

The Contributions of Traditional Judaic Sources in Disclosing the Influence of Greek Gymnastics on Ancient Jewish Culture

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While the related literature from Herodian times certainly appears to illuminate an influx of Hellenistic culture—especially Greek and Roman athletics—into Palestine, some traditionalists still maintain that no ultimate corroboration can be achieved without additional critical sources since the fragmentary nature of the works dealing with this period prevents a clear, detailed picture from being formed. Despite this, some scholars have interpreted the related evidence to suggest that while the Jewish King Herod was responsible for the introduction of Graeco-Roman athletic practices, he was looked upon as a pagan introducing heathenish games and following his death rabbinic admonitions against participating in these activities resulted in their alienation from Judaic society.

Recently, however, a noted scholar has narrated that those authors involved with researching the extent of Jewish participation in Graeco-Roman sports have, with the exception of the books of Maccabees, utilized references others than those accepted as orthodox Judaic sources. Further, this critic concluded that when one incorporates these additional sources (Talmud, Mishna, and Midrash) a more comprehensive study is inevitable. For instance, the beforementioned traditionalists have affirmed that the introduction of circuses and gladiatorial contests were viewed as paganish idolatory by the general Jewish populace since the bloody gladiatorial confrontations of man versus man and man against beast were alien to the humane Mosaic traditions. Accordingly the rabbis would have prohibited attendance at circuses and stadia on the grounds that obscenities were practiced there. While such a rabbinical admonition did exist, the Talmud reveals that this attitude appears not to have been the universal opinion of the Jewish inhabitants and whereas one rabbi of the 1st Century preached that anyone who would attend the Roman circuses was a murderer, other rabbinic leaders regarded athletics as a part of 'Greek Wisdom' and esteemed gymnastics and athletics for their value in the physical development of the youth.

The disclosures found in the Talmud, Mishna, and Midrash will not ameliorate all the ambiguities concerning the influence of Greek gymnastics on the Jewish culture. Nonetheless, with the contribution of these traditional sources many contemporary scholars will come to support the theory that Hellenism had a greater impact on ancient Israel than previously thought possible.