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JEWS

A New History

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David Biale

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BABYLONIAN RABBINIC CULTURE

ISAIAH GAFNI

In the context of a lengthy discussion on the nature, merits, and handicaps associated with the ongoing scattering of the Jewish people, a dispersion for which no imminent conclusion was visible on the horizon, the Babylonian Talmud offers an ingenious observation on its own community's unique predicament. More than a millennium prior to the redaction of the Babylonian rabbinic corpus, vast numbers of Judaeans had been transplanted to lands east of the Euphrates River. The majority of these were captives, a consequence of the initial Babylonian capture of Jerusalem in 597 B.C.E. and the deportation to Babylonia¹ at that time of the Judaeans king Yehoyakhin. Another wave of captives arrived shortly afterward, following the second conquest and final destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E.² Why, the Talmud innocently asks, were the Israelites exiled to Babylonia rather than to any other land? Of course, the modern historian's response to such a question would simply be to point to precisely those events just cited. But in the context of rabbinic theodicy and an interpretation of history as the stage upon which a saga of providential causality was being played out, it made all the sense in the world to inquire as to the implications of a Babylonian setting for Jewish captivity and communal rebuilding. And thus the Talmud proceeds to explain why, in fact, it was Babylonia that was chosen: "Because He [God] sent them [back] to their mother's house. To what might this be likened? To a man angered at his wife. To where does he send her—to her mother's house!" (BT Pesahim 87b).

The Jewish people, we are thus informed, were not merely removed to a random land of captivity but were benevolently transferred to what might be considered their original homeland, inasmuch as their patriarch, Abraham, had his roots in those very same lands east of the Euphrates. Implicit in this statement is not merely the theodicy observation that God did not randomly exile the nation for its sins, but also that they were granted haven in the one territory uniquely qualified to receive them in light of their ancient roots therein, thereby affording them, even while uprooted, a sense of comfort and familiarity rather than the expected alienation of captivity.

Familiarity with an ancient "homeland," however, need not presuppose an as-

simulatory process resulting from an identification with the local culture or civilization. Ironically, it would be precisely in this land of ancient roots, albeit imagined ones, that the Jewish community would evince the greatest degree of cultural autonomy, certainly when compared with parallel processes played out in communities west of the Euphrates, namely those situated within the political and cultural boundaries of the Hellenistic-Roman world. In time the sages of Babylonia would come to be recognized as the outstanding Jewish intellectuals of their day, vying with and ultimately surpassing their colleagues in Palestine. The achievements of this community would determine for almost a millennium central elements of a Jewish self-identity and religious expression, as well as the basic literary curriculum and legal code embraced by Jews throughout the world. If ever there were a communal success story in the annals of Jewish history, it was the meteoric ascendancy of the Babylonian rabbinic community in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages to a position of primacy within the Jewish world. It is to this story that the present chapter addresses itself.

A good place to begin our tale—and certainly one that the sages of Babylonia themselves would have recommended—is an event that took place some 800 years prior to the first appearance of a “rabbinic community” there. In the fourth year of the reign of the last king of Judah, Zedekiah (i.e., 594 B.C.E.), and just a few years before the final Babylonian onslaught and destruction of First-Temple Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to those of his countrymen who had already been exiled to Babylon some years earlier.⁴ In that letter, God, through the prophet, beseeches them:

Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and eat their produce. Marry and beget sons and daughters, in order that you may increase in number there rather than decrease. Seek the welfare of the country to which I have deported you, and pray on its behalf to God, for on its welfare your own depends. (Jeremiah 29:5–7)

One would be hard pressed to find another example in ancient Israelite history in which a community heeded the words of the prophet so scrupulously and in such detail. Not only were Jews destined to thrive demographically and economically in this new land of captivity,⁵ but ultimately even the latter part of Jeremiah’s exhortation, bearing a decidedly political significance, would achieve a fruition of sorts with the formulation by Samuel, a third-century Babylonian sage, of the well-known statement that “the law of the kingdom is law” (*dina demalkhuta dina*).⁶ Although that principle appears in the Babylonian Talmud within a more narrowly defined legal context, recognizing the government’s le-

gitimate right to enforce the collection of taxes and customs and to determine legal frameworks for establishing land-ownership, the fact is that it ultimately attained a sweeping political significance for the totality of Jewish Diaspora life. In rabbinic eyes, however, past and present tend to coalesce, and thus in time the rabbinic community of Babylonia would point to those earliest biblical days of captivity as the first links in an unbroken chain of enhanced Jewish existence “by the rivers of Babylon,” claiming that all the requisite trappings of a vital and self-sufficient community were transported from Jerusalem to Babylon even prior to the destruction of the First Temple.

And yet, if the great success story begins at that earliest of stages, one cannot ignore the fact that the very same story also represents one of the great riddles of Jewish history. To be sure, only a small portion of the Babylonian Jewish community participated in the “return to Zion” during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., while the vast majority remained in the eastern Diaspora and ultimately grew to become second in size only to Palestinian Jewry among all the other concentrations of Jews throughout the world. But though they grew into a community of “countless myriads whose number cannot be ascertained,”⁷ the Jews of Babylonia would at the same time recede into a shadowy background, with practically nothing to be heard from them for almost 750 years. Throughout the Second Temple period (516 B.C.E.–70 C.E.), and indeed for the entire tannaitic era of post-Temple Palestine as well (70–220 C.E.), this community provides us with no meaningful information on its inner development, nor do we possess any significant literary product from its midst. Inasmuch as Jewish historiography in Second Temple times focuses almost exclusively on the affairs of Jews situated within the Hellenistic-Roman spheres of influence (primarily in Judaea, but also in major Jewish centers such as Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt), allusions to Jews beyond the Euphrates are almost always linked to events in the west: thus, for example, we hear only fleetingly of the reception granted the captured high priest of Jerusalem, Hyrcanus II, by the Jews of Babylonia in the wake of the Parthian invasion of Judaea in 40 B.C.E.⁸ Expressions of the commitment of Babylonian Jewry to the Temple of Jerusalem, exemplified by their annual monetary contributions as well as by their potential for armed intervention in the face of any perceived Roman tampering with the nature of the Jewish cultic center (as evinced in the days of Gaius Caligula), all find their way into the writings of Josephus and Philo, but even this information does not really shed any light on the communal structures and cultural character of the Babylonian community.

Nor does the appearance on the Judaeian scene, beginning with the reign of King Herod (37–4 B.C.E.), of various Babylonian personalities such as Hillel the

Elder, really inform us about the nature of contemporaneous Babylonian Jewry, notwithstanding the claims of numerous Jewish historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The historical Hillel, it appears, is just one of the casualties of the vigorous controversy between liberal and traditional representatives of nineteenth-century Jewish *Wissenschaft*, many of whom frequently rendered ancient Jewish history a battleground for their own contemporary disputes. In the case of Babylonia, the paucity of any hard information from Second Temple times enabled liberal opponents of Jewish Orthodoxy to claim that the Babylonian Talmud—the ultimate legal authority in traditionalist eyes—was in fact conceived in a land at first devoid of ancient Jewish tradition and instead caught up in the “superstitions” of the Persian East.” Orthodox Jewish historiography would respond by projecting a “Torah-oriented” society among Babylonian Jews as far back as the earliest days of captivity.

In similar fashion, Hillel was cited by nineteenth-century writers as proof either of Babylonia’s deep-rooted Torah orientation or of the total lack of Torah-knowledge in that land, which therefore required that Hillel “come up” to Palestine if he wished to engage in the study of Torah. In truth, nothing on the nature of Second Temple Babylonian Jewry can really be gleaned from the Hillel stories. It was precisely this lack of any real information that enabled both sides to play fast and loose with it. All this, then, tends to enhance the riddle. What were the objective political and social conditions that contributed to the fashioning of the Babylonian Jewish community, even as it remained out of close touch with the rest of world Jewry, and what were the factors that rendered the community so special in its own eyes, affording it a self-assuredness that determined its behavior toward surrounding cultures, on the one hand, and a distinct assertiveness in its relations with other Jewish communities—most notably that of Palestine—on the other?

In strictly political terms, the Jews of Babylonia were ruled over and influenced by a succession of kingdoms, each of which cultivated its own unique cultural environment. The Babylonian kingdom that originally transported the Judaeans captives to their new surroundings was conquered shortly afterward by the Persian Achaemenid monarchy, under whose rule those Judaeans who so desired were allowed to return to the areas around Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. We have, however, no substantial information on the nature of Jewish life under the Persians, and the same holds true for the subsequent period, when the bulk of Alexander the Great’s eastern conquests came under Hellenistic-Seleucid rule (ca. 323–140 B.C.E.). What is noteworthy, however, is that this Seleucid rule over Babylonia marks the last chapter in ancient history during which the Jews of Palestine and their brethren east of the Euphrates were ruled by the same

monarchy, a political reality to be reestablished only in the wake of the Islamic conquests of the East. The prolonged disintegration of the Seleucid Empire, beginning in the mid-second century B.C.E., would ultimately find the two Jewish centers separated again: Babylonian Jewry found itself under Parthian rule for over 300 years,¹⁰ until the fall of the Parthian kingdom to the Sassanian rulers in the early third century C.E.—that is, precisely at the dawn of the Babylonian rabbinic era. The Jews of Palestine, meanwhile, would experience two generations of political independence under the Hasmonaean priests (141–63 B.C.E.), to be followed by the Roman conquest of the land and the establishment therein of successive regimes, all ultimately controlled by the Roman state.

It was arguably in this prolonged state of communal separation that much of the self-image of Babylonian Jewry may have been determined. The Parthian Empire differed both from its Achaemenid and Seleucid predecessors, and even more so from its Sassanian successor, in that it never constituted a unified empire under strong central rule. Instead it functioned as a weak confederation of vassal states whose loyalty to the Parthian sovereign was put to the test only during major confrontations with external threats, primarily in the form of Roman legions. But though usually successful in amassing great military force to thwart Roman designs, the Parthians evinced no zeal for the establishment of a unified social and political order, based on foundations that might have served to create a more homogeneous society. Particularly noteworthy is the lack of a formal state religion under the Parthians. While they did recognize Iranian deities and also fostered Zoroastrianism, this was never cultivated to the extent and with the dedication shown by their Sassanian successors. In fact, Hellenistic culture also served as a counter-influence in the Parthian court,¹¹ and although this may have been a superficial legacy from the Seleucid period, it nevertheless testifies to the lack of any predominant political or cultural enterprise on the part of the Parthian monarchy. What emerged was a loosely knit confederation with a decidedly feudal nature, and although this tended to weaken the kingdom as a whole, it also served as a unifying and strengthening factor for the individual ethnic groups within the empire, allowing them to cultivate a sort of tribal autonomy as long as the sovereignty of the Parthian ruler was officially recognized.¹²

Moreover, if the various ethnic communities managed to achieve a significant degree of political and military potency, they were in the advantageous position of being able to offer their services to the king should these be required for purposes of subduing rebellious elements within the empire. Josephus provides us with two stories relating to Jews or the Jewish community in first-century Parthia.¹³ In both cases, the king was willing to grant elements within the community—be they renegade Jewish brothers who set up a short-lived pirate

state, or recent converts to Judaism from among a local royal dynasty—an enhanced degree of regional autonomy in exchange for their support against all sorts of local satraps and strongmen who might be harboring mutinous aspirations. Although the novelistic and fictionalized elements in both narratives are apparent, they nevertheless represent an accurate picture of a decentralized environment, in which Jews were free to run their own lives unhindered by external political pressures and, even more important, were not engulfed by a pervasive, attractive, and assimilatory cultural presence so familiar to the Jews of the Hellenistic world. Given such an atmosphere, we can appreciate the concern expressed by representatives of the early rabbinic community with the fall of the Parthian kingdom and the ascendancy of the Sassanians. Upon the death of the last Parthian king, Artabanus V (ca. 224 C.E.), we are told that the renowned sage Rav proclaimed: “The bond is snapped” (BT Avodah Zara 10b).

RABBINIC BABYLONIA: THE INTERSECTION OF PAST AND PRESENT

It was upon this extended period of communal autonomy that the rabbis of talmudic Babylonia would graft their own unique contribution to the social and cultural self-image of Babylonian Jewry. On the most basic level, Babylonian Jews even mildly conversant with biblical tradition would be aware that they dwelt not only in one of the ancient lands of the Bible but literally in the cradle of earliest biblical civilization. For instance, they were able to identify in their midst two of the four tributaries of the river that flowed out of Eden, namely the Tigris “which flows east of Assyria” (Genesis 2:14) and the Euphrates. It is hardly surprising that rabbis residing in the very setting of the opening chapters of Genesis identified sites mentioned in that book with Babylonian or Persian cities of their own day. Thus Genesis 10:11 tells us: “From that land [Bavel] he [Nimrod] went into Assyria [Ashur] and built Nineveh and Rehovoth-Ir and Kalah,” and the Talmud records: “Rav Joseph taught: ‘Ashur is Sileq [Seleucia] . . . Nineveh is what it says, Rehovoth-Ir is Perat de-Meshan, Kalah is Perat de-Borsif’ ” (BT Yoma 10a).¹⁴ Another example relates, “ ‘And the mainstays of his [Nimrod’s] kingdom were Babylon, Erek, Akkad and Kalneh’ (Genesis 10:10)— [they are] Edessa and Nisibis and Ktesiphon.”¹⁵

In similar fashion, even though the giants Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi lived, according to Numbers 13:22, in the vicinity of Hebron, this did not prevent the sages in Babylonia from pointing to three islands in the Euphrates as having been built by them: “Ahiman built Anat, Sheshai built Alush, Talmi built Talbush” (BT Yoma 10a).¹⁶

The game of identifying ancient biblical cities with nearby and familiar sites thus transcended a simple form of geographical exegesis, because it effectively put the exegete himself—together with his audience—on the biblical map as well. But this was not just a process of biblical “immersion”; the intersecting of past and present took on a far greater significance when the past was not merely “biblical” but related to ancient Israelite (i.e., “Jewish”) history as well. If, as we noted in the opening to this chapter, Abraham was perceived as being not just the first Hebrew but also a “Babylonian,” how much more meaningful were those attempts at identifying sites connected with King Nimrod—inasmuch as rabbinic lore described how that ruler was responsible for the incarceration of “our patriarch” Abraham. A heightened sense of continuity with the biblical narrative, as well as an immediate link to the historical arena of that narrative, was the natural consequence. Nothing could now prevent the rabbis from identifying the very location of our patriarch’s incarceration: “Rav said: ‘Our father Abraham was imprisoned ten years, three in Kuta and seven in Kartu.’ . . . Rav Hisda said: ‘Ibra ze’ira [the small crossing] de Kuta—that is the Ur of the Chaldeans.’”¹⁷

Once these ancient biblical sites became “known” to the rabbis, this information could be introduced into their halakhic discourse as well: “Rav Hamnuna said: He who sees the lion’s den or the furnace should say: Blessed is the one who performed miracles to our fathers on this spot” (BT Berakhot 57b).

Of course, the sages were well aware of the events that introduced the descendants of Abraham into the lands east of the Euphrates. Here, too, the attempt would be made to juxtapose past and present:

R. Abba b. Kahana said: What is meant by “and the King of Assyria exiled Israel to Assyria and he settled them in Halah and along the Havor, and the River Gozan and the towns of Media” (2 Kings 18:11)? Halah is Helwan, Havor is Hadyab [Adiabene], the River Gozan is Ginzak, the towns of Media—this is Hamadan and its neighbors, and some say Nehavand and its neighbors. (BT Kiddushin 72a; BT Yevamot 16b–17a)

The focus of all this exegetical activity, if our analysis is correct, was not the Bible and a need for up-to-date knowledge of its geography but rather the self-image of the Jewish community of Babylonia in Late Antiquity. What we have seen up to now suggests yet another way for Jews to understand their position and status in a “foreign” land, where they are engulfed by an alien society and culture. Erich Gruen in his chapter in this volume has described the unique coming to terms of Hellenistic Judaism with the various strains of Greek culture. The

nature of that environment, however, was totally different from what we have encountered in the East. The role of Hellenistic culture was so overpowering in countries such as Egypt that Jews—even if they were to preserve and perpetuate their culture—would have to do this through the media and the methods of that pervasive culture. A Jewish author in Egypt such as Artapanus (second century B.C.E.) would attempt to straddle both worlds—that of his Jewish roots alongside his Egyptian cultural environment—by evincing what the eminent classical historian Arnaldo Momigliano has referred to as “something like Egyptian patriotism.”¹⁸ Artapanus could thus recognize that the land of Egypt is the cradle of civilization but would claim that much of that culture was brought there by his Hebraic progenitors: Abraham taught astrology to the Egyptian king, Joseph introduced order into the country’s economy, and Moses “the teacher of Orpheus . . . invented boats and bricklaying machines, weapons for Egypt and tools for irrigation and war, philosophy, and also divided the land into thirty-six districts, assigning to each its own deity[!] . . . and thus Moses came to be loved by the masses and respected by the priests, and came to be known by the name of Hermes.”¹⁹

The rabbis of Babylonia seem to have taken a different approach. For them, “belonging” did not so much require a cultural accommodation, and certainly this was not the legacy they received from the Parthian period and its decidedly amenable atmosphere of cultural and ethnic diversity. To be sure, that atmosphere would undergo definite changes during the Sassanian period, and we will address these shortly. But the first order of business seems to have been affording the local Jewish community a sense of “home while abroad,” and this was achieved at least in part by creating a sense of familiarity with the physical environment. Jews have roots there that go back to their ultimate patriarch, and possess a literary tradition in which the surrounding geography plays a major role. In total contradistinction to the path taken by Hellenistic Judaism in Egypt, this sort of “belonging” does not require an accommodation with the surrounding culture or a meaningful social interaction, and it might even encourage a certain insularity. With such impeccable documentation of their inherent links to their surroundings, the urgency of evincing cultural ties toward that same end was significantly reduced.

ANTIQUITY AND CONTINUITY: INTERCOMMUNAL RABBINIC IMPLICATIONS

Creating a sense of local antiquity for Babylonian Jews may have been only part of the rabbinic agenda, because the Babylonian rabbis were involved in a different confrontation with their contemporaries in Palestine. The stakes here were

particularly high: of all the Diaspora communities in Late Antiquity, only the Babylonian one embraced the new (post-70 C.E.) Jewish devotion to Torah-study as a religious value and personal calling, a process frequently attributed to the sages at Yavneh following the destruction of the Second Temple and considered by some to be their singular greatest achievement. By the third century C.E., a parallel movement appears in Babylonia, probably drawing at first on the emigration of central rabbinic figures from Palestine but ultimately claiming to be on a par with their colleagues in the Holy Land. But that of course was precisely the problem: Babylonia was not “the Holy Land,” and would that fact alone not automatically relegate its spiritual leadership to a secondary or subservient role within the rabbinic world?

It was precisely in this context that the Babylonian Jews’ links with antiquity would come to play a second major role. To be sure, this process did not take place overnight, and the vigor with which the Babylonian rabbis asserted themselves vis-à-vis their Palestinian counterparts hinged to no small degree on political and religious developments over which the sages had no control whatsoever.

The earliest roots of the community, we have been told, were to be found not only in the patriarchal biblical narrative but, more immediately, in the mass removal of the Judaeen population just prior to, and in the direct aftermath of, the destruction of the First Temple. These two waves of captives, we have already seen, were the recipients of Jeremiah’s instructions regarding proper behavior while abroad, but just prior to the text of that communication the author of Jeremiah 29 actually spells out precisely the addressees of his letter: “To the *priests*, the *prophets*, the rest of the *elders* of the exile community, and to all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon—after *King Yekhoniah*, the queen mother, the eunuchs, the *officials* of Judah and Jerusalem, and the *craftsmen and the smiths* had left Jerusalem” (29:1–2). This, then, was no rabble or riffraff that set up shop in Babylonia but rather the most cultivated and esteemed strata of Judaeen society. Centuries later, this fact was crucial, for it suggested that the captivity was the ancient repository of Judaeen tradition as well. To the rabbinic ear, the term “elders” (*zekenim*) implied sagacity, and in similar fashion the “craftsmen and the smiths” of Jerusalem would be taken as an allusion to Torah scholars who were deported with providential care that a foundation for learning be established in Babylonia at the earliest stages of captivity.²⁰

Indeed, this projection of the present into the past went even beyond the world of Torah and came to encompass all the communal institutions of Babylonian Jewry. The most prominent beneficiary of this process would be the Babylonian exilarch (*resh galuta*). Although we possess no hard evidence for the existence of this office prior to the late second or early third century C.E.,²¹

the exilarchate could now claim that its Davidic pedigree went all the way back to the exiled House of Yehoyakhin (Yekhoniah). Even the synagogues of Babylonia would benefit from this bestowal of antiquity on communal institutions. Having established that the captives found solace in the fact that they were accompanied into exile by the *shekhinah* (divine spirit), the rabbis naturally inquired as to the precise location of God's presence: "Abaye said: In the synagogue of Huzal and in the synagogue of Shaf ve-Yatib in Nehardea" (BT Megillah 29a). By post-talmudic times, claims for such continuity were enhanced even more, and Rav Sherira Gaon (tenth century) informs us that the synagogue of Shaf ve-Yatib in Nehardea was actually built from the rubble of the destroyed First Temple, brought to Babylonia by the earliest wave of captives.²²

It should be apparent, by now, how different the cultivation in Babylonia of this perception of "belonging" to the local environment was from that employed by the Jews of the Hellenistic world. But these same processes could be adapted by the rabbis of Babylonia in their contest over spiritual and legal authority with the sages of Palestine. The Babylonian position would be enhanced even more by claims to a purity of national pedigree that exceeded even that of Palestinian Jewry (the rest of world Jewry was of course a distant third).²³ The most blatant statement to this effect was the claim that Ezra rendered Babylonia "like pure sifted flour" by taking with him to the Land of Israel all the doubtful or not-quite-pure elements of the Jewish population.²⁴ It is for this reason, we are told, that "all countries are an admixture (with impure lineage) in comparison to Eretz Israel, and Eretz Israel is an admixture (in comparison) to Babylonia."²⁵ Indeed, to be sure one was marrying a "pure" Babylonian Jew, a person would have to make inquiries on the geographical background of a potential spouse, and this procedure actually led to the talmudic demarcation of boundaries for "Jewish Babylonia."²⁶ What ensued was an enhanced reverence for the physical "land" of Babylonia, a thinly disguised replication of the very attitude maintained by the Jews of Palestine toward their "Holy Land." Indeed, if burial in the Land of Israel had become by the third century yet another expression of devotion and religious piety,²⁷ can we be surprised at finding those who claim that even burial in Babylonia is equivalent to burial in the Land of Israel?²⁸

What was being played out here was not only an exercise in ethnic and religious survival abroad but also a reimagining of the Babylonian community into something radically removed from any other communal context in the Jewish world. The ultimate conclusion—if not the original goal—of this exercise would be the Babylonian rabbinic statement, attributed already to a late-third-century sage, to the effect that "we have made ourselves in Babylonia the equivalent of Eretz Israel" (BT Gitin 6a; BT Bava Kamma 80a).

“IN THE SHADOW OF GOD”:
JEWISH PROSPERITY IN A NON-ROMAN WORLD

We have yet to address the question of whether the reimagining of their community and its history for internal (i.e., local and inter-Jewish) purposes had a direct impact on the Babylonian rabbis' attitudes toward the political and cultural behavior of the gentile world in whose midst they also functioned.

Notwithstanding all the advantages of an unequaled communal antiquity, whether based on fact or fancy, the Jews of Babylonia were absolutely certain of one critical political and cultural reality: unlike their brethren in Palestine and the entire Hellenistic-Roman world, they were able to function beyond the political reach of the Roman state. For the sages, this was an object of considerable reflection: it touched directly not only on the degree of practical autonomy enjoyed by their community but, even more important, on the significance of Jewish removal beyond the all-embracing influence of Hellenistic culture. With the acceptance of Christianity by the Roman Empire in the fourth century, a major new component was added to this equation, because it now also placed the Jews of Babylonia and their spiritual leadership beyond the constant need to respond to theological confrontations with the Church, a new reality that would become increasingly apparent in the statements—to say nothing of the biblical exegesis—of the sages of Byzantine Palestine.

The following anecdote²⁹ expresses in no uncertain terms the Babylonian rabbis' awareness that their position was radically different from that of the Palestinians:

Rabbah bar bar Hanna was ill, and Rav Judah and the disciples entered to inquire about him. . . . meanwhile one of the *ḥabarim* [Persian priests]³⁰ came and took the candle from them. [Rabbah bar bar Hanna] said: “Merciful One [God]! [Let us live] either in your shade or the shade of the son of Esau [Rome]!” Does this imply that the Romans are preferable to the Persians? Did not R. Hiyya teach: “What is the inference of the scripture ‘God understands the way to it, He knows its source’ (Job 28:23)—God knew that Israel could not survive the decrees of the Romans and so he exiled them to Babylonia.” This [seeming contradiction between the two rabbis] does not pose a difficulty: The [teaching of Rav Hiyya preferring Babylonia] was before the *ḥabarim* came to Babylonia, the [statement of Rabbah bar bar Hanna]—after they came to Babylonia.³¹

All of the political acumen, as well as the doubts and fears, of the Babylonian rabbinic movement appear to be wrapped up in this anecdote. Indeed, we could not ask for a keener appreciation of the historical vicissitudes that transpired precisely as the leadership of that movement began to emerge and to compete for communal control with their counterparts in Roman Palestine.

Rabbi Hiyya's pronouncement seems to reflect the reality of his day (the late second and early third centuries c.e.). With the attractive possibilities for communal autonomy still available under a feudal Parthian regime, on the one hand, and, on the other, harsh memories of the aftermath of the Bar Kokhba rebellion and the ensuing religious persecution³² still fresh in the mind, a preference for Parthian Babylonia was only to be expected. Moreover, Jews throughout the world could never forget that it was the Roman army that was responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. Although the political situation in late-second-century Palestine was about to undergo a temporary improvement, with the appearance on the scene of Judah the Patriarch and the improved relationship between Jews and the new Severan imperial dynasty, Hiyya (a Babylonian by birth who immigrated to Palestine) seems to reflect the established political wisdom born of decades of strained relations with Rome. The third decade of the third century, however, presented the Jews of Babylonia with a new and threatening political reality of their own: the Parthian Arsacid rulers had just been defeated by the armies of a family of Mazdean priests from the district of Fars in southeastern Persia. The new Sassanian dynasty that succeeded the Arsacids would be characterized by a more centralized political regime, imagining itself as the new coming of the ancient Achaemenids, and even more important by a new commitment to the old Zoroastrian religion.³³ This zeal manifested itself in the appearance of an assertive and revitalized state church, and the removal of a flame from among the rabbis in the talmudic anecdote is one of numerous allusions to the fire-priests (*ḥabarim*) who at first seem to pose a threat to the established freedoms of the local Jewish community.³⁴ These same priests are cited in the Babylonian Talmud as the reason that rabbis granted permission to move Hanukkah candles on the Sabbath; keeping the candles out of sight would, they hoped, preclude any hostile action by the fire-priests (BT Shabbat 45a).

The dilemma for the Babylonian sages was acute and somewhat ironic. If, indeed, their community had taken comfort in its relatively favorable political situation, compared to that of the Jews under Roman rule, now it too was confronted with a new situation that threatened to undermine those advantages. The fears related to political as well as religious winds of change. A frequently examined story in the Babylonian Talmud (Bava Kamma 117a) reports that Rav—

a Babylonian sage who spent part of his youth in Palestine but returned to Babylonia to witness the changing of the guard in his homeland—advised his disciple Kahana to flee Babylonia after the latter had apparently taken the law into his hands and executed a potential informer: “Until now [ruled] the Greeks [an allusion to the Hellenistic influences manifest at the Parthian court]³⁵ who were not strict about bloodshed, now there are the Persians [a clear reference to the neo-Persian self-image of the Sassanian dynasty]³⁶ who are strict about bloodshed—go up to the Land of Israel.”

Ultimately these fears of forceful interference in the communal life of the Jews would be proven exaggerated, and the *modus vivendi* formulated by Samuel—the law of the kingdom is law—seems to be reflected in the amicable relationship between a number of Sassanian Kings and Jewish sages, at least according to stories recorded in the Babylonian Talmud. Samuel is described in four talmudic traditions as having maintained a decidedly courteous relationship with King Shapur I.³⁷ Thus we are told that

King Shapur once said to Samuel: “You [Jews] profess to be very clever; tell me what I shall see in my dream.” He [Samuel] said to him: “You will see the Romans coming and taking you captive, and making you grind date-stones in a golden mill.” He [Shapur] thought about it all day, and in the night saw it in his dream.³⁸

Another anecdote describes Samuel juggling eight glasses of wine before the king.³⁹ A century later, we encounter a certain Ifra Hormiz,⁴⁰ mother of Shapur II (309–79 C.E.) according to talmudic accounts, not only befriending some of the sages but actually intervening on their behalf with her son. When a rabbi (Rava) was suspected of having overstepped the bounds of recognized legal authority granted the Jews, she declared: “Have no dealings with [i.e., do not punish] the Jews, for whatever they ask of their master He gives to them.”⁴¹ Another anecdote describes three fifth-century sages at the court of King Yazdgerd I (399–420 C.E.) and again suggests a friendly context.⁴² A number of factors might have contributed to this atmosphere, not the least being the fact that Jews under Persian rule would hardly be suspected of harboring loyalties toward the mutually despised Roman Empire. With the embracing of Christianity by Rome in the fourth century, any such suspicion would have been further alleviated; if any elements of society were suspected of constituting a potential fifth column in Sassanian Persia, these would more likely have been adherents of the Christian faith. The very fact that the Sassanian dynasty conjured up memories of a “Persian” monarchy might have made it even easier for the sages to attach to

them the favorable memories of an earlier “Persia,” and thus we encounter a uniquely rabbinic approach to the laws that govern the unfolding of historical processes:

Rabbah bar bar Hanna, in the name of R. Yohanan, following a tradition from R. Yehuda b. Ilai, said: “Rome is destined to fall to Persia, *kal va-homer* [even more so]: If the First Temple, built by the sons of Shem [Israel] was destroyed by the Chaldeans [Babylonians], and the Chaldeans were defeated by the Persians, [and] the Persians built the Second Temple [through permission granted by Cyrus] [only to have it] destroyed by the Romans—is it not fitting that the Romans should fall to the Persians?”⁴³

In another source, the Talmud actually appears to go out of its way to absolve the Persian king Shapur I of complicity, or at least of intentional malice, in the deaths of 12,000 Jews in Mazaca of Cappadocia during the wars of the mid-third century between the Sassanian Empire and Rome.⁴⁴ Nor do we hear of masses of Jews beyond the Euphrates rising up in support of the invading armies of Emperor Julian in the mid-fourth century, notwithstanding that ruler’s promises regarding the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple. Politically, it would appear, the Jews of Babylonia did not suffer inordinately under the new Sassanian regime and probably fared significantly better under the new rulers than did their Christian contemporaries. In a total reversal of roles when compared to Palestine, it is striking to encounter the fourth-century Christian Father Aphraates, living in close proximity to the Jews of Ktesiphon, describe how the Jews mock the Christians in their midst for their lowly status and for the fact that God does not come to their aid!⁴⁵

Even more striking than the absence of any significant deterioration of the political status of Jews under the Sassanian monarchy was the lack of a systematic religious persecution at the hands of the new state church. Although the Talmud alludes to pressures felt as a result of action taken by the Zoroastrian clergy, a closer examination suggests that this was not a product of a coordinated persecution of Jews, nor even of any missionary zeal on the part of the local priests. Robert Brody has conclusively shown that, inasmuch as Zoroastrianism maintained a position of indifference toward conversion, there is no reason to believe that the actions described in the Babylonian Talmud, such as limiting certain Jewish practices, were the result of a concerted attempt at bringing over to the Persian religion—by force, if necessary—large numbers of Jews.⁴⁶ If, as we have seen, fire-priests intervened in Jewish life when they discovered the latter producing flames, this was a result of the clergy’s wish to preserve the sanctity of

fire, one of the central tenets of the Zoroastrian religion. Being Jewish or adhering to Jewish tradition was not the issue here; maintaining the purity of fire was. The same holds true for another Babylonian talmudic tradition that has been interpreted as referring to “persecution”:

They [the Zoroastrian clergy] decreed three because of three: they decreed concerning meat because of the [priestly] gifts, they decreed concerning bath-houses because of ritual immersion, they exhume the dead because of [Jewish] rejoicing on their [Zoroastrian] holidays. (BT Yevamot 63b)⁴⁷

The source here appears to be saying that Jewish neglect of their religious ordinances (not granting the requisite portions of slaughtered animals to priests, laxity in the laws of purity and immersion, etc.) was the cause of their mistreatment at the hands of the Zoroastrian priesthood. The question is, does all this fall under the heading of religious persecution?

To be sure, the terminology—“they decreed” (*gazru*)—is the common talmudic allusion to religious persecution, more frequently found in the context of Roman Palestine. What we apparently have here, however, is a reference to those areas of daily Jewish life that might be affected by the more activist Zoroastrian clergy that appeared on the scene with the rise of the Sassanians. The source indeed alludes to three areas in which a uniquely Zoroastrian religious sensitivity would have caused new difficulties for ongoing Jewish behavior. Thus, for example, the exhuming of the dead by Zoroastrians is a clear consequence of that religion’s unique concept of the earth’s sanctity, which required that the dead be exposed rather than buried:⁴⁸ “Where then shall we carry the body of a dead man, where lay it down? Then said Ahuara Mazda: ‘On the highest places, so that corpse-eating beasts and birds will most readily perceive it.’ ”⁴⁹ It is precisely in light of such beliefs that the following talmudic tale conforms so naturally with the surrounding religious environment:

A *magus* used to exhume corpses. When he came to the [burial] cave of Rav Tuvi bar Matna, [the latter] seized him by his [the priest’s] beard.⁵⁰ Abaye happened by and said to him [Rav Tuvi]: I beg you, release him. The following year he [the priest] returned. He [Rav Tuvi] seized him by his beard; Abaye came—but [Rav Tuvi] would not release him, until they brought scissors and cut off his beard. (BT Bava Bathra 58a)

In a similar manner, the immersion of menstruant women in waters deemed pure would be equally offensive to Zoroastrian believers.⁵¹ And yet, all this

notwithstanding, one fails to sense an *ongoing* confrontation in rabbinic literature between Jews and representatives of the government or officials of the state church. To be sure, gaonic chronicles such as *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon* describe a series of anti-Jewish persecutions during the fifth century, beginning with the reign of Yazdagird II (438–57 C.E.) and continuing under his son Peroz (459–84 C.E.). Sabbath observance was forbidden, synagogues were closed, and Jewish children were seized to become servants in fire-temples. All sorts of explanations have been offered for this radical departure from the earlier atmosphere of relative tolerance; some point to the religious zeal evinced by Yazdagird II in his relations with Christians as well as Jews, whereas others have searched for factors that may have weakened the central government and thereby enabled the more extreme elements within the church to consolidate their power through the use of terror and persecution.⁵² In truth, no single explanation has proven totally convincing, and the very need to provide some sort of rationale for an abrupt change of policy points to the predominantly favorable relationship between the Jewish and Iranian communities.

CROSSCURRENTS OF INFLUENCE: CULTURAL CONTACTS BETWEEN JEWS AND PERSIANS

Charting the twisted and circular paths of cultural dissemination among communities of the ancient world is one of the more speculative undertakings of historians. Attempts at uncovering ancient Iranian influences on the formative stages of Judaism are no exception, and the question of the degree—and indeed the very existence—of a significant Zoroastrian impact on Judaism dating back hundreds of years prior to the rabbinic era finds scholars divided into diametrically opposed camps: “One of these [camps] emphatically denies the actual existence or possibility of Persian cultural influence on Judaism as a factor affecting Jewish thought. . . . [T]he other position is the one which would explain almost everything in the development of post-biblical Judaism as stemming directly from Iran.”⁵³ To be sure, the Iranian and Jewish worlds of religious thought contain similar notions relating to a wide variety of themes. These include aspects of dualism, angelology and demonology, the destiny of the world and the duration of its existence, as well as various eschatological images and beliefs. What is striking, however, is that almost none of these expressions can be found in any extant pre-talmudic Babylonian Jewish literature, but instead they survived almost exclusively in the Palestinian Jewish writings of the Second Temple period. Given the known policies of the Persian government in Achaemenid times, it would be difficult to attribute such influences to a concerted effort on the part of

the Persian administrators of Palestine during the first centuries of the Second Temple period. A more likely scenario would be to assume an initial Jewish exposure to Iranian ideas within the boundaries of Persia and Mesopotamia, where Jews lived among a predominantly Persian population, and thus “the most likely carriers of this new set of ideas may have been Jews from that Diaspora who had constant communication with their brethren in Palestine through pilgrimage and immigration.”⁵⁴

Though addressing an earlier stage of Persian-Jewish contacts within Iran, this proposal might nevertheless contribute to our understanding of the nature and degree of cross-cultural influences in rabbinic Babylonia as well. To begin, it is doubtful to what degree the feudalization within Iran, in Parthian as well as Sassanian times, effected—as claimed by Salo Baron—a “mutual segregation of all corporate groups, and particularly the ethnic-religious communities.”⁵⁵ If anything, the feudalization of the Persian Empire, which contributed toward the maintenance of distinct tribal and ethnic identities, probably also produced a sense of self-assuredness that would have allowed rabbis to loosen their reins and enabled them to permit a significant degree of interaction with the surrounding society. If we nevertheless encounter numerous Babylonian talmudic discussions that, in the context of attitudes toward idolatry, seek to erect barriers between Jews and non-Jews by prohibiting access, among other things, to gentile bread, wine, and other foods, we should note that almost all these “Babylonian” discussions are based directly on the Palestinian Mishnah and the ensuing halakhic traditions that are also of Palestinian provenance. And so, just as certain Persian concepts and attitudes might have been introduced into Palestinian Jewish society through the mediation of Jews traveling from Iran to western lands, we may note in rabbinic times a reverse phenomenon: the rabbis of Babylonia were almost certainly the recipients of certain religious and social attitudes that were spawned in a decidedly Hellenistic-Roman and ultimately Christian environment, one that demanded a heightened degree of caution in light of constant and even conscious efforts at cultural and religious assimilation. Moreover, even in certain spheres of “popular” cultural activity, such as magical incantations so frequently attributed to a Persian environment, we may in fact be confronted by behavior with decidedly Palestinian roots that found its way to Babylonia through some sort of internal Jewish pipeline:

A comparison of the metal amulets from Palestine and surrounding countries to the magic bowls from Mesopotamia shows in several cases clear Palestinian influences and only rarely if ever can one detect influences in the other direction. . . . When formulae from the two geographical areas converge, it may be

invariably established that the origin of the theme is Palestinian, rather than Babylonian.⁵⁶

All this notwithstanding, the Jews of Babylonia lived in proximity to non-Jewish centers of population and maintained ties on a daily basis with those communities. Indeed, we find gentiles living in the same courtyards with Jews (BT Eruvin 63b), and we even encounter a Jew and a gentile living in the same house: “the Israelite in the upper story and the gentile in the lower” (BT Avodah Zara 70a). Jews and non-Jews would greet one another in passing (BT Gitin 62a) and would even offer a hand to the elderly of the other community (Kiddushin 33a). To be sure, our information on such matters is incidental and appears primarily within the context of some legal issue. Thus, for example, we find Samuel in the house of a gentile on Shabbat, wondering whether he may make personal use of a flame lit by the owner on the Sabbath—if the fire was not lit for Samuel’s benefit.⁵⁷

We also encounter a reverse reality, in which gentiles can be found in the houses of Jews on Jewish holidays (BT Bezah 21b). We even hear of Jews and gentiles exchanging gifts on the respective holidays of the two communities: a non-Jew dedicated a candle to the synagogue of the third-century leader Rav Judah (BT Arakhin 6b), and the same rabbi is supposed to have sent a gift to a gentile on that person’s holiday (BT Avodah Zara 64b–65a).⁵⁸ In fact, Rav Judah actually permitted the sages to conduct business with gentiles on their holidays (BT Avodah Zara 11b). In sum, one senses, at least in this respect, a far more flexible and cordial stance toward the surrounding community than the rigid and indeed at times suspicious attitude evinced by the Palestinian rabbis. The same holds true for a significant amount of commercial cooperation between the communities.⁵⁹ Jews and gentiles worked the same fields and even took each other’s place as watchmen on the respective holidays of their partner (BT Avodah Zara 22a). We find Jews and gentiles pressing grapes together in the city of Nehardea (BT Avodah Zara 56b) and a Jew renting his boat to a gentile for the purpose of shipping wine (BT Avodah Zara 26b). What is striking is that the rabbis of Babylonia are frequently named as maintaining a variety of business relations with gentiles; they buy and sell fields from them, and one story even has Rav Ashi selling trees to “a house of fire”—which to the Talmud sounds suspiciously close to indirectly lending a hand to some sort of idolatrous enterprise (BT Avodah Zara 62b). Clearly the segregation of ethnic communities is not the dominant reality emerging from a wealth of talmudic anecdotes.

Even the most casual mingling of Jews and gentiles in Babylonia required a common language of discourse, and such a tool most certainly existed. The daily

language of almost all the local Jews was undoubtedly Babylonian Aramaic, a dialect of eastern Aramaic⁶⁰ that served the Jewish community at least until the end of the gaonic period in the eleventh century. Rav Hai Gaon, head of the Pumbedita rabbinic academy at the beginning of the eleventh century, declares that “from long ago Babylonia was the locus for the Aramaic and Chaldean language, and until our time all [local] towns speak in the Aramaic and Chaldean tongue, both Jews and gentiles.”⁶¹ The Babylonian *geonim* (heads of the academies) refer to Aramaic as “our language,” the one to be found “even in the mouths of women and youngsters.”⁶² By this statement the Babylonians did not wish to deny or ignore their obvious knowledge and literary use of the Hebrew language, but in all fairness it must be noted that, by talmudic times, Hebrew had reverted even in Palestine more into a literary vehicle within the Jewish community rather than a means of daily communication.⁶³

Babylonian Jews were clearly aware that other languages were also in use in their immediate vicinity, most significantly the Parthian and Pahlavi dialects of what is commonly called “Middle Persian.” Although the literary heritage of this dialect was preserved primarily in Zoroastrian writings rooted in the Sassanian period but surviving primarily in products of the ninth and tenth centuries,⁶⁴ it did serve as the vernacular of the Sassanians and would probably have been identified by the Babylonian rabbis as the language of the Iranian government and clergy. As such, the rabbis apparently attained some degree of familiarity with Middle Persian and even introduced it into their exegetical activity:

Rava said: “On what basis [i.e., what is the biblical analogy] do the Persians call a scribe ‘*debir*’? From this [scripture]: ‘Now the name of [the city] *Devir* was originally *Kiriath-Sefer*.’” (BT Avodah Zara 24b)

The exegesis here is based on the Hebrew letters SPR, which can be read as either “book” (*sefer*) or “scribe” (*sofer*). The fact that the biblical city of Kiriath-SPR was originally called “debir,” which is also the Persian word for “scribe,” facilitated the rabbinic etymological link—tenuous as it may be—of a familiar contemporary Persian word with a statement in biblical Hebrew.⁶⁵

In the continuation of the same portion of the Babylonian Talmud, we find Rav Ashi explaining the Pahlavi word for menstrual blood—*dashtan*—on the basis of a contraction of Rachel’s words in Genesis 31:35, “For the manner of women [*derekh nashim*] is upon me.”

Such explicit allusions to “Persian,” however, are sporadic at best and hardly represent an indication of the nature and extent of cultural ties or influence. The number of Persian loanwords found in the Babylonian Talmud, while consider-

able, is dramatically less than the thousands of Greek and Latin words found throughout the parallel rabbinic corpus of Palestine.⁶⁶ Moreover, the study or knowledge of “Persian” never assumed the ideological significance that accompanied a parallel pursuit of Greek in Palestine and that caused fathers to address rabbis with questions regarding the permissibility of teaching their sons (and daughters) Greek.⁶⁷ Nor were the qualities of the Persian language extolled in the manner that Palestinian sources refer to the Greek language, such as its being the only language into which the Torah might be accurately translated.⁶⁸ Indeed, the statement by Rav Joseph—“Why [speak] the Aramaic language in Babylonia, [better] either the Sacred Tongue [Hebrew] or the Persian language” (BT Sotah 49b)—can hardly be taken as a serious attempt at abandoning Aramaic in favor of a Persian dialect. The statement is no more than an artificial replication of a declaration attributed to the Palestinian patriarch Judah (180–220 c.e.): “Why speak Syriac [i.e., Aramaic] in Palestine? Talk either Hebrew or Greek” (BT Sotah 49b). Both statements recognize that Jews in Late Antiquity were interacting with three languages: the sacred Hebrew language of Scripture and synagogue liturgical activity; the vernacular (Aramaic); and the “official” language of the government and surrounding elements of the indigenous aristocracy or clergy. But the comparison ends here, and Persian among Babylonian Jews never assumed the position evinced by Greek among the Jewish populations of Palestine and the Roman Empire. The latter were surrounded by broad sections of a gentile society for whom the Greek language was not just a vehicle for daily discourse but the ultimate underpinning of an all-embracing culture. This was not the case in Babylonia; here no such equation between the “official” language of government and the vernacular of the cultured masses existed. Persian was far more limited to government and the Iranian church, whereas Aramaic served as the vernacular—both for Jews and for the indigenous non-Jewish population.

If, however, Middle Persian was perceived by the rabbis as primarily a language of the Iranian government and clergy,⁶⁹ the use—or at least passive knowledge—of words in that dialect by Babylonian Jews might nevertheless serve to indicate the areas of cultural interaction between the latter and certain representative elements of Iranian society. Sure enough, of those Persian words that found their way into the Babylonian Talmud, a significant number relate precisely to those spheres of public behavior where Jews and Persian officials came into actual contact. These include state administration, official titles of office, the administration of justice and forms of punishment, and military terms.⁷⁰

Similarly, it is not at all surprising to find rabbinic allusions to the festivals of “the Persians.” The main reference in the Babylonian Talmud (Avodah Zara 11b)

lists four “Persian ones” alongside “four Babylonian ones,” and this distinction—to say nothing of the actual names of the festivals cited for each group by the Talmud—is far from clear.⁷¹ The parallel discussion in the Palestinian Talmud (*Avodah Zara* 1:1 39c) quotes Rav as saying that “three holidays are in Babylonia and three holidays are in Media.” In both cases the names of the holidays were corrupted by copyists over the generations and thus prove nothing regarding the original familiarity of the talmudic rabbis with Iranian festivals.⁷² But the vast scholarship on these lists⁷³ has succeeded at least in identifying two well-known Iranian holidays in both versions. They are “Noruz” (“Musardi” in manuscript versions of the BT; *Noroz* in the PT), which signified the coming of the spring or the summer,⁷⁴ and “Mihragan” (“Muharnekei” in the BT), which designated the onset of the rainy season. The halakhic context for the preservation of these lists was the Palestinian rabbinic prohibition on conducting business transactions with the heathen on their festivals (*Mishnah Avodah Zara* 1:1–2). Whereas the *Mishnah* proscribed such transactions “on the three days preceding the festivities,” the Babylonian sage Samuel declared that “in the diaspora [Babylonia] it is only forbidden on the actual festival day” (BT *Avodah Zara* 11b), possibly hinting at a diminished fear in Babylonia that Jews might somehow become involved in local cultic worship.

The underlying assumption in all cases was that the Jew had sufficient knowledge of the surrounding calendar so that he might refrain from business on those days. It could be, however, that—as in the case of Iranian loanwords—here too the rabbis referred precisely to those days on the Persian calendar that directly affected their own lives. The two festivals noted above were apparently also days of tax collection in the Sassanian Empire, and indeed we hear elsewhere that Jews were accused of attempting to avoid payment of “the king’s poll-tax” twice during the year, “a month in the summer and a month in the winter” (BT *Bava Metzia* 86a).⁷⁵ This would tend to dovetail with those sources cited already, relating to the interference of the Persian priests in the daily life of Jews, such as by the removal of fire from their midst. This sort of activity apparently also took place on specific days of the Persian calendar,⁷⁶ and so—as in the case of tax collection—rabbinic awareness of particular components of Iranian culture need not necessarily reflect an internalizing process of acculturation but instead might point at times to a more prosaic reality of Jewish life being affected by the proclivities of the surrounding—and ruling—local administration.

Yet when all is said and done, it would be impossible to deny some obvious similarities between certain Iranian and Babylonian rabbinic aspects of theology that manifest themselves not only in parallel terminology but also in actual expressions of popular belief and concomitant behavior. To be sure, not all “simi-

larities” necessarily point to an Iranian influence upon Babylonian Jewry,⁷⁷ but the fact that we possess the literary product of two parallel rabbinic communities, those of Babylonia and Palestine, affords us with at least some degree of control. Consequently, when we encounter fairly obvious affinities of expression or behavior between Babylonian Jews and their Persian neighbors, with no parallel expression anywhere in Palestinian rabbinic literature, the likelihood of an internal Iranian process of acculturation is at least partially enhanced.

One seemingly obvious example of contact between popular Iranian culture and statements recorded in the Babylonian Talmud relates to the realm of demons and demonology.⁷⁸ To be sure, a belief in the existence of vast armies of demons and spirits existing alongside human beings and constantly interacting with them was shared by all the peoples of the Ancient Near East. Among the biblical sins of ancient Israel was their recurrent sacrificing to *shedim*, a Hebrew term translated in the Septuagint as *daimones* (demons).⁷⁹ Second Temple Jewish literature is replete with allusions to a variety of such forces of evil, and Josephus even claims that King Solomon was trained in the ways of fighting evil spirits, and that he “composed incantations . . . and left behind forms of exorcisms with which those possessed by demons drive them out, never to return.”⁸⁰ Josephus himself testifies to witnessing the activity of an exorciser in the presence of Vespasian and his soldiers,⁸¹ and of course the New Testament is replete with stories of people possessed by a variety of evil spirits.⁸² Scholars have even noted distinct similarities in the import assigned to some terms that refer to a variety of spiritual forces in Palestinian sectarian literature with those found in Iranian terminology,⁸³ suggesting some sort of Iranian cultural impact on the religious thought and imagery embraced by certain Palestinian Jewish circles.⁸⁴

It is hardly surprising, then, that the Palestinian rabbis were also party to this widespread belief in spirits; according to one opinion in the Mishnah, “the harmful spirits” (*mazikin*) were among the 10 things created on Sabbath eve at twilight.⁸⁵ Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai interpreted the word “all” in a particular scripture (“And *all* people of the earth shall see that thou art called by the name of the Lord”—Deuteronomy 28:10) to refer “even to spirits and even to demons.”⁸⁶ Such beliefs found their way into halakhic discourse as well, and thus, for example, the Tosefta addresses the permissibility of whispering an incantation “about demons” on the Sabbath.⁸⁷

The universality of belief in demons and spirits notwithstanding, it is nevertheless in the Babylonian rabbinic corpus that we sense a true affinity to specific demonological images prominent in Iranian religious thought. The pervasiveness of demons so common in Pahlavi literature⁸⁸ resonates clearly in the Babylonian Talmud.⁸⁹

It has been taught: Abba Benjamin says: "If the eye had the power to see them, no creature could endure the demons." Abaye said: "They are more numerous than we are and they surround us like the ridge around a field." Rav Huna says: "Every one among us has a thousand on his left hand and ten thousand on his right hand." Rabba says: "The crushing in the Kallah [i.e., the gatherings for public learning among the Babylonian rabbis] is from them. The wearing out of the clothes of scholars is due to their rubbing against them. . . . If one wants to discover them, let him take sifted ashes and sprinkle them around his bed, and in the morning he will see something like the footprints of a cock."⁹⁰

Another talmudic tradition describes the queen of demons—Igrath, the daughter of Mahalath—at the head of 180,000 "destructive angels." Originally, we are told, these forces had unbridled permission to wreak destruction, but their powers were curtailed following the decree of one of the rabbis⁹¹ ordering her never to pass through settled regions. " 'I beg you'—she pleaded—'leave me a little room,' so he left her the nights of Sabbath and of Wednesdays." It is for this reason, the Babylonian Talmud warns, that "one should not go out alone . . . on the nights of either Wednesday or Sabbath" (BT Pesahim 112b). Yet another sage—Abaye—succeeded in limiting the activities of these angels to isolated areas, removing them by his decree from settled regions (BT Pesahim 112b). Not only are these allusions to such demonic forces introduced into the talmudic discourse without any sign of skepticism or inferred disbelief, but they actually suggest that the most noted legal scholars of the rabbinic world accepted the existence of such forces; however, the scholars were able to overcome their destructive powers either by some specific knowledge they possessed or by virtue of their own pious behavior. Prayer, we can assume, would be a particularly potent weapon in this confrontation, and thus we read the following story about "a demon" that haunted the schoolhouse of Abaye, so that whenever two disciples would enter the premises, even during daytime, they would be harmed. Upon the arrival of another sage—Rabbi Aha b. Jacob—in town, Abaye saw to it that none of the townsmen offered him hospitality, thereby requiring the rabbi to spend the night in the schoolhouse:

The demon appeared to him in the guise of a seven-headed dragon. Every time he [Aha] fell on his knees [in prayer] one head fell off. The next day he reproached [the men of the schoolhouse]: "Had not a miracle occurred, you would have endangered my life." (BT Kiddushin 29b)

Legal discussions and allusions to demons seem to merge effortlessly in the Babylonian Talmud, hardly leaving an impression that the world of halakhah—

rather than that of devils and spirits—is the “real” and exclusive environment in which rabbis function. The long discussion of demons, magic, and the like found in the Babylonian Talmud (Pesahim 109b–112b) is introduced through a question relating to the mishnaic stipulation that at the Passover seder one must drink four cups of wine: “How could our Rabbis enact something whereby one is led into danger? Surely it was taught: A man must not eat in pairs [i.e., eat an even-numbered amount of dishes] nor drink in pairs nor cleanse himself twice nor perform his requirements [a euphemism for intimacy] twice.” All this, we are ultimately informed, is because—as the demon Joseph once told Rabbi Joseph—“Ashmedai”² the king of the demons is appointed over all pairs” (BT Pesahim 110a).

What is striking, however, is not merely the credulity evinced by the Babylonian rabbis toward these phenomena but also their knowledge that such beliefs were not always shared by their Palestinian counterparts: “In the West [Palestine] they are not particular about ‘pairs’ ” (BT Pesahim 110b).³ Moreover, it appears that all sorts of Babylonian rabbinic customs are related to fears well established in Iranian demonology. For example, the care that the rabbis demand in not randomly discarding the parings of human fingernails—“One who buries them is righteous, one who burns them is pious, and one who throws them away is a villain”⁴—derives directly from Iranian fears about the powerful potential, for good as well as evil, found in nail-parings. According to the *Vendidad* (17.9), nail-parings should be dedicated to a particularly fabulous bird (known as “Asho.zushta” and identified as the owl) renowned for uttering holy words in its own unique tongue, thereby causing devils to flee. This bird was charged with guarding the parings, lest they fall into the hands of the devils who then turn them into hostile weapons.⁵

The rabbis of Babylonia were aware of potential danger lurking wherever the demons and their kind might be found, which was just about everywhere. Particularly susceptible moments were during the various functions connected with eating and drinking:

Abaye said: “At first I thought the reason why the last washing [of the hands after a meal] may not be performed over the ground [but only over a vessel] was that it made a mess, but now my master [Rabbah bar Nahmani] has told me it is because an evil spirit rests upon it [i.e., the water].” (BT Hullin 105b)

Abaye was also advised by his mentor not to drink water from the mouth of a jug but to pour off some water first and then drink, “because of evil waters”—that is, the fear that demons may have drunk from the water at the top of the jug

(BT Hullin 105b).⁹⁶ In general, demons rendered the drinking of water a potentially dangerous activity, and one had to know precisely when and where it was advisable to refrain from drinking: “A man should not drink water from rivers and pools at night, and if he drinks, his blood is on his own head, because of the danger.”

What is the danger?—the Talmud asks, and responds by citing the name “Shaberiri,” apparently the demon that causes blindness. Fortunately, the rabbis were also privy to the effective incantation that might ward off this particular spirit: “O So-and-so, my mother told me: ‘Beware of Shaberire, berire, rire, ire, re; I am thirsty for water in a white glass’ ” (BT Pesahim 112a).⁹⁷

Here too it was Zoroastrian literature that also warned against drinking water at night. In a collection of Zoroastrian traditions known as *Sad Dar* (lit. “The Hundred Subjects”),⁹⁸ we read that “it is not proper to swallow water at night, because it is a sin.”⁹⁹ A Pahlavi fragment alludes to the contamination of well-water at night,¹⁰⁰ and yet another text¹⁰¹ explicitly relates to the presence of demons and fiends who seize upon the wisdom of one who eats or drinks in the dark.

For Zoroastrians, however, demons did not only lurk in various locations and wait to pounce on some hapless innocent. Just as one’s physical being might be assaulted by these forces, so others might lay siege to a person’s moral nature and behavior.¹⁰² Pahlavi texts describe various spirits taking over a man’s personality: “A man whose body is inhabited by Akoman [Evil Mind], this is his mark: He is cool as regards good works, has bad relationships with the good, is difficult [in] making peace, is an advocate of the destitute good and is himself [miserly].¹⁰³ The same text goes on to describe a man “whose body is inhabited by Xesm [Anger]” and the negative impact on his behavior: “It is impossible to talk to him, when people talk to him he does not listen. . . . [H]e tells many lies to people and inflicts much chastisement on an innocent person.”

This being the case, we can understand how all sorts of actions might be attributed to such demons who take control of a man’s faculties, thereby controlling his deeds as well. Not only was this sort of compulsion known to the Babylonian rabbis, but they even attempted to define the legal ramifications of such behavior. In this context the Talmud cites the following halakhah: “If a man is compelled by force to eat unleavened bread [on Passover], he thereby performs his religious duty.” The nature of this compulsion, however, is immediately addressed: “Compelled by whom? Shall I say by an evil spirit?” (BT Rosh Hashanah 28a). The conclusion, of course, might be to consider “sin” as well the result of various powers that have taken control of one’s being, thereby possibly alleviating any moral culpability for such action. Although this was not ad-

dressed directly by the Babylonian rabbis, they nevertheless appear to have been familiar with the image of one whose actions seem to be directed, and indeed coerced, by some sort of invading demon. When asked why her children are so beautiful, a woman ascribes it to her husband's modesty, describing how her husband cohabits with her only at midnight, and even then "uncovers a handbreadth and covers a handbreadth, and is as though he were *compelled by a demon*" (BT Nedarim 20b).¹⁰⁴

The belief in demons and spirits demanded a powerful arsenal of protective measures to ward off potential dangers, and the ancient world produced an enormous variety of them. The Jews of Babylonia were no different in this respect from their brethren in Palestine and elsewhere, nor from the non-Jewish environment in which they lived. Amulets, incantations, and other measures were employed universally, but certain discoveries relating to this community would appear to shed some interesting light on one particular aspect of the relationship between Jews and gentiles east of the Euphrates River.

During the past 150 years, hundreds of earthenware bowls, containing incantations primarily in Jewish Aramaic but also in Syriac and Mandaic, have been discovered in Mesopotamia and Iran, the areas that in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages constituted the regions of talmudic and gaonic Babylonia.¹⁰⁵ These bowls are usually dated between the fourth and seventh centuries C.E.—that is, the second half of the talmudic era and the immediate post-talmudic period. The vessels are inscribed in ink, usually on the concave side in spiral concentric circles, but there are various exceptions to this pattern.¹⁰⁶ (See p. 250.) A large number of such bowls were found in 1888–89 at excavations at Nippur, where they were discovered *in situ* in private dwellings, usually in what is assumed to be their original position, upside down. Scholars have assumed that, positioned in such a manner, and given their contents, the bowls were intended to trap and imprison various demons. Although this interpretation is reinforced by the language frequently found in the bowls ("bound and sealed are all demons and evil spirits"),¹⁰⁷ other such vessels were intended to rid a person or a house of some evil spirit ("now flee and go forth and do not trouble Komes b. Mahlaphta in her house and her dwelling").¹⁰⁸ The removal of the spirit or demon was effected in a manner very similar to the dispatching of a writ of divorce, and indeed some of the bowls actually use the terminology of a Jewish *get*, except that in place of a woman being divorced, we encounter Lilith or some other demon as the object of the process:

I, Komes bat Mahlaphta, have divorced, separated, missed thee, thou Lilith, Lilith of the Desert. . . [I]t is announced to you, whose mother is Palhan and whose father [Pe]lahdad, ye Liliths: Hear and go forth and do not trouble

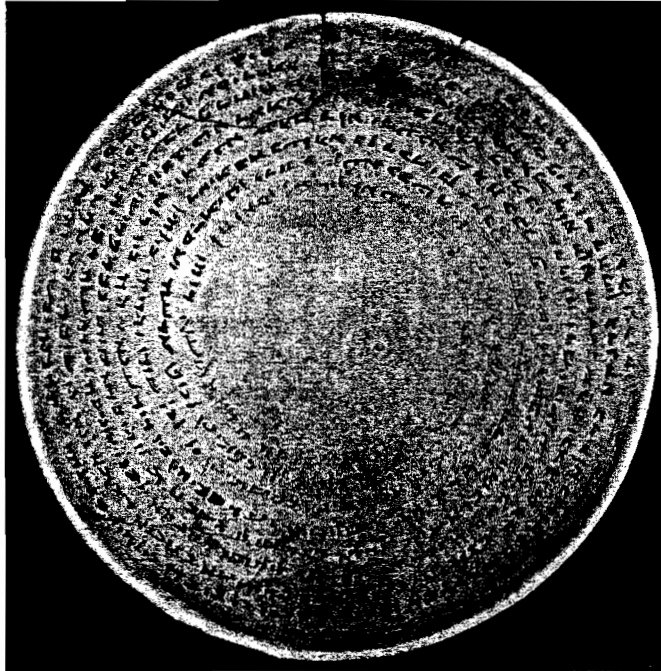
Komes bat Mahlaphta in her house. Go ye forth altogether from her house and her dwelling and from Kaletha and Artasria her children . . . for so has spoken to thee Joshua ben Perahya: A divorce has come to thee from across the sea.¹⁰⁹

Even more striking is the fact that these “deeds of divorce” frequently adhere not only to the terminology of a *get* but to legal stipulations as well, such as the requirement that the document cite explicitly the full name of the intended divorcee, as well as the person charging the particular spirit with removal. Indeed, one bowl actually alludes to a previous case where the banned spirit was not named, thus rendering that earlier document invalid: “Just as there was a Lilith who strangled human beings, and Rabbi Yehoshu’a bar Perahya sent a ban against her, but she did not accept it because he did not know her name.”¹¹⁰

The numerous references in the bowls to Yehoshua ben Perahya, the “rabbi” we encountered in a talmudic confrontation with “the queen of demons,” is just one of many factors that support the widely—albeit not universally¹¹¹—accepted theory that these bowls were inscribed not only by Jews but indeed by those Jews who had at least some access to rabbinic legal formulae. The language in many of the bowls has been definitively identified as Babylonian Jewish Aramaic, and the frequent quotation of biblical scripture in Hebrew lends further support for assuming that before us are the products of Jewish practitioners of magic.

But if the language and content all point to Jewish magicians, one factor in many of the bowls almost certainly suggests a non-Jewish involvement as well: the clients on whose behalf the bowls were produced very frequently go by decidedly Persian names, at times even Zoroastrian theophoric ones.¹¹² Some Jews may have adopted Persian names, but the preponderance of otherwise Jewish components in the vast majority of magic bowls found to date, alongside a decidedly non-Jewish nomenclature for the beneficiaries of the bowls, seems to point to a fascinating social and cultural reality in talmudic Babylonia. As a minority group, however self-assured, the Jews may have been considered by the indigenous population of Babylonia not only as “different” and even “outsiders” but, more important, as “others” who nevertheless have access to certain knowledge, or powers, that “we” locals are not privy to. In fact, societies frequently attribute such extraordinary talents precisely to groups living outside the mainstream, or on the fringes of society. It may very well be that the Jews of Babylonia were willing to offer their services in connecting with certain forces or spirits not readily accessible to the masses. And while this activity might have been frowned upon—at least in principle—by the rabbis themselves, they could not prevent their coreligionists from providing a service in great demand by neighboring groups who were not party to the same misgivings.

This last observation deserves some further explication. On the one hand, the



An example of Aramaic magic bowls, written by Jews but possibly intended to heal non-Jews in Sassanian Babylonia.
(The Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

rabbis evinced enormous discomfort with all sorts of magical activities,¹³ considering them an attempt at circumventing proper channels of prayer and behavior in the process of seeking certain benefits, and thereby constituting a denial of the exclusive role of “the heavenly *familia*” in the granting of such rewards.¹⁴ Yet, on the other hand, it is clear from what we have seen that the belief in an army of demons and spirits was deeply embedded in the rabbinic mind and that the rabbis did not shy away from addressing this “reality” with their own unique recourse to a wide array of incantations and other activities, all aimed directly at the threatening entity and forgoing supplication to the divine protector or benefactor.

This seeming inconsistency characterizes the rabbinic position vis-à-vis all sorts of popular beliefs and their attendant behavior. Among the most obvious examples of such fence straddling are the numerous rabbinic statements addressing astrology. Here, of course, the barriers between Babylonia and the rest of the Jewish world had long ago been removed. While the very phrase

“Chaldean” served in ancient times to link the land of Babylonia with a propensity for astrological activity,¹¹⁵ astrology had become so popular by the Greco-Roman period that “scarcely anybody made a distinction between astronomy and its illegitimate sister.”¹¹⁶ For the rabbis, however, recognition of the efficacy of astrology placed in question not only man’s freedom of choice but also the whole concept of Divine providence and its critical link with the principle of free will.¹¹⁷ Recourse to astrological divination was tantamount to recognition that events were predetermined in the stars and not dependent on God’s will, which properly should be influenced by man’s behavior. Consequently the third-century sage Rav, in the name of one of the few second-century rabbinic authorities also of Babylonian origins (Rabbi Yosi of Huzal), declared: “How do we know that you must not consult Chaldeans [astrologers]? Because it says: ‘Thou shalt be whole-hearted with the Lord thy God’ (Deuteronomy 18:13).”¹¹⁸

But neither in Babylonia nor in Palestine could the rabbis bring themselves to deny outright the “science” of their day, “a science recognized and acknowledged by all the civilized ancient world.”¹¹⁹ Moreover, just as Jewish authors of the Second Temple period had already identified Abraham as one who “sought and obtained the knowledge of astrology and the Chaldean craft,”¹²⁰ so too did the Babylonian sages attribute to Abraham a belief in planetary influence. When he is promised by God that he will have an heir, he replies:

Sovereign of the Universe, I have looked at my constellation and find that I am not fated to beget a child. He [God] told him: “Leave your astrological calculation, for Israel is not subject to planetary influence [lit. ‘there is no planet—*mazal*—for Israel’].”¹²¹

God’s response does not deny the power of the stars but claims that Israel—unlike the rest of humankind—has been removed from planetary control. Though clearly striving to maintain the theological purity of Israel’s relationship with Divine providence, this somewhat contrived rabbinic compromise never really convinced the Babylonian sages that there was nothing in the stars for them. A passage in the Babylonian Talmud elaborates precisely what characteristics will adhere to people born on each of the seven days of the week (BT Shabbat 156a). The continuation of that same text notes how being born under the various planets also determines one’s behavior:

He who was born under Venus will be wealthy and an adulterer. . . . He who was born under Mercury will be of a retentive memory and wise. . . . He who was born under Mars will be a shedder of blood. Rav Ashi said: “Either a surgeon, a thief, a slaughterer or a circumciser.”

Elsewhere, Rava declares that “life, children, and livelihood” are not the consequence of one’s merits but are “dependent on the planet” (BT Mo’ed Katan 28a). Yet another sage, Rav Papa, suggests that one should plan various activities in accordance with the planetary constellation. Thus, for example, a person should avoid litigation during the month of Av, “whose planet is pernicious,” and prefer instead the month of Adar, “whose planet is favorable” (BT Ta’anit 29b).

Even more telling is the foresight that the rabbis attribute to the various “Chaldeans” that they themselves solicited for advice. Rav Joseph turned down an offer to serve as head of the rabbinical academy “because the astrologers had told him that he would be head for only two years.” And so his colleague Rabbah filled the position for 22 years, ultimately to be succeeded by Rav Joseph who indeed served for only two and a half years (BT Berakhot 64a).¹²² Interestingly, a later (tenth-century) version of this same story claims that it was Rav Joseph’s mother who had contact with the astrologers,¹²³ and we can only wonder if this latter rendition is not something of a cleansed version intended to distance the sage himself from behavior that does not quite conform to the standards set by the rabbis themselves. Elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud we do, in fact, find a story describing contacts between the mother of a sage and Chaldeans, and there, too, the prophesies of the astrologer are proven correct:

Rav Nahman b. Isaac’s mother was told by Chaldeans [astrologers]: “Your son will be a thief.” She did not permit him to go bareheaded, telling him: “Cover your head so that the fear of heaven may be upon you, and pray [for mercy].” He did not know why she said this.

One day when he was sitting and studying under a palm tree, his garment fell from over his head, he raised his eyes, saw the palm tree, and temptation overcame him. He climbed up and bit off a cluster [of dates] with his teeth. (BT Shabbat 156b)

The Talmud cites this story to prove that Israel is *not* given to the influence of planets, but, inasmuch as Rav Nahman’s behavior until his “fall” overcame the Chaldeans’ prophesy, the bottom line of the story would appear to prove just the opposite. Moreover, this is not an isolated case of a sage interacting with an astrologer, and in those other cases as well the pronouncements of the “Chaldeans” invariably prove to be accurate.¹²⁴

In sum, all of these sources seem to suggest a unique social and cultural reality. The Babylonian sages knew quite well what a “perfect” Jewish world ought to look like, and we would do well to interpret many of their programmatic declarations as just that: idyllic guidelines for a world that could not possibly exist given the cultural milieu in which these rabbis functioned. And so,

theoretical declarations notwithstanding, in practice both the rabbis and their flock functioned as part of their social and cultural environment. Did these beliefs and their consequential behavior render the rabbis themselves “non-rabbinic”? Not really, if we accept the multiplicity of cultural influences all contributing to the uniquely Babylonian version of rabbinic society. In Jewish terms, much of their learning was nothing if not a continuation and intensification of Palestinian rabbinic teaching. Even here, however, they almost certainly grafted at least some aspects of the local Sassanian legal process to the mass of Palestinian material that they succeeded in co-opting and making their own.¹²⁵ As for popular culture, here too they forged an amalgam between ideas passed on from Palestine through the same rabbinic pipeline that transmitted legal materials and the surrounding Iranian environment that supplied them with a wealth of religious and spiritual imagery.

The genius of Babylonian rabbinic leadership, however, was not so much in the melding of such variegated influences into a broad cultural mosaic but rather in the creation and propagation of a self-image that would project this culture as being the embodiment of the one unique and ancient model of true, unadulterated Israelite tradition, with uncontaminated roots going back to First-Temple Jerusalem and the days of the prophets. Given all that we know about the diverse influences that left their mark on Babylonian Jewish culture prior to their establishment as a literary corpus, one undeniable fact remains. By post-talmudic times, the sages of Babylonia would not only assume the upper hand within the rabbinic world of their day but also ultimately succeed in securing a near-universal acceptance of their Talmud as the definitive expression of rabbinic Judaism. Having emerged out of almost total obscurity only a few centuries earlier, the communal success story of Babylonian Jewry would now be complete.

NOTES

1. The import of the names “Babylon” and “Babylonia” is far from consistent. Whereas the former is commonly employed as a designation of the ancient city, it (as well as “Babylonia”) frequently refers to the vast territories between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, south of Baghdad and constituting much of the southeastern areas of modern-day Iraq. In “Jewish geography,” however, talmudic “Babylonia” usually includes all the Jewish communities east of the Euphrates, i.e., not only southeastern Iraq but also Mesopotamia to the northwest, as well as the Iranian territories east of the Tigris, such as Assyria, Media, and Elymais (Khusistan).

2. For surveys of the early Jewish captive community in Babylonia, see R. Zadok, *The Jews in Babylonia During the Chaldean and Achaemenian Periods According to the Babylo-*

nian Sources (Haifa, 1979), and E. J. Bickerman, "The Babylonian Captivity," in W. D. Davies and L. Finkelstein, eds. *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Engl., 1984), 342–58.

3. The Munich manuscript of the Babylonian Talmud reads "to her father's home," probably influenced by the allusion to the patriarch Abraham.

4. The date of the letter does not appear in chapter 29 of Jeremiah, but the passage seems to belong to the same historical context as the two previous chapters; see J. Bright, *Jeremiah*, 2d ed. (New York, 1984) 210–11.

5. The earliest successes of the Judaeans captives in adjusting to their new land, while maintaining some degree of unique ethnic identity, are documented in the Murashu archives, discovered in 1893 at Nippur. See M. D. Coogan, "Life in the Diaspora: Jews at Nippur in the 5th Century B.C.," *Biblical Archaeologist* 37 (1974): 6–12, and S. Daiches, *The Jews in Babylonia in the Time of Ezra and Nehemiah According to Babylonian Inscriptions* (London, 1910).

6. BT Bava Bathra 55a and parallels; see J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, 5 vols. (Leiden, 1965–70), 2: 69. For the subsequent implications and various interpretations of the principle, see S. Shiloh, *Dina de-Malkhuta Dina* (Jerusalem, 1975). For a brief discussion of the principle's impact on Jewish communal development, see D. Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York, 1986), 54–57.

7. This statement by Josephus (*Antiquities*, 11:133) seems to reflect a common general impression shared by other Jews in the west (see, e.g., Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium*, 216, 282) of vast numbers of Jews populating the lands beyond the Euphrates; in a way it also seems to highlight a shared ignorance of any real internal communal structures and cultural activities among those Jews.

8. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15:14–15; here again Josephus relates that Hyrcanus II settled in Babylonia "where there was a great number of Jews."

9. For the role of Babylonian Jewry and Judaism in early modern Jewish scholarship, see I. Gafni, "Talmudic Research in Modern Times: Between Scholarship and Ideology," in A. Oppenheimer, ed., *Jüdische Geschichte in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit* (Munich, 1999), 134–48. For the place of Hillel in this dispute, see *ibid.*, 145.

10. The formal reckoning of Parthian history begins with the uprising of Arsaces I and his brother Thiridates against the Seleucid Empire, circa 247 B.C.E. In effect, the beginning of Parthian rule in portions of Babylonia overlaps with the Seleucid era, but the main thrust of Parthian expansion at the expense of the Seleucid Empire, under King Mithridates I (171–138 B.C.E.) coincides with the Hasmonaean brother's rebellion against those very same Hellenistic rulers.

11. Parthian kings frequently attached titles such as "Philhellene," "Epiphanes," or "Euergetes" to their names, and Plutarch (*Crassus* 33) describes how one of Euripides' plays was being presented at the Parthian court when word was received there about the victory over Crassus at Charrae. Interestingly, the Babylonian Talmud (Bava Kamma 117a, according to most manuscripts) has the third-century sage Rav describe the Parthians—who had just

been defeated by the "Persians" (Sassanians)—as "Greeks." On Parthian attitudes toward Hellenism, see R. Ghirshman, *Iran* (Harmondsworth, 1954) 266–68, and R. Ghirshman, *Iran, Parthians and Sassanians* (London, 1962), 1–12, 257–81. Note also the title "The Adaptable Arsacids" for the Parthians, in R. N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia* (Cleveland, 1963).

12. For general surveys of the Parthian Empire, see N. Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia* (Chicago, 1938); A. D. H. Bivar, "The Political History of Iran Under the Arsacids," in E. Yarshater, ed., *Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3(1) (Cambridge, Engl. 1983), 21–99; and J. Neusner, "Parthian Political Ideology," *Iranica Antiqua* 3 (1963): 40–59.

13. *Antiquities*, 18:310–79 (the story of the brothers Asinaeus and Anilaeus); *Antiquities* 20:17–69 (the conversion of the royal family of Adiabene). Here, too, various nineteenth-century Jewish writers thought they might derive from these narratives solid information on the cultural and religious fabric of the Babylonian Jewish community in pre-talmudic times; however, see Gafni, "Talmudic Research," 144–45, esp. n. 59.

14. These identifications are in fact untenable. Borsif has been identified with the Burs mentioned by Yaqut and other Arabic sources (present-day Birs Nimrud) and is situated southwest of Babylonia, whereas the biblical text clearly refers to cities in Assyria; see A. Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica in the Talmudic Period* (Wiesbaden, 1983), 104. The same is true for Perat de-Meshan, clearly in the vicinity of the Shatt al-Arab and consequently far removed from any Assyrian locality (*ibid.*, 348).

15. BT Yoma 10a; Gen. Rabbah 37:4.

16. Yaqut and other Arab geographers have identified the three as islands in the Euphrates; see Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica*, 28, 446.

17. BT Bava Bathra 91a; Kuta, or Kuta Rabbah, is the present-day Tall Ibrahim on the Habl Ibrahim canal, 30 kilometers northeast of Babylon; see Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica*, 175, who notes that Arab sources also connect Kuta with Abraham.

18. A. Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom* (Cambridge, Engl., 1975), 116.

19. Apud Eusebius, *Præparatio Evangelica*, 9.27.4.

20. BT Gitin 88a; see also Tanhuma Noah 3: "He [God] acted righteously with Israel in that He had the exile of Yekhoniah precede the exile of Zedekiah, in order that the Oral Torah not be forgotten by them."

21. All the attempts at identifying an exilarch in Babylonia prior to the third century c.e. are based on late and insufficient evidence; see J. Liver, *Toldot bet David mi-Ḥurban Mamlakhet Yehudah ve-ad le-aḥar Ḥurban ha-Bayit ha-Sheni* (Jerusalem, 1959), 41–46, and other literature cited in I. Gafni, *Land, Center and Diaspora: Jewish Constructs in Late Antiquity* (Sheffield, Engl., 1997), 55 n. 37. To be sure, given the overall paucity of information on the Babylonian Jewish community prior to the talmudic era, the existence of an early exilarchate cannot be dismissed out of hand and may actually have made sense within the political and social frameworks of the Parthian Empire.

22. *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon*, ed. B. M. Lewin (Haifa, 1921), 72–73. The antiquity of synagogues played a major role in Babylonian historical consciousness; see A. Oppen-

heimer, "Babylonian Synagogues with Historical Associations," in D. Urman and P. V. M. Flesher, eds., *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery*, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1995), 40–48.

23. BT Kiddushin 69b, 71a; BT Ketubot 111a.

24. BT Kiddushin 69b.

25. Ibid.

26. BT Kiddushin 71b, and BT Gitin 6a; see also A. Oppenheimer and M. Lecker, "Lineage Boundaries of Babylonia," *Zion* 50 (1985): 173–87, and A. Oppenheimer and M. Lecker, "Burial Beyond the Euphrates," in S. Ettinger et al., eds., *Milet*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv, 1983), 157–63.

27. See I. Gafni, "Reinterment in the Land of Israel: Notes on the Origin and Development of the Custom," *The Jerusalem Cathedra* 1 (1981): 96–104, and Gafni, *Land, Center and Diaspora*, 79–95.

28. *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*, ed. S. Schechter, version A, chap. 26, p. 82.

29. Of course, the historicity of the story itself is not the issue here, but rather the self-image and political awareness that it reflects.

30. A frequent talmudic rendition of "herbad" or "erbad," one of several Persian titles for priests of the Zoroastrian church.

31. BT Gitin 16b–17a. For an exhaustive study of the talmudic source, its textual variants, and the wider religious realities and implications of the Zoroastrian priestly attempts at safeguarding the purity of fire and removing it from nonreligious contexts, see E. S. Rosenthal, "For the Talmudic Dictionary—Talmudica Iranica," in S. Shaked, ed., *Irano-Judaica*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1982), Hebrew sec. 38–134, esp. 38–42, 58–64, and the notes on 75–84, 128–31.

32. For the nature of the Roman persecution of Jews during and following the Bar Kokhba uprising, see M. D. Herr, "Persecutions and Martyrdom in Hadrian's Days," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 23 (1972): 85–125.

33. See J. Duchesne-Guillemin, "Religion and Politics Under the Sasanians," in E. Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, 3(2): 874–97.

34. BT Yevamot 63b.

35. See n. 11 above.

36. The text is quoted here according to almost all the important manuscripts of BT Bava Kamma and has undergone extensive scrutiny because of its obvious reference to the major political changes of the day. See Rosenthal, "For the Talmudic Dictionary," 54–58, 87, and D. Sperber, "On the Unfortunate Adventures of Rav Kahana: A Passage of Saboraic Polemic from Sasanian Persia," in Shaked, ed., *Irano-Judaica*, 1: 83–100.

37. BT Berakhot 56a; BT Sukkah 53a; BT Mo'ed Katan 26a; BT Sanhedrin 98a.

38. BT Berakhot 56a.

39. BT Sukkah 53a.

40. See D. Goodblatt, "A Note on the name 'ypr' / 'pr' hwrmyz," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96, 1 (1976): 135–36.

41. BT Ta'anit 24b; for the other stories, see J. Neusner, *Jews in Babylonia*, 4: 35–39.
42. BT Ketubot 61a–b.
43. BT Yoma 10a. Not all the Babylonians concurred with this prognosis, and in the continuation of this same source Rav predicts the opposite: Rome will defeat Persia. When asked how the destroyers will emerge victorious, the Talmud—anonously—suggests that the latter were also guilty of destroying synagogues. (Rav himself is simply quoted as stating that this was God's wish—without elaborating.) This vague allusion to religious pressure on the part of the Sassanians might reflect the harsh reactions to some of the behavior attributed to the Zoroastrian priests, or possibly it was formulated during the few periods of outright persecution in Persia of minorities in general, not only Jews. These occurred in the late third century and again in the tumultuous days of the fifth century. For brief surveys of the attitude toward Jews under the Sassanians, see G. Widengren, "The Status of the Jews in the Sassanian Empire," *Iranica Antiqua* 1 (1961): 117–62; J. Neusner, "Jews in Iran," in Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, 3(2): 909–23.
44. BT Mo'ed Katan 26a.
45. See W. Wright, *The Homilies of Aphraates: The Persian Sage*, vol. 1: *Syriac Text* (London, 1869), 394. For literature on this relationship, see J. Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism* (Leiden, 1971), 7–12. The confidence of the Jews in their confrontation with Iranian Christianity may also be the result of superior numbers; see F. Gavin, *Aphraates and the Jews* (Toronto, 1923), 17. See also G. F. Moore, "Christian Writers on Judaism," *Harvard Theological Review* 14 (1921): 199.
46. See R. Brody, "Judaism in the Sasanian Empire: A Case Study in Religious Coexistence," in S. Shaked and A. Netzer, eds., *Irano-Judaica*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1990), 52–61.
47. On this source, see M. Beer, "Notes on Three Edicts Against the Jews of Babylonia in the Third Century," in Shaked, ed., *Irano-Judaica*, 1: 25–37, and Brody, "Judaism in the Sasanian Empire."
48. For the rite of Zoroastrian exposure, see M. Boyce, *Zoroastrians, Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London, 1979), 14–15, 44–45, 120–21.
49. From Vendidad 6. The Vendidad, consisting of 22 sections, was most probably compiled in the Parthian period. It deals with a variety of legal topics and contains elaborate laws relating to purity. The translation here is from M. Boyce, ed. and trans., *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* (Manchester, 1984), 65.
50. The "Persians," in rabbinic imagery, "grow hair like bears" (BT Megillah 11a; BT Kid-dushin 72a; BT Avodah Zara 2b), and in fact Sassanian art (coins and rock-carvings) almost always portray Persian rulers with grown beards, frequently in contradistinction to the Roman rulers shown in those same depictions.
51. It is not absolutely clear what aroused Zoroastrians to prohibit the slaughtering of animals by Jews; see Beer, "Notes on Three Edicts," 29–31. S. Shaked, "Zoroastrian Polemics Against Jews in the Sasanian and Early Islamic Period," in Shaked and Netzer, eds., *Irano-Judaica*, 2: 93, quotes certain Zoroastrian texts that advise "not to kill cattle before they reach

maturity" and claim that "Dahag"—the mythical representative of the negative views that oppose the true faith—"taught to kill cattle freely, according to the custom of the Jews."

52. See Brody, "Judaism in the Sasanian Empire," 61, and the literature cited in I. Gafni, *Yehudei Bavel bi-Tekufat ha-Talmud: Ḥaye ha-Ḥevrah ve-ha Ruah* (Jerusalem, 1990), 49–51, 251.

53. S. Shaked, "Iranian Influence on Judaism: First Century B.C.E. to Second Century C.E.," in Davies and Finkelstein, eds., *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, 1: 308–25, esp. 309. A copious literature exists on the possible bilateral influences of the Jewish and Persian religions and cultures, alongside an equally elaborate bibliography denying the "influence" aspect and arguing for a more independent, albeit at times chronologically concurrent, development of similar ideas. See G. W. Carter, *Zoroastrianism and Judaism* (Boston, 1918); J. Barr, "The Question of Religious Influence: The Case of Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53, no. 2 (1985): 201–35; J. Neusner, *Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism in Talmudic Babylonia* (Lanham, Md., 1986); and M. Boyce and F. Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 3: *Zoroastrianism Under Macedonian and Roman Rule* (Leiden, 1991), 366–67, 392–440.

54. Shaked, "Iranian Influence on Judaism," 324–25.

55. S. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 2 (New York, 1952), 191.

56. J. Naveh and S. Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae—Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem, 1993), 21.

57. BT Shabbat 122b; Palestinian Talmud (henceforth: PT) Shabbat 16:15d. It is interesting to note that the gentile is referred to in the PT as "a Persian," whereas in the BT simply as "nokhri"—a gentile. It appears that the PT uses "Persian" as a generic term for gentiles in Babylonia, whereas the BT reserves the use of "Persian" to government or church officials (see Gafni, *Yehudei Bavel bi-Tekufat ha-Talmud* 153 and n. 18).

58. See also BT Avodah Zara 65a: Rabah sent a gift to one bar Sheshak.

59. Most of the relevant information has been gathered by M. Beer, *Amora'ei Bavel: Perakim be-Ḥaye ha-Kalkalah* (Ramat Gan, 1974), 207–11.

60. For the various Aramaic dialects found in Iran from the Achaemenid period and down to the talmudic era, see *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 2 (London, 1987), 251–56. On the use of Aramaic by Jews, from late biblical times and down to the present, see the concise overview by J. C. Greenfield, "Aramaic and the Jews," in M. J. Geller et al., eds., "Studia Aramaica," *New Sources and Approaches* (Oxford, 1995), 1–18.

61. From a responsa of Rav Hai, published by A. E. Harkavy in *Hakedem* vol. 2 (St. Petersburg, 1908), 82.

62. See the sources cited in J. N. Epstein, *Dikdud Aramit Bavlit* (Jerusalem, 1960), 17.

63. The question of Hebrew as a commonly spoken vernacular even in Second Temple Palestine, as well as the first centuries of the Common Era, has been heatedly debated for over 150 years, with accusations of "Zionistically inclined" Hebraism and tendentious romanticism frequently introduced into the polemic. See, for a brief discussion, E. Y. Kutscher,

A History of the Hebrew Language (Jerusalem, 1982), 115–19; much of the relevant research has been cited by S. D. Fraade, “Rabbinic Views on the Practice of Targum, and Multilingualism in the Jewish Galilee of the Third–Sixth Centuries,” in L. I. Levine, *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* (New York, 1992), 253–86. For one historian’s perspective of the debate, see S. Schwartz, “Language, Power and Identity in Ancient Palestine,” *Past and Present* 148 (1995): 3–47. Whatever the reality might have been in Palestine, few would argue for any widespread use of Hebrew as a vernacular among Jews of the Babylonian Diaspora in Late Antiquity.

64. See E. Yarshater, “Zoroastrian Pahlavi Writings,” in Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, 3(2): 1166–69.

65. This tendency to provide biblical etymologies for Persian words fits nicely with the rabbinic propensity in the Babylonian Talmud of linking biblical place-names with contemporary cities in the Iranian countryside.

66. Only 130 examples of Iranian loanwords were noted by S. Telegdi, “Essai sur la phonétique des emprunts iraniens en araméen Talmudique,” *Journal Asiatique* 226 (1935): 177–256; see also S. Shaked, “Iranian Loanwords in Middle Aramaic,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2: 259–61. Shaked notes that many of the Iranian loanwords that appear in Middle Aramaic (i.e., the Aramaic of the Babylonian Talmud) may have entered that language over a protracted period of time and would thus not necessarily attest to contacts between Jews and Iranians during the talmudic period alone. In contradistinction to the Babylonian Talmud, over 3,000 Greek and Latin loanwords were cited by S. Krauss, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum*, vols. 1–3 (Berlin, 1898–99). Notwithstanding the problems involved in portions of Krauss’s lists (see D. Sperber, “Greek and Latin Words in Rabbinic Literature,” *Bar Ilan* 14–15 [1977]: 9–20 [English sec.]), the discrepancy between the scope and nature of the influence of surrounding “official” languages on the literary production of the Jews of Palestine and Babylonia is undeniable.

67. See S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1950), 100–114.

68. PT Megillah 1:2, 71c; see S. Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1942), 17.

69. See A. Christensen, *L’Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen, 1944), 45.

70. See Shaked, “Iranian Loanwords,” 260–61.

71. See B. M. Bokser, “Talmudic Names of the Iranian Festivals,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975): 261–62.

72. See Neusner, *Jews in Babylonia*, 2: 88, and J. Neusner, *Talmudic Judaism in Sasanian Babylonia* (Leiden, 1976), 142.

73. See Gafni, *Yehudei Bavel bi-Tekufat ha-Talmud* 157 n. 33.

74. In Achaemenian times, Noruz (lit. “new day”) was celebrated in spring (March/April); in the early Sassanian period it was also celebrated in autumn, thus leading to a dual celebration. However, with the establishment by the first Sassanian king, Ardashir I, of a 365-day year with no intercalation, Noruz crept backward every year by one quarter of a day, and thus the autumn festival of Noruz was actually being celebrated by the fifth cen-

tury in July. Subsequent calendar reform resulted in multiple celebrations of the holiday during the year. See M. Boyce, *Zoroastrians, Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London, 1979), 72, 105–6, 124, 128–30. To this day, various Zoroastrian factions celebrate Noruz at different times of the year; see S. A. Nigosian, *The Zoroastrian Faith* (Montreal, 1993), 115.

75. See Neusner, *Jews in Babylonia*, 2: 88, and D. Goodblatt, “The Poll Tax in Sasanian Babylonia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 22 (1979): 275–76, and nn. 111–14.

76. See Rosenthal, “For the Talmudic Dictionary,” 39–42.

77. The most comprehensive argument for such influence was put forward by J. Scheftelowitz, *Die Alpersiche Religion und das Judentum* (Giessen, 1920); some criteria for identifying apparent influences, albeit not necessarily for Babylonian Jewry alone, have been presented by S. Shaked, “Qumran and Iran: Further Considerations,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972): 433–46. See also D. Winston, “The Iranian Component in the Bible, Apocrypha and Qumran: A Review of the Evidence,” *History of Religions* 5 (1966): 183–216, and E. Spichandler, “‘Be Duar’ and ‘Dina de-Magistha,’” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 26 (1955): 333–54.

78. For a general comparison of demonology in Judaism and the Iranian religion, see Scheftelowitz, *Die Alpersiche Religion*, 25–61. On Iranian demonology, see A. Christensen, *Essai sur la démonologie iranienne* (Copenhagen, 1941), and M. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1, 2d ed. (Leiden, 1989), 85–108.

79. See Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:37.

80. *Antiquities*, 8:45; compare the Wisdom of Solomon 7:20 as well as rabbinic statements linked to Solomon in connection with Ecclesiastes 2:8. See also L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 6 (Philadelphia, 1956), 291 and nn. 488–89.

81. *Antiquities*, 8:46; Josephus describes in great detail how a demon was removed “through the nostrils” of a man possessed, who proceeded to “speak Solomon’s name and recite the incantations he had composed.”

82. Matthew 8:28–34, 12:43–45; Mark 1:23, 5:1–20; Luke 8:26–38.

83. The various Palestinian uses of the Hebrew term *ruah* (spirit), especially those found at Qumran, dovetail with parallel meanings applied to the Iranian term *menog*; see Shaked, “Qumran and Iran,” 434–37.

84. Scholars long ago recognized the similar use of the word “heaven” as a reference to the deity in both Iranian and rabbinic literature; see E. E. Urbach, *The Sages*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1975), 70 and n. 11. Yet another parallel has been noted between the Pahlavi concept of “wrath” and the the rabbinic concept of *midat ha-din* (the attribute of justice), whereby a concept well established in Zoroastrian dualism was adapted by the rabbis as a means of attributing man’s suffering to the omnipotent God; see S. Pines, “Wrath and Creatures of Wrath in Pahlavi, Jewish and New Testament Sources,” in Shaked, ed., *Irano-Judaica*, 1: 76–82, and Urbach, *The Sages*, 1: 451, 460–61.

85. Avot 5:6.

86. PT Berakhot 5:9a.
87. Tosefta Shabbat 7:23; see BT Sanhedrin 101a.
88. See Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, 1: 85.
89. For some of the relevant sources and a brief discussion, see Neusner, *Jews in Babylonia*, 4: 334–38, and 5: 183–86.
90. BT Berakhot 6a. Iranian demonology in fact assigned the form of various birds to a number of fabulous creatures that composed the vast army of supernatural forces existing alongside human beings and playing destructive as well as beneficial roles in this world; see Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, 88–90.
91. The Babylonian Talmud identifies him as R. Hanina b. Dosa, actually a first-century quasi-rabbinic figure in Palestine, known for his wonder-working activity rather than for any halakhic teaching; see B. M. Bokser, “Wonder-working and the Rabbinic Tradition: The Case of Hanina ben Dosa,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 16 (1985): 42–92 (esp. 42 n. 1, which provides a list of earlier studies on Hanina ben Dosa).
92. This particular demonic figure never appears by name in Iranian sources, although it is apparently a derivation of the Zoroastrian *Aeshma Daeva* (the demon of wrath); the Greek form—Asmodaeus—appears in the Book of Tobit (3:8), a Second Temple apocryphal work likely to have been written in Babylonia and in an obvious Iranian environment. See R. N. Frey, “Qumran and Iran,” in J. Neusner, ed., *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults (Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty)*, vol. 3 (Leiden, 1975), 170. “Ashmedai King of Demons” is known only to the Babylonian Talmud, most notably in a highly detailed account of his relationship with King Solomon (BT Gitin 68a–b); parallel traditions in Palestinian rabbinic sources (PT Sanhedrin 2:20c) talk only about “an angel” who appeared in the image of King Solomon.
93. Scholars have in fact noted an Iranian propensity for considering odd numbers favorable and even numbers dangerous; see Scheftelowitz, *Die Alpersiche Religion*, 88–91. See also BT Gitin 68a for another example where the Babylonian Talmud admits to a demon-connected interpretation of scripture (Eccles. 2:8) while acknowledging that the Palestinian exegetes understood the same text differently.
94. BT Mo’ed Katan 18a.
95. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, 1: 90. Boyce notes that the practice of dedicating nail-parings to this bird while uttering appropriate words from the Vendidad is still observed by strictly orthodox Zoroastrians.
96. Rabbis not only knew how to limit the danger from demons but at times even knew how to get them to do one’s bidding. A demon employed by Rav Papa “once went to fetch water from the river but was away a long time. When he returned he was asked: ‘Why were you so long?’ He replied: ‘[I waited] until the evil waters [i.e., the water from which demons had drunk] had passed.’ But when he saw them [R. Papa and friends] pouring off [some water] from the mouth of the jug, he exclaimed: ‘Had I known you were in the habit of doing this I would not have taken so long.’” (BT Hullin 105b–106a).

97. The demon is apparently overcome by hearing his name diminish letter by letter.
98. On the nature of this book, see E. W. West, introduction to *The Sacred Books of the East—Pahlavi Texts*, vol. 24, part III, ed. F. Max Mueller, 3d ed. (Delhi, 1970), xxxvi–xlv.
99. *Ibid.*, 292. In another tradition on the same page we are told that “it is not proper to pour away water at night, especially from the northern side which would be the worst”; the reason for this is that demons are supposed to come from the north, and anything thrown out northward might be of use to them.
100. See *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 37, part IV, 3d ed. (Delhi, 1969), 471.
101. *Shayast ne-Shayast*, ix, 8; *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 5, part I, ed. F. Mueller (Oxford, 1901), 310; on this collection, see Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, 3(2): 1177–78.
102. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, 87.
103. Denkart, Book VI, 78; quoted in Shaked, “Qumran and Iran,” 437.
104. Although the woman referred to is Imma Shalom, wife of the late-first-century Palestinian sage Rabbi Eliezer b. Hyrcanus, the story and language are definitely of Babylonian rabbinic provenance. The Babylonian Talmud frequently tells stories using well-known Palestinian figures as its heroes, but these are frequently couched in local Babylonian reality as well as terminology and have no parallels in Palestinian rabbinic literature.
105. There is extensive literature on the ongoing publication of these texts; see, e.g., Neusner, *Jews in Babylonia*, 5: 217 n. 1; J. Naveh and S. Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls—Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity*, rev. ed. (Jerusalem, 1998), 19–21; L. H. Schiffman and M. D. Swartz, *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Genizah* (Sheffield, Engl., 1982), 17–18 and notes; and P. S. Alexander, “Incantation Bowls and Amulets in Hebrew and Aramaic,” in E. Schuerer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*, a new English edition revised and edited by G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Goodman, vol. III, part I (Edinburgh, 1986), 352–57. For a recent publication of one major collection, see J. B. Segal, *Catalogue of the Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum* (London, 2000). Yet another study is D. Levene, *A Corpus of Magic Bowls* (New York, 2001).
106. See Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls*, 13 n. 1.
107. *Ibid.*, 135.
108. J. A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia, 1913), 191.
109. *Ibid.*, 190–91 (quoted in Neusner, *Jews in Babylonia*, 5: 223).
110. Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls*, 159; see also Alexander, “Incantation Bowls,” 354 n. 24, for an attempt at recreating the halakhic context for the situation described on the bowl.
111. The major doubt was cast by Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 112–13, who claimed that the use of names such as “Moses” and “Yehoshua ben Perahya” had already found its way into an eclectic magical environment, thereby removing the certainty of a Jewish connection. Many of Montgomery’s readings, as well as conclusions regarding the Jewish origins of the bowls, were challenged in a brilliant review essay by J. N. Epstein,

"Gloses Babylo-araméennes," *Revue des Etudes Juives* 73 (1921): 40–72. Montgomery's contention is further weakened not only by the quoting of Hebrew scripture in some of the bowls but also by the references to uniquely Jewish legal conventions in the production of divorce writs; see Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls*, 17–18. See also J. C. Greenfield, "Notes on some Aramaic and Mandaic Magic-Bowls," *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 5 (1973): 149–56; B. A. Levine, "The Language of the Magic Bowls," appended in Neusner, *Jews in Babylonia*, 5: 343–73; and Alexander, "Incantation Bowls," 353 n. 23.

112. Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls*, 18.

113. For an overview of rabbinic attitudes toward all manifestations of magical activity, see G. Veltri, *Magie und Halakha*, (Tübingen, 1997), 295–326 (containing a comprehensive bibliography on the subject and related issues). See also G. Veltri, "Defining Forbidden Foreign Customs: Some Remarks on the Rabbinic Halakhah of Magic," in *Proceedings of the Eleventh Congress of Jewish Studies*, Div. C, vol. 1: *Rabbinic and Talmudic Literature* (Jerusalem, 1994), 25–32. Veltri's work addresses primarily the rabbinic attitudes toward phenomena of the Greco-Roman world.

114. BT Sanhedrin 67b; for a brief overview of rabbinic attitudes toward magic, see Urbach, *The Sages*, 97–101. Urbach senses the fuzzy demarcation in rabbinic tradition between those statements that appear to prohibit any recourse to magic and others that clearly suggest the sages' own involvement in a variety of such magical practices (see 101–2). Note the statement by L. H. Schiffman, "A Forty-two Letter Divine Name in the Aramaic Magic Bowls," *Bulletin of the Institute of Jewish Studies* 1 (1973): 97: "It is also clear that these incantations and the attendant magical practices could not have had the approval of the rabbinic authorities." To this, Greenfield ("Notes on Some Aramaic and Mandaic Magic-Bowls," 150 n. 10) responded—accurately, to my mind—"But even if there was no approval, these practices were condoned and tolerated." For a brief survey on the growing scholarly recognition of "the extent to which magic was ingrained in the rabbinic milieu," see M. D. Swartz, *Scholastic Magic* (Princeton, 1996), 18–22 and the bibliography in nn. 58 and 63. See also the comments and literature cited in Y. Harari, "If You Wish to Kill a Person: Harmful Magic and Protection from It in Early Jewish Magic" (Hebrew), *Jewish Studies* 37 (1997): 111–42.

115. And thus Cicero felt required to point out that "Chaldaei" was not the designation for practitioners of a specific training, but rather the name of a tribe (*De Divinatione* I, 1, 2). Indeed, the Third Sybilline Oracle (227; see also J. H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigraphy*, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y., 1983–85), 1: 367) praises Israel as a race of righteous men who "do not practice the astrological predictions of the Chaldeans nor astronomy" (cited in S. Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* [New York, 1942], 97–98).

116. F. Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (New York, 1956), 146.

117. See Urbach, *The Sages*, 277.

118. BT Pesahim 113b.

119. Lieberman, *Greek*, 98.

120. Pseudo-Eupolemos, apud Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.17.3 (Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2: 880). The Egyptian-Jewish author Artapanus (third-second centuries B.C.E.) claims that Abraham actually taught Parethothes, the King of Egypt, astrology (ibid., 2: 897).

121. BT Shabbat 156a and parallels; later midrashim leave even less to the imagination: "You are Jews, the words of the astrologers do not apply to you, for you are Jews" (Tanhuma, Shofetim 10).

122. The reference to "Chaldeans" is missing in some manuscript versions and also in the parallel version in BT Horayot 14a.

123. *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon*, ed. Lewin, 85–86.

124. BT Yevamot 21b; BT Sanhedrin 95a.

125. The degree of Iranian legal knowledge possessed by the rabbis, and their willingness to apply this knowledge to their own deliberations, is still open to debate, but for one recent attempt to prove the feasibility of such a process, see M. Macuch, "Iranian Legal Terminology in the Babylonian Talmud in the Light of Sasanian Jurisprudence," in S. Shaked and A. Netzer, eds., *Irano-Judaica*, vol. 4 (Jerusalem, 1999), 91–101.

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