

On Use Of The Term Apikoros / Apiqoros / Bikouros Against Epicureans

Post by "Don" of March 17, 2024 at 10:32 PM

Just saw this thread listed in "Research Projects" and finally downloaded "A Diachronic Study of the ʿApiqoros in Rabbinic Literature" by Jenny R. Labendz. Here are some excerpts and notes (Quotes are from Labendz paper unless otherwise noted):

When *tannaim* refer to the ʿ*apiqoros* there is little doubt that they have in mind followers of the ancient philosophical school of Epicureanism,¹ flourishing at that time in Palestine and elsewhere.² By the third century C.E., however,

"*Tannaim* were the rabbinic sages whose views are recorded in the Mishnah, from approximately 10–220 CE. The period of the Tannaim, also referred to as the Mishnaic period, lasted about 210 years." - *Wikipedia* (Tannaim)

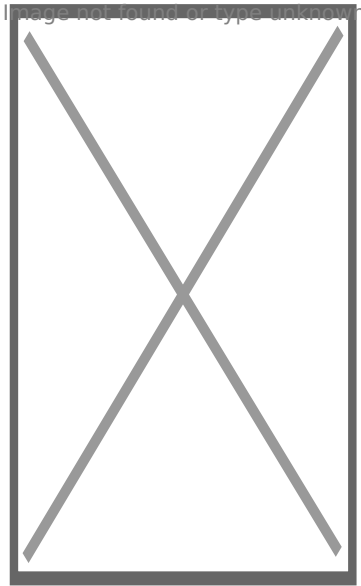
The paper continues that, although the origin of the name 'apiqoros definitely originally referred to Epicureans, by the 4th century CE the Greek philosophical schools (Stoicism, Epicureanism, Scepticism) had "basically disappeared." The *amoraim* (Jewish scholars of 200–500 CE) primarily in Babylonia and Israel, probably never encountered actual Epicureans. ".these Rabbis were not bound to maintain that 'apiqoros meant Epicurean, even if they understood the historical and philosophical meaning of that term. It was obvious to them... that an 'apiqoros was something decidedly negative, but in the absence of real Epicureans, they could, and did, give free reign to their imaginations to construct new definitions."

as the closest the *tannaim* come to defining the ʿ*apiqoros*. The definition they would perceive points to one who rejects the divine origin of the Torah or neglects the study of Torah. Expanding upon this, over the course of subsequent generations, the meaning of the ʿ*apiqoros* focuses increasingly upon an irreverence for learning or for teachers.

"Modern philologists are generally in agreement that the word 'apiqoros is a Hebrew transliteration of the Greek word for either Epicurus or Epicurean." It appears that the consensus is that the generic word Epicurean was the one adapted into Hebrew.

"Epicureans flourished in Palestine...and they missionized ardently." The author cites DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, 3, and Howard Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition* (Routledge, 1989),

64, for this information. "Since the Epicureans missionized vigorously, the Rabbis may have encountered them somewhat regularly, and might have been able to read or at least hear the epitomes that encapsulated Epicurean philosophy and theology." The author cites Saul Lieberman's *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (1962) in several places:



[Hellenism in Jewish Palestine : Lieberman, Saul, 1898-1983 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

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However, the consensus seems to be that since the tannaim literature doesn't employ any Greek philosophical terms "the Rabbi's knowledge of Greek philosophy was limited." ...

to Greek communities outside of Palestine.¹¹ Similarly, Judah Goldin emphasizes that "the rabbis were not Platos in Hebrew disguise, nor were they students (much less disciples) of Plato."¹² Consequently, there is no reason to consider the Rabbis' knowledge of Epicureanism to be any different from that of a beginning Epicurean student who would be familiar only with the general concepts.¹³

Even with this basic knowledge, the Rabbis knew enough to consider the Epicureans "heretical, such as the Epicurean denial of divine providence."

Mishnah 'Abot 2:14

רבי אלעזר אומר, R. Eleazar says,
הוי שקוד ללמוד תורה, Be diligent to study Torah,
ודע מה שתשיב לאפיקורוס. and know what to reply to an Epicurean,
ודע לפני מי אתה עמל. and know before whom you toil.
ונאמן הוא בעל מלאכתך And reliable is your Employer
שישלם לך שכר פעולתך: to pay you your wages.

The author notes that this *mishnah* presumes the reader knows who/what an Epicurean is... later *amoraim* who inherit the term have to "reconstruct its meaning."

The author posits that the Rabbis encountered the Epicureans would most likely have debated them. The intellectual Rabbis were likely targets for Epicurean missionizing and for the pamphlets the Epicureans distributed. So, the Rabbis goal was to know how to counter these basic Epicurean arguments.

ואלו שאין להם חלק לעולם And these have no share in the world
to come:
הבא:

האומר אין תחיית המתים מן התורה,²² resurrection of the dead from the Torah,
ואין תורה מן השמים, and Torah is not from Heaven,
ואפיקורוס. and an Epicurean.

Again, it is assumed that the reader will know who/what an Epicurean is, and this person is someone with whom the student will interact. "Here, the student is being warned against the consequence of actually being an Epicurean himself. This may be what motivates Judah Goldin's assertion that '*apikoros* refers specifically to a Jewish Epicurean.'" (Goldin, *Studies in Midrash and Related Literature* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988, 62).

"Several things can be learned from this mishnah about the tannaitic conception of the Epicurean. First...God is the one who punishes the Epicurean. The problematic nature of being an Epicurean is the theoretical or intellectual rather than practical ... the Epicurean, who denies divine reward and punishment, and is thereby excluded from divine reward in the world to come." The mishnah goes on to say that the Epicureans "says there is no way to learn resurrection of the dead...that the Torah is not from Heaven." These are "essential religious

truths" according to the Rabbis. So the "salient characteristics of Epicureanism" were the "outright denial of providence" and not their missionary efforts or some metaphysical, philosophical theories.

Tosefta Sanhedrin 13:5 lists a whole list of ne'er-do-wells condemned by the Rabbis: sectarians, apostates, informers, Epicureans, those who have denied the Torah, those who separate from the ways of the community, and those who have denied the resurrection of the dead. "Based on the tannaitic familiarity with Epicureanism discussed above... it is plausible that the Rabbis' disdain towards Epicureanism encompassed more than the single heresy of denial of divine providence."

The author states that "we may characterize the early Rabbis' understanding and use of the term. An *'apiqoros* was a member of the missionizing Epicurean school of philosophy which, among other heresies or impieties, denied divine providence. ... Not much later, Rabbis were less sure of the meaning of the word *'apiqoros*."

That gets us up to pp. 175-184. The remainder of the paper traces the use of the word in other texts, but also shows that the writers were less and less aware of what an actual Epicurean was and rather more able to foist whatever heresies they wanted onto the term *'apiqoros* including disrespect for the Torah or simple irreverence. But there is no denying the term originally referred to our philosophical forebears.