Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, and western Persia."⁵⁷ The text analyzed in this paper shows how Babylonian Jews engaged with a discussion that is originally "western" and that included predominantly Christians. But this text also shows us that the Talmud responds to a particular inflection of that issue that was rooted in its unique Mesopotamian environment.

The reconstruction offered here also presents a new kind of evidence for Jewish involvement in the rise of Greek learning in late ancient Mesopotamia, an involvement that might have significant implications for the history of the Talmud and the Jewish academies. Thirty years ago, Shaye Cohen identified similarities between the way the Babylonian Talmud describes the head of the rabbinic academy and the way Greek sources describe the head of the philosophical academy or scholar.⁵⁸ More recently, Daniel Boyarin has argued for "Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia" on the basis of similarities in foundational literary phenomena between the Talmud and Greco-Roman literature,⁵⁹ and Charlotte Fonrobert has suggested that a famous talmudic story engages with Plato's *Republic*.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ P. Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 115–22 and 128.

⁵⁷ See R. Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and also his more recent contributions: Kalmin, "The Miracle of the Septuagint in Ancient Rabbinic and Christian Literature," in *Follow the Wise: Studies in Jewish History and Culture in Honor of Lee I. Levine*, ed. Z. Weiss et al. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 242–53; Kalmin, "Manasseh Sawed Isaiah with a Saw of Wood: An Ancient Legend in Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Persian Sources," in *Talmudic Archaeology*, ed. M. Geller (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming). The quotation comes from the first page of the latter article.

⁵⁸ S. J. D. Cohen, "Patriarchs and Scholars," *PAAJR* 48 (1981): 57–86; Cohen specifically raised the possibility that "the parallels between patriarchs and scholarchs tell us more about the Hellenization of Babylonian Jewry in the fourth and fifth centuries than about the Hellenization of Palestinian Jewry in the second" (85).

⁵⁹ D. Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Boyarin, "Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. C. E. Fonrobert and M. S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 336–63.

⁶⁰ C. Fonrobert, "Plato in Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai's Cave (B. Shabbat 33b–34a): The Talmudic Inversion of Plato's Politics of Philosophy," *AJS Review* 31 (2007): 277–96.

These contextualizations of the Talmud have been based on a modern identification of similarities between talmudic and Greco-Roman texts or institutions – similarities that had to be recovered from the Talmud's rhetoric of insularity. In contrast, our text discusses Hellenism explicitly, demonstrating, at the very least, that it was a live issue for some Babylonian Jews. The reworked *baraita* might suggest that some talmudic Jews valued Greek *paideia* enough to project it back to an important moment of their history and present it in some sense as comparable to the study of Torah, writing a rabbinic past that matched contemporary expectation, and the same source might even indicate that the same Jews were themselves occupied with Greek learning.

If these sources tell us about some kind of Babylonian Jewish engagement with Greek wisdom, they raise interesting possibilities for the cultural history of that community, its institutions, and the Talmud. It has been long noted that the rabbinic academies in Babylonia developed at the same period as the Christian schools of the same region. While scholars have found many similarities in the structure of these institutions, their social location, and their ideology, the preoccupation with the Greek philosophical tradition in the Christian schools was one element that has been seen as a point of contrast.⁶¹ The text discussed in this paper points to the possibility that the rise of the rabbinic academies, like the rise of the Christian schools, corresponded to an increased interest in Greek thought among Jews that is not represented in the sources that survived. Furthermore, the similarities that Cohen found between the “scholarch” and the head of the academy may indicate a closer, even causal, connection between this engagement with Greek traditions and the institutionalization of intellectual life or the rise of the academies. Much more evidence is required before we can pursue these possibilities, but they suggest a direction for a new understanding of the culture that produced the Talmud.

⁶¹ See, e.g., Becker, “Comparative Study,” 103.