

THE IRANIAN TALMUD

Reading the Bavli in Its Sasanian Context

SHAI SECUNDA

The Iranian Talmud

DIVINATIONS: REREADING LATE ANCIENT RELIGION

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READING THE BAVLI
IN ITS SASANIAN CONTEXT

Shai Secunda

PENN

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For Daphna

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NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS, CITATIONS, AND TERMINOLOGY

This book is written from the perspective of a Talmudist with training in Iranian studies. Its primary audience is fellow Talmudists, but it is my hope that scholars of other areas of Jewish studies, Iranists and students of late antiquity, and also interested laypeople, will still find the work inviting. As a result, I have written with these different communities in mind, while I have also endeavored to make the book relatively user friendly. The transcription of Hebrew and Aramaic follows the basic conventions of Jewish studies, while the transcription of Middle Persian largely accords with the system of D. N. MacKenzie that is prevalent in Iranian studies. For example, “long” vowels are marked only in the transcription of Iranian (ā, ē, ī, ō, ū), while the letter *shin* appears as “sh” in the transcription of Hebrew/Aramaic and “š” in Iranian. Where possible, abbreviations and other scholarly conventions that tend to disorient non-specialists have been minimized. The one area where I have retained an extensive system of abbreviation is in the citation of rabbinic texts. The name of the tractate is spelled out in full, but it is preceded by a single-letter abbreviation indicating the particular corpus it comes from. Thus, a lowercase “b” stands for Babylonian Talmud—which incidentally is used interchangeably with the terms “Bavli” and “Talmud” in this book. A lowercase “y” stands for Yerushalmi—the conventional name of the Palestinian Talmud. Lowercase “m” signifies the primary tannaitic corpus known as the Mishna, while “t” stands for Tosefta—a related compilation of tannaitic material. As an illustration: “b. Sanhedrin 39a” stands for Babylonian Talmud tractate Sanhedrin, folio 39a in the standard Vilna edition; “y. Sanhedrin 1:6 (19c)” refers to Palestinian Talmud tractate Sanhedrin, Chapter 1, *mishna* 6, and the text that is found on folio 19, column c, in the Venice edition; “m. Sanhedrin 1:6” means Mishna, Tractate Sanhedrin, Chapter 1, *mishna* 6;

while “t. Sanhedrin 1:6” stands for Tosefta Sanhedrin, Chapter 1, *halakha* 6.

Throughout the book I have added short explanatory glosses that briefly note the dating and significance of the various cited texts. In the survey of literary remains undertaken in Chapter 1 I list introductions to rabbinic and Middle Persian literature. These guides should be consulted by non-specialists for important background information that I do not provide.

Rabbinic texts are cited according to the manuscripts chosen by the Historical Dictionary of the Academy of Hebrew Language (available at <http://hebrew-treasures.huji.ac.il/>), apart from instances in which these manuscripts are lacking or insufficient for my immediate needs. In that case, either a more reliable manuscript or more readable first printed edition is used. I only note variants that are significant for the immediate discussion or which reflect profound differences in meaning. For the most part, I have relied on the Sol and Evelyn Henkind Talmud Text Database of the Saul Lieberman Institute (<http://www.lieberman-institute.com>), which contains transcriptions of most Talmud manuscripts. Note that I do not include the complete call number of the manuscripts since these are readily available. Instead, I have adopted the shortened form used in the Henkind database. Major variants have been checked against digital images of the manuscripts made accessible via the website of the National Library of Israel (<http://web.nli.org.il>). For *geniza* fragments I have used the unparalleled Friedberg Geniza Project website (<http://genizah.org>). I am highly indebted to these three projects, which each in its own way has revolutionized talmudic philology.

All translations of rabbinic texts are my own. On occasion, these have been reworked from the Soncino translation of the Talmud or from Herbert Danby’s rendition of the Mishna, as the case may be.

The quotations of Middle Persian texts follow the most reliable manuscripts available and refer to the relevant scholarly editions. Because the state of the evidence is what it is, these texts must be frequently emended and are thus “eclectic.” As much as possible I indicate in the notes where an emendation or controversial reading has been made. Let me pause at this juncture to express my deep gratitude to Prods Oktor Skjærvø for reviewing and correcting my readings. Most of the translations and transcriptions are based in one way or another on painstaking philological work that he has conducted over

the years. Any philological errors that remain are solely and embarrassingly my own.

One final terminological note: Throughout this book, for stylistic reasons I sometimes employ the terms “Persia”/“Persian” and “Iran”/“Iranian” interchangeably in non-technical contexts. In recent times, “Iran” and “Persia” have acquired strong political colorings that are tied up with the national history of the modern country we know as “Iran.” However, in antiquity and in most scholarly research, “Iran” generally retains a broader geographical and intellectual sense than “Persia.” The latter technically refers to speakers of Persian—a Southwestern Iranian dialect—and a territory in Southwestern Iran. On the other hand, “Iran” encompasses numerous languages and regions that stretch from Central Asia all the way to Jewish Babylonia—the focus of this book.

The Iranian Talmud

Introduction

Of all the graces of God on the multifarious earth
only you alone knew my youth,
you were my garden on a hot June day
and at my head a pillow for the nights of winter
and I learned to hide in your scrolls the returns of my soul
and braid among your columns my dreams of holiness.
Do you remember still?—I have not forgotten
In an alcove, in the empty house of prayer
I was the last among the last to leave.

—H. N. BIALIK, “Before the Book Closet”¹

From the introspection afforded by older age and religious reorientation, the great Modern Hebrew poet Hayim Nahman Bialik expressed these words of love and longing to, of all things, a dusty shelf of old Jewish books. The poet recalls earlier days spent indoors studying the Talmud and its vast commentarial tradition. This is not the only occasion on which Bialik returns to the simultaneously romantic and critical image of a *yeshiva* student hunched over a talmudic tome, illuminated by a flickering candle yet “facing the wall.” Bialik was trying to make a point. For many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Eastern European Jews, the Talmud comprised their total existence. This was its blessing and this was its curse.

Since the Middle Ages, the Babylonian Talmud, or the *Bavli*, as it is conventionally known, has sat at the nerve center of the Jewish canon. As a result, it has been the recipient of and inspiration for an enormous amount of intellectual energy. More than merely constituting a storehouse of raw materials, however, the Talmud was—and for many it remains—a self-enclosed universe in which a life can be lived. Structurally, it is organized as a commentary on the early rabbinic legal compilation known as the Mishna. However, sober commentarial work is often cast aside and discussions veer off to consider anything from magical incantations and medical cures to rabbinic

hagiographies, the shape of the godhead, and the ideal contours of the female body. The Talmud is an expansive meditation on the Hebrew Bible, earlier rabbinic sources, and virtually anything else that engaged the attention of its creators. In turn, over the centuries the Talmud has preoccupied the thoughts of Jews who immersed themselves in its study. In the eyes of many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century members of the Jewish Enlightenment like Bialik, the enclosed and all-encompassing quality of traditional Talmud study held Jews back from participating in the wider world. As endless as the Sea of Talmud's horizons were, they were paradoxically confined to the "four ells of the law." A brilliant Jewish scholar might spend a lifetime tracing the Talmud's looping arguments and listening to its fanciful tales, and yet emerge only as a master of a narrow vastness.

While traditional Talmud study continued apace in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, in some quarters the study of rabbinic literature underwent a radical change as classical Jewish texts were critically analyzed by practitioners of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*—the so-called Science of Judaism. The shift from traditional talmudic learning to its "scientific" study in the first half of the nineteenth century represented a revolutionary approach to rabbinic literature. For these new Talmudists, the rabbinic corpus was no longer conceived of as a complex of interlocking texts that express an eternal truth, rather as an assemblage of different works composed in various times, places, and circumstances. The task that lay before these scholars and their students was twofold—to chart the internal textual history of each of the rabbinic compilations and also to locate them in a particular geographical and cultural setting. For the majority of the classical rabbinic corpus, this meant considering the Greco-Roman environment of Roman provincial Palestine. In the case of the Babylonian Talmud, scholars would need to explore the cultural, religious, and linguistic milieu of the Iranian Empire, which in late antiquity included—and indeed was to some extent centered in—modern-day Iraq.

Some of the early critical scholars began to study Persian and familiarize themselves with subjects like Mesopotamian geography, ancient Iranian religions, and Sasanian history. With their broad interests and efforts to integrate the study of classical Jewish literature into an academic program of research, the new brand of Talmudists were in some ways the antithesis to Bialik's cloistered *yeshiva* student. This new generation of scholars pursued their studies not only in the shadow of the traditional Jewish book closet, but in impressive

European libraries that housed tomes comprising the great classical and oriental traditions.

Modern critical research of the Talmud traces itself to this movement, and it has made enormous strides over the past century. Academic Talmudists now have at their disposal cutting-edge text-critical, source-critical, and literary-critical tools that have been continually developed and improved upon. Nevertheless, since the Second World War the attempt to understand the Bavli contextually has for the most part petered out. This is noteworthy since one of the most basic assumptions made by scholars of religion is that religions and their texts cannot be properly understood without considering the cultural and historical factors of their contexts. Indeed, it is not unusual for scholars studying classical rabbinic Midrash or the Palestinian Talmud to consult the archaeological record of Roman Palestine and the vast corpus of Greek and Latin literature that has survived from antiquity. Yet researchers of the Bavli often have proceeded as if they are cloistered in a traditional *yeshiva* study hall. This ignorance of the Bavli's context has come at the expense of gaining a deep appreciation of the Talmud's laws, narratives, and other forms of discourse.

At the turn of the last century, a senior scholar at Yeshiva University named Yaakov Elman began producing a series of studies that considered the impact of Persian culture on the Bavli, thereby challenging the inward-looking dynamic of talmudic research that had been in place for decades. This book takes its cue from Elman's groundbreaking research, which I review in some detail in the first chapter. For the moment, it is worth considering some of his work in order to illustrate what precisely is at stake when the Bavli's Iranian context is ignored.

Among other subjects, Elman's early research examines the distinctions between rabbis and their respective attitudes toward late antique Iranian culture. According to Elman, it is possible to classify some of the most important amoraim—the talmudic sages who flourished during the third to the fifth centuries C.E.—as either accommodating or resisting upper-class Persian mores. At the center of the *Kulturkampf* were two figures—the second- and third-generation amoraim Rav Naḥman and Rav Yehuda. Rav Naḥman lived in Maḥoza, which was located some fifteen miles southeast of modern-day Baghdad and was part of the metropolitan area that comprised the Sasanian winter capital, Ctesiphon. Aside from hosting a sizable Jewish population, Maḥoza also contained an important Eastern

Christian community, held significance in Manichaean history, and had an administratively prominent Zoroastrian official. On the other hand, Rav Yehuda dwelled in the apparently less cosmopolitan town of Pumbedita, which was located in the vicinity of the modern-day Iraqi city of Fallujah at a distance of some sixty miles from the capital. Not surprisingly, Rav Naḥman is depicted in the Talmud as having been more of an accommodator to Persian culture while Rav Yehuda comes off as more of a resister to acculturation.²

Elman's contextually informed understanding of these two figures, their particular geography, and the trappings of upper-class urban Iranian society allows for a colorful reading of an otherwise obnoxious talmudic passage that describes how Rav Yehuda was summoned to appear in front of Rav Naḥman in order to defend a verbal altercation with a Pumbeditan.³ Before the proceedings can get underway, Rav Yehuda ridicules Rav Naḥman repeatedly without provocation. His criticisms include apparent marginalia like Rav Naḥman's use of words not found in the rabbinic and everyday Aramaic lexicon, Rav Naḥman calling upon his minor daughter to come and serve the guests, and encouraging Rav Yehuda to send regards to his wife. Both the medieval commentator Rashi⁴ and the modern scholar Jacob Neusner⁵ explain Rav Yehuda's behavior as simply reflecting hostility toward Rav Naḥman's attempt to exert his authority over others.

While this assessment is partially correct, what goes virtually unnoticed is how much of Rav Naḥman's speech and behavior is encoded as upper-class Sasanian. Rav Naḥman offers his guest citrons—Persian haute cuisine—and unmixed wine, and he uses the Middle Iranian words and forms *atrunga* and *anbaga* instead of their rabbinic or popular Aramaic counterparts.⁶ Rav Naḥman's permissive attitude toward the place of women among men might be related to broader trends in late antique Iranian sexuality,⁷ while his daughter, Dēnag, bears an upper-class Zoroastrian female theophoric name.⁸ In other words, the passage represents not merely the complaints of a disgruntled amora, rather a critique of a certain kind of upper-class, high-falutin Babylonian rabbi and the world that he represents. Without knowledge of Sasanian culinary, gender, and linguistic habits, the larger import of Rav Yehuda's heavy-hitting critique is lost.

Another example to consider regards the development of *halakha* (rabbinic law). There are certain situations where rabbinic law requires complete ownership in order to fulfill a ritual obligation. According to the law as it is formulated in tannaitic literature (rabbinic works

compiled around the third century C.E.), on the festival of Tabernacles one cannot fulfill the commandment to take the four species referred to in Leviticus 23:40 without owning them. In a case where there is only one set of the species available for a group of people to fulfill the obligation, the tannaitic legal compilation, the Tosefta, advises each person to accept the set as a “complete gift”—presumably one that can be retained indefinitely if the recipient so desires. Yet there is a surprising innovation attributed by both the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds to Rav Naḥman and his school, wherein a temporary gift of the four species—that is, one transferred with the words “I give you this gift on condition that you return it to me”—is permitted and even encouraged.

The question arises as to how and why Rav Naḥman broke with the ancient rabbinic tradition. Elman demonstrates that the shift is understandable if we consider the Bavli’s context, and in particular the significance of temporary ownership in Sasanian law. In its discussion of the laws of inheritance, the Book of a Thousand Judgments—an undated but probably seventh-century C.E. Sasanian law book—reflects a well-developed system of temporary ownership and gifts that parallels Rav Naḥman’s stance here. It also helps explain a number of other Babylonian rabbinic innovations regarding legal ownership, perhaps along with receptivity toward sexual practices that can be charitably understood as temporary marriages.⁹

Even when the Bavli explicitly engages the world outside the study hall, traditional and academic scholars alike often remain ignorant of the way Persian context can inform talmudic text. Take, for example, the following rather bizarre story that depicts Ifra Hormiz—according to a Jewish tradition the Sasanian queen-mother of King Shapur II—sending samples of menstrual blood to the fourth-century C.E. rabbi known as Rava.¹⁰

אפרא הורמיז אמי' דשבו' מלכ' שדר' דמ' לקמי' דרבא הוה יתי' רב עובדי' קמי' ארחי' א' לה
האי דם חימו' ה' אמר' לי' לברה תא חזי כמ' חכימי יהודאי א' לה דילמ' כסומ' בארובה הדר
שדר' לי' שתי' מיני' דמ' וכולהו אמרינהו ההוא בתרא דם כני' הוה ולא הוה ידע אסתייעא
מילת' ושדר לה סרקות' דמקטלא כלמי אמר' יהודאי בתווי' דלבא יתבי

Ifra Hormiz, the mother of King Shapur, sent [a sample of] blood before Rava. Rav Ovadia was sitting in his presence. [Rava] smelled it. He said to her: “This is blood of desire!” She said to her son: “Come [and] see how wise the Jews are!” He said to her: “It is quite possible that [he chanced upon it] like a blind man on a window.” Thereupon she sent [Rava] sixty kinds of blood, and he identified

them all, [but] the last one was lice blood, and he did not know [its origins]. [Nevertheless,] the matter was successful and he sent her a comb that exterminates lice. She exclaimed: “The Jews dwell in the chambers of the heart!”¹¹

The story’s most obvious curiosity is its presentation of a powerful non-Jewish woman, who presumably was unconcerned with the Jewish rules of menstrual impurity, asking a rabbi to rule on the purity status of her genital discharges. The great eleventh-century commentator Rashi was bothered by this point and suggested that although Ifra Hormiz was indeed not Jewish, “she would keep the menstrual laws and she was close to converting.”¹² Nearly a millennium later, modern scholars Jacob Neusner and Albert de Jong essentially threw up their hands.¹³ Had these commentators more fully considered the significance of menstrual impurity in Zoroastrian culture and the competition between Jews and Zoroastrian on this matter, they would have been better positioned to unravel the meaning of this talmudic story and appreciate the intercultural dynamics that it reflects.¹⁴

BOOK PROGRAM

The enduring image of the Talmud as an impervious and self-sufficient work, and the reluctance of some Talmudists to fully consider the Bavli’s context, requires this book to argue the obvious: The Bavli cannot be properly understood without seriously engaging the rich Iranian world in which it was produced, and particularly the textual remains of the rabbis’ Zoroastrian neighbors. Yet the mere realization that the Bavli must be studied contextually is not enough. Many students of the Bavli and even of late antiquity are insufficiently familiar with the religious and ethnic communities of the Sasanian Empire and the various forms of evidence available to researchers who wish to understand late antique Iran. As of yet there is no comprehensive treatment of the different forms of interaction that took place between Babylonian Jews and their non-Jewish—especially Persian—neighbors. Similarly, there are no recent and up-to-date monographs that consider the complex ways in which Sasanian Jews perceived their Zoroastrians neighbors and vice-versa, and which analyze these texts using advances in lower and higher critical research. Finally, because of its young age the comparative study of the Bavli and non-rabbinic Sasanian texts has seen relatively little methodological and theoretical reflection.

The goal of this book is to set the stage for further “Talmudo-Iranic” research by working from the ground up. Chapter 1 surveys the textual and material remains of the Bavli’s context. Chapter 2 discusses the various points of contact between rabbis and Zoroastrians in late antique Mesopotamia and highlights certain features of Sasanian society that may have allowed for non-Jewish and non-rabbinic ideas and modes of discourse to interact with Babylonian rabbis and thus shape the content and contours of the Bavli. Chapters 3 and 4 consider different forms of discourse that Sasanian rabbis and Zoroastrian priests constructed about each other. With this groundwork in place, Chapter 5 discusses a number of theoretical options available to scholars who wish to read the Bavli alongside Middle Persian literature.

A central concern of the book is coming to terms with the apparently insular and self-sufficient character of the Bavli—as articulated by Bialik. As I describe in some detail, the relatively closed nature of the Talmud and indeed of many Sasanian religious texts makes it possible to incorrectly conclude that the different communities that produced these works were distant from one another. I suggest reading strategies that do not ignore the style and genre of the Bavli, Middle Persian literature, and other Sasanian texts, yet still allow for a mutually informed and informing reading of the different corpora. I also attempt to craft a methodology for drawing comparisons and parallels and thereby consider the different kinds of models that can be used to explain convergences and divergences between the Bavli and Middle Persian texts. Other methodological issues, like the orality of the Bavli and Middle Persian literature, which I believe relate to some of my concerns and also methodological responses, are also treated in some detail.

It is important to point out that many of the talmudic and Middle Persian texts cited in this study require sustained philological discussion. Particularly in the case of the rabbinic passages, it should be stressed that if there ever was a set of texts whose surface meaning should not be allowed to stand alone in scholarly inquiry, these are they. As such, this book continues the tradition of critical talmudic study in its suggestion of novel yet (I hope) cogently argued readings. With any luck, beyond offering new understandings of the texts the book provides insight into the intersections between Judaism and Zoroastrianism, the nature of the Bavli’s relationship with Middle Persian literature, and the way that we, as scholars today, might read the Bavli within a vibrant world no less complex than our own.

The Sea of Talmud and Its Shore

The Talmud and Other Sasanian Remains

The Bavli's influence on Judaism can hardly be overstated. It has constituted the primary source for Jewish law and theology across the centuries and throughout the Diaspora and has also served as a touchstone for post-talmudic forms of learning such as Jewish philosophy and mysticism. Imaginative talmudic stories have engendered and intersected with Jewish folklore and have inspired other forms of artistic expression as well. It could also be argued that the Bavli has managed to infiltrate the very structure of Jewish consciousness via its influence on the medium of language. The Talmud's terse and eccentric lexicon has influenced Jewish languages from Yiddish and Judeo-Arabic to Modern Hebrew and "Yeshivish"—the English sociolect spoken by North American *yeshiva* students. Since the Bavli's influence can be measured in almost every Jewish community since the Middle Ages, the looming if unstated theoretical question of critical Talmud scholarship—"What is the Talmud?"—is crucial across Jewish studies.

By almost any standards, the Bavli is a strange work. It defies a number of basic literary expectations, especially those that pertain to questions of authorship and composition, and it can take a lifetime to study in its entirety, to say nothing of achieving mastery. Along with the challenges presented by the Talmud's dense discussions, scholars in every generation have struggled to discern the work's nuts and bolts as well as its larger goals. Scholarly epistles, rabbinic genealogies, and full-fledged introductions first appeared toward the end of the first and the beginning of the second millennium C.E., and the

genre of Talmud guides remained popular in medieval Europe and North Africa in subsequent centuries. The modern era, especially the past one hundred and fifty years, has witnessed an explosion of introductions and aids to Talmud study.

All these attempts can be seen as compensating for a basic problem. Despite its overwhelming importance, the Bavli, like a newborn baby, does not come with an instruction manual or even an introduction. Notably, this omission is not shared with other late antique legal compilations. The roughly contemporaneous Digest of Justinian includes no fewer than three prefaces, while the Sasanian Book of a Thousand Judgments preserves a brief, theologically inclined introduction. Instead of beginning with a description of the committee responsible for its composition or a homily about the religious significance of studying law, the Bavli's opening lines form a pair of local exegetical questions directed at a single *mishna*. The omission of a preface from the Bavli, and for that matter from virtually every classical rabbinic compilation, has only further encouraged debate about the Talmud's redaction, goals, audience, and related matters.

A further difficulty in understanding the Bavli and appreciating its significance is related to the fact that it is not a *sui generis* textual specimen, but a kind of second order literature. In certain respects, the Bavli constitutes the culmination of the classical rabbinic project. While organized as a commentary on the earliest and most central rabbinic legal text—the Mishna—the Bavli and the rabbis it cites are also engaged in the exegesis of Scripture, earlier rabbinic and often Palestinian sources, and indeed any text deemed worthy of interpretation. By the fourteenth century, Jews speak of the Talmud as a “sea”¹—one that beckoned readers to sail across its immensity and plumb its depths. The renowned twelfth-century Talmudist Rabeinu Tam even suggested that Jews who singly pursue Talmud study need not pay heed to the Bavli's own proscription to divide study time among the different pillars of the Jewish canon. Since, as a talmudic folk etymology would have it, the Talmud of Babylonia (*bavel*) was a perfect mixture (*balul*) of Bible, Mishna, and Talmud,² the Bavli could be seen as constituting a comprehensive and self-sufficient curriculum of Jewish learning.³

As much as the Bavli is closely connected to the sources and traditions of earlier times and other locations, it remains a product of Sasanian Mesopotamia. The Bavli is the only major rabbinic work composed on the eastern side of the Rome/Persia political and cultural

divide, and talmudic onomastics and colorful expressions of Babylonian Jewish local patriotism reflect a text with a distinctively Mesopotamian flavor. Not a few talmudic passages refer to encounters with Persian kings, Zoroastrian religious functionaries, and other representatives of the Sasanian Empire. More broadly, the echoes of Sasanian daily life—from language, food, and dress, to narrative motifs, demonology, and taxes—can be found throughout the Talmud. It is not coincidental that, like the folk etymology cited above, the third-century C.E. Palestinian sage Rav Yoḥanan refers to the entire project of Babylonian rabbinic learning as quite simply “*bavel*”—that is, Babylonia.

The academic study of religion generally presumes that no religious belief, ritual, or text can be properly understood without some recourse to the context in which it developed. There is no reason to treat the Bavli any differently, and the evidence provided by a contextual approach will bring Talmudists closer to answering the perennial research question regarding the essence of the Talmud. Given the Bavli’s embeddedness in post-talmudic forms of Judaism, the results of this project might also go a long way toward achieving a broader understanding of Judaism in all its phases. The main goal of this chapter is thus to lay the groundwork for conceiving of the Bavli as a product of its time and place by locating it among the remains of Sasanian late antiquity, particularly in relation to the analogous texts produced by its Persian Zoroastrian neighbors.

THE HISTORY OF TALMUDO-IRANIC RESEARCH

Before beginning this task, it is worth reflecting on previous attempts to integrate talmudic scholarship with Iranian studies.⁴ Indeed, already prior to the period when Bialik and his fellow *yeshiva* students were engaged in more traditional forms of Talmud study, the European “Science of Judaism” movement was devoted to critical questions that sometimes overlap with the present comparative project. *Wissenschaft des Judentums* was a product of its time. Like their colleagues in the human sciences, practitioners of critical Jewish studies were committed not only to philological research, but also to historical and contextual investigation. Yet despite the desire on the part of some *Wissenschaftler* to locate rabbinic literature in a particular time and place, from the very beginning it was clear that contextualizing the Bavli would be more difficult and elusive than doing the

same for Palestinian rabbinic literature. In the nineteenth century, Iranian studies were still more or less in their infancy, while classics had virtually embodied Western intellectual pursuits for centuries.⁵ Perhaps more significant, the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement was motivated by clearly articulated political and ideological goals that were often at odds with the object of pursuing intensive research of the Bavli and its context. First, the attempt to use critical research of Jewish texts as a means for encouraging society's acceptance and appreciation of Jewish culture did not always coincide with examining the Bavli and its "Oriental features." In addition, *Wissenschaft des Judentums'* project of reforming Judaism sometimes took aim at the Bavli—the primary source of traditional Jewish law and belief—and its perceived primitiveness and tendency toward stringency.⁶ All this led to a transfer of intellectual capital toward rabbinic works produced in the Roman and Byzantine West, like the Palestinian Talmud and Midrash, and away from the Bavli.

The effects of *Wissenschaft's* "disorienting intellectual shifts"⁷ on the study of the Bavli had further effects. While it is true that for some the Bavli's Iranian texture encouraged its neglect, others seized the opportunity to explore supposed "Persianisms" in an attempt to draw attention to the Talmud's superstitious character and thereby discredit it. At the same time, some scholars during this period employed Iranian material quite innocently in the service of talmudic exegesis. Thus was the modern study of the Bavli in its Iranian context inaugurated when the scholar and theologian Solomon Ludwig Steinheim issued a brief notice in 1840 regarding the importance of studying Middle Persian for understanding the Talmud.⁸ Jacob Levy's pioneering *Neuhebräisches und chaldäisches Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim*,⁹ which appeared some decades later, includes a good number of Persian etymologies and is in the spirit of Steinheim's announcement. Alexander Kohut greatly expanded the list of alleged Persian loanwords in his *Aruch completum*¹⁰—and according to some scholars even went too far in this regard.¹¹

Kohut also authored a series of articles that explored the relationship between Judaism and Zoroastrianism,¹² and his work deals more directly with the theologically fraught question of Zoroastrian influence on the Bavli. The question of religious influence was vigorously pursued by two Galician *maskilim*, Solomon Rubin¹³ and Yehuda Leib Schorr.¹⁴ Not unlike earlier reformist Christian interest in Zoroastrianism of the eighteenth century, Rubin and Schorr scoured

Zoroastrian literature in their attempt to uncover the Persian origin of some Jewish practices and beliefs.¹⁵ A more apologetic but still revolutionary approach can be found in Isaac Hirsch Weiss's *Dor dor vedoreshav*.¹⁶ It might be noted that some of this research was also motivated by Orientalism.¹⁷ In short, the fate of Talmudo-Iranic research in the nineteenth century was both animated and inhibited by its conflicting interests, ideologies, apologetics, and political ambitions.

Subsequent generations of scholars continued to research the content, nature, and extent of Iranian and rabbinic intersections in a somewhat less charged environment, though earlier factors continued to play a role.¹⁸ Salomon Funk's careful history, *Die Juden in Babylonien, 200–500*,¹⁹ is a good example of the methodological progress of the era. Another significant development of this period was the participation of scholars like Isidor Scheftelowitz²⁰ and Bernhard Geiger,²¹ who were properly trained Orientalists and thus much better equipped to assess and incorporate Iranian material in their research. All this is aside from the scholarship, some of it still worthwhile yet much now obsolete, published by Christian scholars that explored the possibility of Zoroastrian influence on Judaism and Christianity.²²

In sum, the early decades of the twentieth century saw the continuation, expansion, and advancement of nineteenth-century Talmudo-Iranic research. It is therefore surprising to note that in the decades following World War II, only two major scholars, Jonas C. Greenfield and Ezra Spicehandler, advanced this research by contributing one brief lexicographical study each.²³ Unfortunately, Greenfield and Spicehandler did not continue to publish on Talmudo-Iranica, as the former was an esteemed Semiticist otherwise engaged in research of earlier stages of Aramaic and Iranian,²⁴ and the latter was a promising young scholar whose interests led him to make lasting contributions in the field of Modern Hebrew literature.²⁵

Despite the decimation of European Jewry during World War II, the period following the war saw much productive research on the textual history of the Bavli—the other half of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*' enduring project. Around the same time, significant research in Zoroastrian studies appeared that questioned some of the reigning scholarly assumptions and ultimately shaped the contours of Iranian studies as we recognize it today.²⁶ In addition, dramatic archaeological discoveries made during the early years of the twentieth century drew interest to Manichaeism and its texts, which of course first developed in Sasanian Mesopotamia. By the early 1980s,

the Turfan finds, Coptic Manichaean texts and the celebrated Greek Mani Codex all lay open for scholarly inquiry. Nevertheless, apart from the modest contributions of Greenfield and Spicehandler, essentially no Talmudo-Iranic studies were produced after the Second World War.

In accounting for the lack of interest in Iranian studies on the part of postwar Talmudists, it is impossible to claim that it was for a lack of vitality in either field. Instead, one must highlight other factors. Again, a fair amount of Talmudo-Iranic research that took place during the nineteenth century was motivated by fairly explicit ideological agendas. Schorr and Rubin did not conceal their intentions in pointing to the Iranian origins of certain talmudic practices and beliefs, and neither did Weiss hide the significance of his apologetics. Even as Jewish studies matured into an ostensibly more dispassionate enterprise, in the years and decades that followed, Talmudo-Iranic research was still powered by the vision of earlier, ideologically motivated scholars. On the other hand, World War II ultimately divided twentieth-century Jewish studies in half. In the case of Talmud research, while scholars during the first half of the century engaged the Bavli's Iranian context, scholars of the second half were largely ignorant of it. The war's destruction and dislocations constituted a rupture that was not easily overcome.²⁷

Perhaps a more significant factor in the sudden decline in research of the Bavli's Iranian context concerns the success of higher talmudic criticism. Although they were primarily interested in other works of classical rabbinic literature, prior to World War II some early giants of modern academic talmudic research published pioneering text-critical studies of the Bavli.²⁸ The period immediately after the war saw the probing studies of Hyman Klein on the layers of the Bavli,²⁹ and Abraham Weiss, who managed to escape Nazi-occupied Poland in 1940 and continue to publish his groundbreaking studies.³⁰ The true sea change in higher criticism of the Bavli occurred more recently through the efforts of Shamma Friedman and David Weiss-Halivni. Both scholars emphasized the need to separate the Talmud's anonymous layers from earlier traditions in order to better understand the original meaning of attributed, amoraic (that is, third- to fifth-century C.E. rabbinic) statements.³¹ In other words, most Talmudists were preoccupied with establishing, testing, and applying new textual approaches to the Bavli instead of furthering Talmudo-Iranic research.³²

Recently, a number of scholars of the Bavli have finally begun to study Middle Persian language, literature, and culture. It may be tempting to

trace this trend back to the late Israeli scholar Eliezer Shimshon Rosenthal's opening remarks in a characteristically philologically detailed article that appeared posthumously in 1982.³³ In the article, Rosenthal appeals to fellow Talmudists to invest intellectual capital in mastering Iranian studies not merely as a marginal interest, but as a central pursuit.³⁴ While it is true that Rosenthal's Hebrew University colleague Shaul Shaked established the modern, broader study of "Irano-Judaica,"³⁵ and Israeli historians, including Moshe Beer³⁶ and Isaiah Gafni,³⁷ devoted attention to the Iranian context of the Babylonian Jewish community, for the most part "card-carrying" Talmudists did not heed Rosenthal's call.³⁸ This may reflect the orientation of scholars of ancient history and languages, who normally consider the surrounding political reality, interreligious landscape, and linguistic map. Textual scholars like Talmudists, on the other hand, are more likely to tune out external factors and focus exclusively on their object of study.

The current Talmudo-Iranica renaissance should be attributed mainly to the efforts of Yaakov Elman who has written a series of articles and delivered numerous presentations that set out to examine the impact of various aspects of Sasanian Iranian culture on the Babylonian rabbis.³⁹ As part of these efforts, Elman has argued for and implemented a curricular shift in the academic training of Talmudists toward the mastery of Iranian studies. In turn, a number of younger scholars have begun to make important contributions to Talmudo-Iranica.⁴⁰ Thus, despite Rosenthal's initially unheeded plea, the past decade has witnessed a revival of Talmudo-Iranic research that holds great promise for major advances in the coming years.

REENGAGING THE BAVLI'S CONTEXT: THE REMAINS OF SASANIAN IRAN

If it is true that single-minded devotion to the Bavli's text-critical issues has played a significant if unintended role in diverting Talmudist's attention away from the Bavli's Iranian context, then the time has come to correct the imbalance. Disciplinary divisions and other features of academic turf wars cannot be allowed to justify a wholly non-contextual approach to the Bavli. There is simply no such thing as a pure and virginal text produced and transmitted in a self-enclosed sphere. Even Talmudists, whose primary goal is to comprehend the Bavli *qua* text, can consult a variety of extra-talmudic material in their research.

To be fair, Bavli specialists have complained that in contrast to scholars of the Yerushalmi—as the Palestinian Talmud is commonly known—they suffer from a lack of extra-talmudic sources. Archaeology in Israel has yielded many finds relevant for Palestinian rabbinic literature. Numerous Palestinian Jewish texts were produced during roughly the same time period as classical works like the Yerushalmi, and they contain useful and illuminating parallels. There are also many relevant non-Jewish works in Greek and Latin from the Roman Empire to be consulted. On the other hand, Mesopotamian archaeology has largely disregarded later strata in a quest for more ancient Babylonian treasures. A much-lamented truism is that the only artifact produced by Babylonian Jews was the Babylonian Talmud.

Jewish Sasanian Texts beyond the Bavli

In reality, the situation is less bleak than scholars normally assume. First, there are many contemporaneous and related rabbinic texts from outside the Sasanian Empire that remain crucial for talmudic research. Talmudists often forget that Palestinian rabbinic literature can shed light on the Bavli—even regarding “Babylonian” matters. Some medieval talmudic exegetes like R. Ḥananel ben Ḥushiel of Qayrawan knew the value of Palestinian rabbinic literature and quoted it extensively in their commentaries on the Bavli. Palestinian rabbinic texts preserve valuable citations of Babylonian amoraim (late antique rabbis) and talmudic stories set in Babylonia that are unattested in the Bavli or appear there in different versions. Geonic or early medieval Babylonian literature constitutes another important source, especially Sherira Gaon’s epistle and chronologies like *Seder Tannaim ve-Amoraim* and *Seder Olam Zuta*. Although using this material carries risks, including anachronism and the possibility that some of the material does little more than reproduce and reinterpret talmudic sources already at our disposal, it still should not be entirely cast aside.⁴¹

Scholars might also reconsider the question of what qualifies as a Sasanian Jewish text. First, there may be some rabbinic works that have been misclassified as either Palestinian or geonic. This may be the case regarding some of the so-called minor tractates. Recent scholarship on Tractate Kalla, for example, argues that it is an amoraic collection composed in Babylonia, while Kalla Rabbati constitutes its “*gemara*,” or commentary.⁴² Moreover, growing sophistication

regarding the way scholars understand the composition, redaction, and transmission of late antique texts may allow for a more nuanced approach to the geographic and chronological provenance of rabbinic texts. For example, it is possible that a particular passage in Ecclesiastes Rabba is derived from earlier Babylonian material that traveled to Palestine, took on a different form, and was then further affected by the Bavli during later stages of its transmission.⁴³ Related phenomena have been described regarding Avot de-Rabbi Nathan,⁴⁴ and may also apply to some of the biblical Targumim.⁴⁵

Sasanian Jewish Material Culture

Despite the undeveloped state of late antique Mesopotamian archaeology, some Sasanian Jewish remains have survived that should be of interest to Talmudists. Shaul Shaked published twenty-four seals that can be classified as both Jewish and Sasanian.⁴⁶ The seals constitute a rather limited data set, yet one Talmudists have barely tapped. A few of the seals might be associated with known personalities in the Bavli⁴⁷—a correlation between text and material culture that is unusual even in the study of Palestinian rabbinic society. Furthermore, these sources constitute a rare cache of Babylonian Jewish art.⁴⁸

Perhaps an even more promising repository of Jewish Sasanian artifacts are the Babylonian Jewish Aramaic incantation bowls. In recent years, scholarship on the linguistic and religious significance of the bowls has grown at a rapid pace.⁴⁹ For the most part, Talmudists consult this material for the information they reflect regarding the general practice of magic in Jewish Babylonia.⁵⁰ New research highlights the links between the world and literature of the Babylonian rabbis and the incantation bowls.⁵¹ Further, scholars have recently argued that these sources contain useful data for reconstructing and studying Babylonian demographics, family structure, onomastics, art, and other “non-magical” aspects of society.⁵²

Non-Jewish Sasanian Material Culture

Most of the surviving Sasanian material culture is not identifiably Jewish on either linguistic or religious grounds.⁵³ Still, these sources are essential for understanding the physical reality that Babylonian Jews inhabited, especially when the finds are provenanced to regions known from literary sources to have had Jewish populations. The

material can be divided into three categories: (a) “Neutral” remains that might have been connected to both Jews and non-Jews, like private urban structures, neighborhoods (i.e., courtyards and alleyways), and housewares; (b) remains that were produced or used exclusively by non-Jews, such as churches, fire temples, and Zoroastrian and Christian seals; and (c) remains like inscriptions and imperial architecture that were produced by non-Jews but were intended to communicate messages to all the inhabitants of the empire, including Jews.

Regarding the first category, when compared with the impressive tradition of archaeology in the Ancient Near East and especially on ancient Babylonian society, there has been relatively little archaeological interest in late antique Mesopotamia. However, we do have some data on major urban areas, including digs in the area of the Sasanian winter capital, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, which included the important Jewish town of Maḥoza.⁵⁴ Knowledge of urban layout, neighborhood design, and home construction can inform our understanding of how and where urban rabbis may have interacted with other non-rabbinic and non-Jewish city dwellers. It is also valuable for probing the relationship between the Bavli and its world, since the physical environment of Sasanian Mesopotamia would undoubtedly have affected related talmudic discussions. By way of example, the Bavli’s treatment of the laws governing carrying on the Sabbath is conducted by “mapping” neighborhoods, apartments, courtyards, and alleyways, and then providing a secondary map overlay of ritual meaning. Since the rabbinic terminology on this subject was initially formulated in the architecturally distinct setting of Roman Palestine, the Bavli’s attempt to make sense of this legal system in a new milieu represents a fascinating encounter between a text, its antecedents, and the physical environment with which it interacts.⁵⁵

Artifacts and structures that were produced and used solely by non-Jews can also provide Talmudists with a window into the religious experiences of Sasanian Christians and Zoroastrians that is not always reflected in their surviving texts.⁵⁶ These finds can also be consulted when attempting to locate where the different religious communities resided, worshiped, and sought to establish communal institutions, as I discuss in the next chapter.

This final category comprises “ideological” remains and includes objects like Sasanian coins with their distinctive royal portraits on the obverse and fire altars on the reverse, silver bowls and busts that depict royal figures, hunting scenes, singers, entertainers, and other

expressions of Persian courtly life, and structures like the ruins of the Sasanian imperial palace known as Tāq-e Kisrā, which lies just across the Tigris River from where Maḥoza once stood. These artifacts are essential for reconstructing the mosaic of images that Babylonian rabbis encountered on a daily basis.⁵⁷ Perhaps more immediately useful are the Sasanian royal reliefs and inscriptions carved on the sides of rocks that were intended to convey more explicit royal ideologies. These sources are of considerable relevance when analyzing the distinct milieu in which Babylonian rabbis made their home.

*Kerdīr's Inscriptions and the Variety
of Religious Study in the Sasanian Empire*

Along with the royal reliefs, we have a set of inscriptions that were engraved in the latter half of the third century by a powerful Zoroastrian priest named Kerdīr.⁵⁸ These texts detail Kerdīr's ascension to power, recount his piety, and describe in vivid detail a journey into the realm of the dead. The testimonies are important for all scholars interested in the nature of religious experience in the late antique Near East, and they are particularly enlightening for Talmudists in the way they map the geographic and religious terrain in which the Bavli was produced:

*ud šahr ō šahr gyāg ō gyāg hāmšahr kerdagān ī ohrmazd ud yazdān
abardar bawēd ud dēn mādēsān ud mowmard andar šahr wuzurg
padixšar bawēd ud yazdān ud āb ud ādur ud gōspand andar šahr
wuzurg šnūdih abar rasīd ud ahreman ud dēwān wuzurg snāh ud
bištīh abar rasīd ud kēš ī ahreman ud dēwān az šahr *franaft ud
awābar *akirī ud jahūd ud šaman ud brāman ud nāsra ud kristiyan
ud makdag ud zandīg andar šahr zad bawēnd ud uzdēs gugānī ud
gilist ī dēwān wišōbī ud yazdān gāh ud nišēm *akirī*

And from province to province, place to place, (and) throughout the empire the services to Ohrmazd and the gods increased. And the Mazdayasnian [Zoroastrian] Tradition (*dēn*) and the magi received great honor in the empire. And great satisfaction came to the gods, water, fire and cattle in the empire. And great blows and harm came to Ahreman and the demons. And the (false) belief of Ahreman and the demons exited the empire and was made untrustworthy. And Jews and Shamans (Buddhists) and Brahmins (Hindus) and Nazarenes and Christians and Baptists and Manichaeans were struck in the empire. And idols were destroyed and the dens of the demons were disturbed and made into thrones and seats of the gods.⁵⁹

The different communities listed in this text bring into relief the religious diversity of Sasanian Iran. Two Far Eastern communities (Buddhists and Hindus) are juxtaposed to a nascent, highly syncretistic religion (Manichaeism), while Baptists and Eastern and Western Christians⁶⁰ are listed alongside the Jews. Certainly this brief taxonomy does not constitute an exhaustive inventory of Sasanian religions,⁶¹ yet it does probably account for the major traditions. To this list one also should add the various Zoroastrian heterodoxies that Kerdīr alludes to when he mentions his victory against Ahremanic and demonic beliefs and other unspecified heresies.⁶² Aside from the vast geographic territory that Kerdīr maps and identifies as *mowestān*—the Zoroastrian equivalent to Christendom—the passage also graphs the different religions that shared a vast empire with the Jews and, apparently, Zoroastrian persecution.⁶³ When considering the Bavli's neighboring communities, these lines in Kerdīr's inscriptions constitute some of the hardest evidence available.

Another noteworthy if less conspicuous aspect of Kerdīr's inscriptions concerns his reference to Sasanian Zoroastrianism's culture of religious learning. Kerdīr recounts that "the Tradition (*dēn*) was much studied in various ways."⁶⁴ In other words, beyond the establishment of fire-temples and the maintenance of magi throughout the empire, the performance of costly rites, the protection of the sacred elements, and the "persuasion" of various peoples to adopt or align themselves with his version of Zoroastrianism—all things the inscriptions boast about—Kerdīr also draws attention to an increase in religious study.

In this regard, the phrase "the Tradition was much studied in various ways (*ud was dēn ōšmurd gōnag gōnag*)" consists of a number of intriguing lexical elements. Yuhān Vevaina's examination of the uses of the Middle Persian verb *ōšmurdan*—rendered here as "to study"—suggests that what Kerdīr is actually describing is an ongoing epistemological project that included the recitation, memorization, and organization of sacred Zoroastrian texts.⁶⁵ The adverbial clause "in various ways (*gōnag gōnag*)" is particularly fascinating, though it is equally obscure. While Kerdīr's tendency to boast explains the use of the word "many (*was*)" to modify the religious learning, his claim that there was variety in the learning, and perhaps even interpretive processes, seems to assume a more sophisticated scholastic environment in which different modes of study were simultaneously sustained.⁶⁶ Finally, Prods Oktor Skjærvø's reconstruction of the word "*nask*" at

the beginning of Kerdīr's description of his other-worldly journey is also worthy of note.⁶⁷ The *nasks*—perhaps “(textual) bundles”—are the twenty-one divisions of the Avesta. As he prepares for his spiritual journey, Kerdīr refers to a specific scriptural source as the body of knowledge that describes what he expects to experience on his visit to the Next World.⁶⁸

Although scholars do not always characterize it as such, Sasanian Zoroastrianism boasted an impressive tradition of religious learning. I highlighted a few traces of Zoroastrian study culture in Kerdīr's inscriptions, but truthfully it can best be apprehended in the Middle Persian religious writings themselves. One might say that the very composition of some Middle Persian works—the speculative glosses in the cosmological tract known as the *Bundahišn* (“The Primal Creation”), the alternating interpretations preserved in the ninth book of the encyclopedic *Dēnkard* (“Works of the Tradition”), the discursive passages found in ritual-exegetical texts like the *Hērbedestān* (“The Place/Course of Priests”)—testifies to a robust environment of religious learning. The apparent existence of a physical *hērbedestān*, a place of Zoroastrian priestly learning described in the Middle Persian interpretative work of that name, leaves little doubt that religious study constituted an important aspect of Sasanian Zoroastrianism.

Non-Jewish Sasanian Literary Remains

Most of the Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts that have come down to us are indeed the product of an intellectual elite. Significantly, this feature is not unique to Middle Persian literature. Largely on account of the politics of textual production, transmission, and preservation, the literary remains of most Sasanian religious communities—including the compositions of Babylonian rabbis, Zoroastrian priests, and, to a certain extent, Eastern Christian schoolmen and the Manichaean elect—represent scholastic cultures. Whether it is the Bavli,⁶⁹ the Syriac hymns of the Christian poet-scholar Ephrem,⁷⁰ Manichaean cosmological tracts,⁷¹ or Zoroastrian Middle Persian renditions of the Avesta, these works seem to have been composed by and for an intellectual elite.⁷² The shared “intellectualism” of many of these texts and hence cultures constitutes a valuable site of potential research for Talmudists.⁷³ However, it also leads to a serious challenge, since fruitful comparison of this kind of material must account for the insularity typical of much elite religious literature. Before confronting this

impediment—which I believe constitutes one of the greatest challenges inherent in the comparative study of ancient religions and particularly in the attempt to read the Bavli alongside parallel Iranian texts—I first outline the major Sasanian non-Jewish religious writings and highlight some of the sources most promising for Talmudists.

Of the different religious communities referred to by Kerdir in his inscriptions, Babylonian Jews were most likely to have encountered Christians, Manichaeans, and “Baptists”—including the Mandaeans and the Elchasaïtes, which was a Mesopotamian “Judeo-Christian” sect in which Mani himself was raised.⁷⁴ Despite a longstanding tendency among Talmudists to downplay the role of Christianity in Jewish Babylonia,⁷⁵ scholars now recognize that Christianity was indeed an important factor in the lives of Babylonian Jews. As a result, in their research Talmudists increasingly consult Eastern Christian writings composed in Syriac.⁷⁶ These include but are not limited to the so-called *Demonstrations* of the fourth-century church father Aphrahat, the writings of his somewhat younger co-religionist Ephrem, monastic literature, and texts that describe the martyrdom of Christian converts at the hands of Sasanian authorities. The *Demonstrations* holds significant research potential for Talmudists given the fact that Aphrahat repeatedly mentions a Jewish interlocutor in the text. Moreover, his exegesis of the Hebrew Bible overlaps with ancient Jewish biblical interpretation.⁷⁷ Other recent research into Syriac that is worthy of mention includes Yifat Monnickendam’s examination of the Bavli and the writings of Ephrem, Aphrahat, and other Eastern Christian sources in an attempt to reconstruct a late antique Aramaic legal *koiné*.⁷⁸ Michal Bar-Asher Siegal is engaged in a comparative project that looks at early monastic Christian literature—primarily from Egypt—that parallels rabbinic stories in the Bavli.⁷⁹ Although they have not devoted much attention to it, Talmudists should also consider the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* and related martyrological texts composed and/or set in the Sasanian Empire.⁸⁰ The growth of this literature parallels the Bavli’s martyrological discourse,⁸¹ and the Syriac martyrologies also contain a wealth of information about life in Sasanian Mesopotamia, including some references to Jewish and Christian interactions.

On account of some relatively recent and dramatic archaeological discoveries, Manichaean literature is a particularly exciting field of research worthy of interest by Talmudists. In its heyday, Manichaeism was a true world religion, stretching from the westernmost reaches

of the Roman Empire all the way to China. Significantly, Mani, the founder of the religion, was born in Babylonia at the end of the Parthian era, and he flourished in and out of the Sasanian royal court. Aside from geography, there are a number of reasons why Manichaean textual remains, especially those preserved in Aramaic and Middle Iranian languages, should be examined by Talmudists. First, Mani and many of his followers saw their religion as one of the book, and Manichaeans devoted great energy toward preserving their tradition in writing. Indeed, Manichaean texts emphasize the reliability of the written word over and above oral transmission.⁸² A comparison of Manichaean notions of textuality can shed light on related processes in other Sasanian religions, including Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Eastern Christianity.⁸³ In this vein, Yaakov Elman has briefly noted that Manichaeism's celebration of the written word may have led to certain tensions in Babylonian Jewry, and even affected the Bavli's conception of Oral Torah.⁸⁴ Jason BeDuhn's work on Manichaean ritual praxis⁸⁵ should similarly be considered by Talmudists, as the Manichaean "*halakhic*" system would seem to represent an interesting counterpoint to rabbinic law. A final area of potentially fruitful research relates to the possible links between some Manichaean works and ancient Jewish literature.⁸⁶ There are a number of factors that might explain this particular phenomenon; foremost among them is the fact that Mani spent his early years among the Elchaisites.⁸⁷ From this perspective, parallels between Manichaean texts and the Bavli may thus be seen as "repeat" encounters between two religious cultures.

This approach might also be useful for thinking about possible interactions between Jews and Mandaeanes.⁸⁸ Aside from containing interesting, overlapping material, some Mandaic texts explicitly refer to Jews and Judaism,⁸⁹ and it has even been argued that the Mandaeans might have descended from Jews, though this view is hotly contested.⁹⁰ Regardless of their origins, Mandaic texts constitute a corpus that Talmudists could greatly benefit from. Classical Mandaic literature seems to have been redacted only after the Islamic conquest, though most scholars agree that it preserves older material from late antique Mesopotamia. Given the proximity of Mandaic to Babylonian Jewish Aramaic, Mandaic literature has long been consulted by students of Jewish texts and languages for their precious linguistic data.⁹¹ A number of scholars interested in comparative mysticism, magic, and mythology have also discussed connections between

Mandaic and Jewish texts.⁹² Nevertheless, Mandaean studies still remain distant from their erstwhile neighbors in talmudic studies.

Pahlavi Literature: Ambiguities and Advantages

The final type of Sasanian literary remains under discussion here consists of texts composed in Zoroastrian Middle Persian—or Pahlavi, as the language is commonly referred to.⁹³ At the heart of Pahlavi literature is the *dēn*—the sacred textual tradition consisting of the Avesta and its Middle Persian rendition, which is known as Zand. The Avesta was transmitted orally from antiquity until late Sasanian times and contains no direct historical references, so it is notoriously difficult to date. Still, it can be divided linguistically into two different layers. The earliest group of texts, known as the *Gāthās*, was composed in a language that Iranists refer to as Old Avestan. Based on comparisons with the *Rigveda*, some argue that the *Gāthās* may date to as early as the latter half of the second millennium B.C.E. The majority of the Avesta is composed in Young Avestan. Given the extent of apparent linguistic development from Old Avestan, Young Avestan seems to date to the first half of the first millennium B.C.E.⁹⁴ The Zand, a term probably deriving from the Avestan word for “commentary” or “interpretation,” is the Pahlavi translation and commentary on the Avesta that became synonymous with the *dēn*.⁹⁵ Since both Old and Young Avestan are languages at some geographical and chronological remove from the Middle Persian spoken by Sasanian Zoroastrian priests, the Zand functions as the portal by which late antique Zoroastrians accessed their ancient textual tradition.

The Zand consists of three basic components. First and foremost, it includes a direct interlinear Middle Persian translation of some of the surviving books of the Avesta. Added to this are brief explanatory glosses that clarify obscure words and make the Avestan-like syntax of the Middle Persian renditions more comprehensible. Finally, the Zand preserves relatively lengthy, learned discussions with or without clear thematic connections to the subject matter at hand. These deliberations are occasionally attributed to named Zoroastrian authorities, though at other times—and in some works this is exclusively the case—the translations, glosses, and commentary are all anonymous. The content of the Zand follows the preoccupations of the Avestan book that it renders. Thus, the Pahlavi *Videvdad* (“The Law Against / Discarding the Demons”) is a Middle Persian rendition of a Young

Avestan book of the same name that is also devoted to discussing rules about ritual purity.⁹⁶ Due to their legal-ritual preoccupations, the Pahlavi *Videvdad*, as well as the *Nērangestān* (“Ritual Instruction”) and the *Hērbedestān*, are of particular interest to Talmudists.⁹⁷ The different interpretations of the Avestan liturgical *nask* known as the *Yasna* (“Sacrifice”) collected in the ninth book of the *Dēnkard* are also relevant to Talmudists interested in comparative hermeneutics.⁹⁸ More generally speaking, much of the excitement that has energized the renewed interest in the Bavli’s Iranian context stems from the almost tangibly rabbinic “feel” of the discursive Zand. Given the terrific research potential of this material, it is crucial that Talmudists seriously consider the constitution of the Zand, its historical background and how best to consult it in comparative research. If it can be adequately demonstrated that the Zand is a product of Sasanian Iran, Talmudists may treat it as a more or less coterminous work produced in the same Empire—if not necessarily the same region—as the Bavli.

Determining when and where the Zand was composed is unfortunately quite complicated. This is not the least due to the orality of the Zand.⁹⁹ Obviously, modern scholars access the Zand not by listening to recitations of the text, but by consulting medieval manuscripts, facsimiles, and modern editions. The oldest extant manuscripts go back only to the fourteenth century C.E., with colophons occasionally testifying to ancestors a few centuries prior—though no earlier than around 1000 C.E. References to Zoroastrians in non-Zoroastrian literature contain no real mention of a written Zand in Sasanian or early Islamic times. And virtually no verbs of writing appear in the Zand. Unfortunately, some scholars have conflated the *writing down* of Pahlavi literature—which seems to have taken place only in ninth-century Iran—with the initial *composition* of Pahlavi texts. Yet there are a number of reasons why even in its current written state the Zand should be approached as a kind of oral text that was first put together prior to the Muslim conquest.¹⁰⁰ These include stylistic and linguistic characteristics, passages that link named authorities to historical events of the Sasanian period, the absence of unambiguous references to Islam, and source-critical comparisons with other texts that allow for relative dating.¹⁰¹

All this aside, even if we can be confident that the Zand as it has come down to us is not fundamentally different from its late antique incarnation, it is still rather difficult to identify which of its

components actually reflect Sasanian realities and are thus comparable with the Bavli. Again, the Zand's base layer directly translates the Avesta into Middle Persian. It is not at all clear what such a "Pahlavi-ized" Avestan may have meant to Sasanian Zoroastrians, nor how it would have functioned in Zoroastrian culture.¹⁰² Of course the Zand adds glosses in order to explain the translation's archaic vocabulary and Avestan-like syntax, and it also occasionally updates realities and beliefs no longer current in urban Sasanian Zoroastrian society. However, this is an incomplete process so that it is unclear whether the great Zoroastrian exegetical endeavor of late antiquity should be understood as a form of literature in which ancient scriptures were brought to bear on contemporary realities, or a more knotty situation in which older and "dead" letters co-existed alongside newer and more "relevant" material.

In other words, while it may be safe to assume that the Zand was composed during late antiquity, given the way it represents—really reproduces—the Avesta, one might wonder whether from the opposite direction these texts should still be perceived as "Sasanian." For example, if we look at descriptions of Zoroastrian learning practices in the Middle Persian rendition of the *Hērbedestān*, these would seem mainly to reflect pre-Sasanian realities that late antique exegetes only partially brought up to date. Had Sasanian sages composed an entirely *sui generis* work about Zoroastrian learning, it would have looked markedly different from the Pahlavi rendition of the *Hērbedestān* that has come down to us.

A similar issue can be raised in regards to another group of texts—namely, legal compilations like *Šāyest nē šāyest* ("Allowed and Not Allowed"), which are derived from and closely related to the Zand.¹⁰³ Here it is easier to more explicitly interrogate the purpose of these works and consider whether they are collections put together out of mere convenience, or if they have a specific agenda—legal or otherwise. The case of the most important Zoroastrian cosmographical work, the *Bundahišn*, can be approached from this perspective. Although the *Bundahišn* contains a few references to Islam that suggest a final redaction after Sasanian times, since the work largely transmits and comments upon Avestan traditions, we are in a similar predicament when considering whether the work represents more of an Achaemenid or even pre-Achaemenid outlook on the origins and composition of the universe, or one current among Zoroastrians in Sasanian times or even during the early Islamic period.¹⁰⁴

In order to sharpen the issue somewhat, consider the following. It is not simply the orality of the Zand and related compilations that is problematic; rather, it is their anonymity that complicates their use—particularly for scholars who wish to engage in comparative research. True, there are a number of “semi-provenanced” works that were first composed by established, post-Sasanian Zoroastrian figures in the ninth and tenth centuries. These include the letters of an important ninth-century Iranian Zoroastrian communal leader, Mānuščihr (*Nāmagihā ī Mānuščihr*—“Letters of Mānuščihr”), the anthology of his controversial brother Zādspram (*Wizīdagihā ī Zādspram*—“Selections of Zādspram”), and the Pahlavi *Rivāyats*, or responsa, such as the *Rivāyat ī Ēmēd ī Ašawahištān* (“Responsa of Ēmēd son of Ašawahišt”). Similarly, we might think of the *Dēnkard*—a multi-volume encyclopedic collection of diverse, mainly non-legal materials—as connected to a certain time and place, since we know the names and regions of its ninth- and tenth-century redactors. Finally, the late Sasanian lawbook *Mādayān ī hazar dādestān* (The Book of a Thousand Judgments) contains the name of its compiler—Farroxmard ī Wahrāmān—and also records the statements of numerous Sasanian sages. That said, these attributions are themselves not particularly helpful for actually linking works to their historical contexts. In truth, they only highlight the challenges of “locating” Middle Persian literature in general, and the Zand in particular.

From a contemporary Western perspective, one might say that Middle Persian literature suffers from a kind of authorial problem. Most of the texts are compilations of one kind or another. The grounding that many modern readers seek in a named author who lived during a specific—and well understood—historical time period is rarely to be found in Pahlavi literature. Although the Zand cites Sasanian exegetes and jurisconsults, the translation, glosses, and many comments are anonymous. More important, the compilers of the Zand have concealed themselves quite well—save perhaps for an occasional expression of puzzlement voiced in the first person. The same can be said for the compilations derived from the Zand, the pseudepigraphal *andarz* (wisdom, literally advice) literature, and even the *Dēnkard*. The hand of the redactor may yet have been heavy, but its effects on the text are barely visible.

There are, of course, other challenges involved in the study of Pahlavi literature.¹⁰⁵ Scholars must reckon with the relatively late date of even our earliest surviving manuscripts; the lack of modern critical

editions for many works; the profound difficulties involved in interpreting Pahlavi script; the fragmentary nature of some texts; and the high number of technical terms—especially in the legal material. All these are compounded by the loss of, or at least inaccessibility to, an extensive, indigenous interpretive tradition.¹⁰⁶ Instead of exploring these challenges in detail, I emphasize the “authorial problem” of Pahlavi literature here because it is both of particular concern to comparativists and of special interest to Talmudists.

As I describe in greater detail in the final chapter of this book, the development of thinking about intertextuality during the twentieth century has meant that many scholars conceive of even “typically” authored works as textual repositories and mosaics that intersect with coterminous and antecedent texts during the act of reading.¹⁰⁷ The notion of intertextuality has problematized traditional philological approaches to literary influence and more generally has led to profound changes in the study of literature. Nevertheless, regarding corpora like the ostensibly “authorless” Zand, the implications of an intertextual approach are not necessarily confounding: they can even be rewarding.¹⁰⁸ There is little doubt that Talmudists who expected to use Middle Persian literature as a transparent window into Sasanian Zoroastrian society will be disappointed by the challenges and ambiguities that have been discussed here. However, an intertextual perspective that recognizes the messiness of the data could actually lead to more productive thinking about where in these textual mosaics Sasanian Zoroastrian culture might be “located.”

Aside from these matters, there are still more general problems facing scholars who wish to consult Sasanian religious literature. True, there was impressive ethnic and religious diversity in Sasanian Iran, and people from different communities came into regular contact with one another. However, many of the religious texts produced during this period are elite, insular, and thus quite complicated specimens for use in comparative research. As religious literature, the works typically grow out of a profound relationship with their own canonical and semi-canonical texts and institutions, and most often engage members of their text-community to the exclusion of all others, including members of other religions and even co-religionist sectarians. They each employ distinct, idiosyncratic languages in interpreting and explaining the texts and religious phenomena peculiar to their world. Thus, while the Bavli is most interested in explaining Mishna and other earlier rabbinic texts, the Middle

Persian Zoroastrian material primarily translates, interprets, and paraphrases the Avesta and the textual traditions that it engendered.

Thus, despite sharing a single line in Kerdīr's inscriptions and, more materially, inhabiting the same cities and neighborhoods, shopping in the same markets, housing each other in times of peace and war, engaging in religious disputations, exchanging greetings and gifts, and supporting each other's poor, many of the surviving scholastic religious texts tend to be so self-absorbed that some scholars have read their textual insularity as reflecting actual, cultural segregation. An urgent pair of questions for Talmudists is therefore: How can non-rabbinic Sasanian literature be used to illuminate the Bavli when the texts are so inwardly focused? Moreover, how might Talmudists most effectively place the Bavli into conversation with other correspondingly insular works without performing an injustice to the distinct hermeneutical richness of talmudic and non-talmudic literature?

DEFINING THE BAVLI

To begin to respond to these issues—which are addressed in the final chapter—it is first necessary to articulate a more complete definition of the Bavli.¹⁰⁹ Notably, the many challenges presented by the Zand are in certain respects no less considerable than those pertaining to the Bavli. Above all, the Bavli is a commentary on the Mishna, and its structure follows the program established by that influential text. At the same time, the Bavli is far more than a commentary on the Mishna. It also interprets verses from the Hebrew Bible, *baraitot*—tannaitic (early rabbinic) statements that appear in collections other than the Mishna—and teachings transmitted in the name of amoraim (late antique sages who flourished in the centuries immediately following the tannaim). Along the way, the Bavli contains a good deal of ostensibly unrelated discussions that can deal with just about anything contemplated by the human mind.

How are all of the Bavli's diverse sources and editorial layers arranged and how do they relate with one another? The related question of whether the Bavli should be seen as a single unified work or a stratified document is one fraught with controversy. To a certain extent, the Talmud looks like a transparent, multi-generational transcript of a rabbinic debate. For many years even critical scholars did not fundamentally disagree with this view. In time, however, many Talmudists came to realize that the anonymous stratum normally

represents the final textual layer. More significant, it was suggested that the authors of this stratum were responsible for the collection, arrangement, and interpretation of the Talmud's earlier material. In other words, the rabbis who contributed the Bavli's anonymous layer—in contemporary academic parlance, the Stam (literally, “anonymous”)—essentially gave us the Talmud as we recognize it today.¹¹⁰

While developing his “documentary hypothesis” theory, Jacob Neusner came to a related but different conclusion regarding the nature of the Bavli. According to Neusner, all rabbinic works were shaped into coherent literary documents by the last group of rabbis to have come into contact with them. In the case of the Bavli, Neusner deems Babylonian sages living toward the end of late antiquity entirely responsible for producing this work. The gap between Neusner's view of the Talmud's genesis and scholars who ascribe a major role to the Stammaim (“the anonymous ones”) may appear minor, yet in important respects it is considerable. According to Neusner, the Bavli's redactors were basically authors who shaped their sources beyond recognition. Advocates for a major role played by the Stam, on the other hand, perceive the last generation of rabbis to handle the text as redactor-editors. In this capacity, these sages worked from coherent, discrete sources that they received, reproduced, framed, and occasionally reworked. Differences between the original sources and their appearance in the Bavli can be attributed either to an active editorial role or simply due to the vagaries of oral transmission.

A large part of the debate between proponents of the Stam and Neusner is about whether it is possible to conduct any sort of textual archaeology across the Bavli's layers. As much as the “Stammaists” no longer accept the view of gradual redaction or the “uninterrupted transcript” view of talmudic history, many of them still maintain that the amoraic and tannaitic sources themselves were more or less faithfully transmitted by the Stam. This allows scholars to trace the development of laws and ideas across the layers of the Bavli. Normally, hermeneutics of suspicions are reserved for the anonymous framing and interpretation of the earlier sources.

An important subset of this scholarly argument concerns the reliability of the rabbinic attributions. Specifically, just as we find in regards to Islamic *hadith* literature, rabbinic texts expend a good deal of energy toward preserving the precise names of the rabbis who were said to have authored and transmitted religious teachings. Many traditional and critical Talmudists up until the last number of decades

almost blindly trusted these attributions. But in a groundbreaking book published in 1970¹¹¹ and in a steady stream of subsequent publications, Neusner declared that positivist talmudic historiography and its concomitant reliance on attributions was irresponsible and naïve. In his view, the overwhelming majority of these attributions are fictive and historically worthless. Neusner's critique was supported by a number of observations. For example, the Talmud itself occasionally admits that attributions were unjustifiably appended to statements on the basis of logical inference. This being true, how do scholars know that attributions can be trusted in cases where there is no such admission? Moreover, some of the material found in the Bavli is preserved in other rabbinic works like Yerushalmi and classical midrashic collections, yet it is attributed to different rabbis. The increasing availability of talmudic manuscripts and *geniza* fragments has only further reminded scholars that there are often significant textual variants in rabbinic attributions.¹¹²

The field has slowly but effectively responded to Neusner's critique by devising some new and creative approaches. Of particular note is Richard Kalmin's attempt to demonstrate that the Talmud accurately portrays intergenerational relations between amoraim in such a way that would have been unlikely if not impossible had the final redactors simply invented all its sources out of whole cloth. Kalmin's additional arguments similarly demonstrate the reliability of the Talmud's material and the way the sources were preserved along generational lines. In other words, for Kalmin the Bavli is indeed a stratified document that scholars can effectively dissect.¹¹³ Some scholars, including Yaakov Elman and Barak Cohen, have attempted to prove even beyond generational reliability that the Bavli's attributions to individual sages, or least their schools, are usually accurate.¹¹⁴ That said, it is important to note that even among scholars who generally trust attributions, Neusner's critique has indeed encouraged a near universal caution and mild skepticism.

This book assumes the following positions in this and similar debates. First, Neusner's extreme skepticism regarding attributions is unwarranted. Even though there are variants found in manuscripts and parallel texts regarding attributions and related issues, these can often be explained on the basis of specific criteria like auditory mistakes in oral transmission or confusion between teachers and students. Second, the Bavli, or any rabbinic document for that matter, does not speak with "one voice"—as Neusner has tried to put it.¹¹⁵

Accordingly, it is possible to plot broader generational trajectories and perhaps even individual amoraic positions through the layers of the Talmud, while checking the names against the manuscripts, medieval witnesses, and parallels within the Bavli and without, and by employing the requisite and genuinely felt disclaimers. Third, the research of Shamma Friedman, David Weiss-Halivni, and their scholarly progeny has sufficiently demonstrated the centrality and far-reaching effects of the anonymous editorial project of the Bavli's redactors.¹¹⁶ Readers must be alert for potential re-interpretations of amoraic material, usually but not always located in the Talmud's anonymous layer. Finally, scholars should focus their attention on the way the Stam assembles, organizes, and occasionally reworks its material in an effort to consider, beyond individual amoraic views, the Bavli's broader positions and ideologies.

COMPOSITIONAL AMBIGUITY AND COMPARISON

This methodological discussion recalls some of the challenges encountered in the description of Middle Persian literature and especially the Zand. Like Pahlavi literature, the Bavli contains a "compositional problem" in the way it also defies modern, Western expectations about authorship. As Martin Jaffee noted in a pioneering study of authorship in rabbinic literature, "[The rabbis] would surely have known of Jews who wrote in Greek under their own names. Despite these available models, however, the rabbinic sage quite obviously refused to make use of them."¹¹⁷ Even the tannaim and amoraim cited by name in rabbinic works apparently did not perceive themselves as pure *authors* of the statements attributed to them. Instead, they tended to imagine their role largely as that of transmitters of their masters' teachings and ancient traditions. This is certainly the case in respect to the Bavli's ultimate framers, the Stammaim, whose very elusiveness apparently testifies to a self-perception other than that of traditional author.¹¹⁸

Because it intensifies the already dialectical nature of rabbinic literature, the Bavli is quite difficult to pin down on any particular issue, much less to essentialize. Similar to the Zand and other Middle Persian texts, the Bavli is not an uncomplicated, straightforward compilation with a clearly identifiable editorial program. It includes a mix of sources that cannot easily be correlated to a particular, overarching legal position, ideological stance, or cultural view.¹¹⁹ It is therefore

not surprising that the Bavli's near apparent celebration of indeterminacy and its persistent juxtaposition of contradictory and even deliberately "subversive" sources has provided fertile ground for all kinds of post-structural readings.¹²⁰

The lines between text, semiotics, and culture have been transgressed and reconstituted over the past few decades in critical theory. If we apply some of these insights to the issues at hand, it might be suggested that the Zand and the Bavli's mixing of dormant and active registers can actually be seen as an expression of the complex cultural phenomena that produced them. Indeed, the Bavli's multi-dimensionality has encouraged some scholars to locate within this work enough diverse—if disembodied—voices and subtexts to almost constitute a virtual, self-standing culture in miniature. In this view, Sasanian Zoroastrian and rabbinic culture lies somewhere on the fault line in their respective textual formations between the here and now, and the dynamic and the quiescent.

This brings us back to the ever-present challenge of Bavli scholarship, which Daniel Boyarin articulates as follows: "All of the texts available are of the same epistemological status. They are all literature or all documents in precisely the same degree; indeed, they all occur within the same texts, between the same covers. There is literally (virtually) nothing outside of the text."¹²¹ Boyarin's solution is to dig deeper and "look at texts as (necessarily failed) attempts to propose utopian solutions to cultural tensions."¹²² The movement away from an essentializing scholarly endeavor to a hermeneutic that is attuned to disruptions and complexities is by most accounts a positive development. But it also runs the risk of intensifying the Bavli's preexisting condition of insularity. Given Boyarin's extended comparative engagement with some of the most important texts in the classical canon,¹²³ he clearly has just the opposite in mind. Nevertheless, the danger remains that the application of New Historical tools to the study of the Bavli ironically runs the risk of perpetuating the Talmud's preexisting splendid isolation.

The recognition that the Bavli and Middle Persian texts strongly represent diverse cultures that were previously considered by many scholars as irretrievable might actually provide scholars with both a valuable tool and goal for a text-comparative enterprise like *Talmudo-Iranica*. While in this book I am more interested in these two exempla of Sasanian literature than in the actual cultural entities themselves, the textual archaeology of the texts is sufficiently complex to actually

consider the Bavli and Middle Persian literature as particularly robust signifiers of the societies that produced them. If it can be demonstrated that the Sasanian Zoroastrian and rabbinic communities shared common geographic space, assumptions, and experiences, then scholars might justifiably bring the texts into conversation with one another as a kind of reenactment of late antique historical encounters. True, the Bavli and Middle Persian literature are both late antique *texts* and thus technically of the same “epistemological status,” in Boyarin’s formulation. Nevertheless, the fact that these corpora represent two very distinct cultural worlds provides scholars of the Talmud with a rare, bright new window that can illuminate Sasanian Mesopotamia, and even the Babylonian rabbinic study hall.

Having surveyed the different kinds of extra-talmudic evidence and established the beginnings of a theoretical and methodological program that we revisit in the final chapter, the next task is to explore some of the potential pathways of historical interaction between the rabbis and their non-Jewish neighbors in Sasanian Mesopotamia. The possibility of these historical interactions will set the stage for the central claim of the book, namely that one can perceive the Bavli’s interaction with its Iranian cultural and literary context not only in talmudic anecdotes concerning Sasanian people, materials, and institutions, but also—especially—in the textual shifts in and resonances of seemingly insular rabbinic texts that transmit and reconfigure earlier, frequently Palestinian traditions. By engaging explicit references to Persians and Zoroastrian priests in Babylonian Jewish texts and Jews in Middle Persian literature, a rich historical context will come into focus that can allow scholars to see the text of the Bavli as constantly engaged with its context, even when it does not directly quote it.

In the Temple and Synagogue

Locating Jewish-Zoroastrian Encounters in Sasanian Mesopotamia

Sometime between the fifth and seventh centuries of the Common Era, a Mesopotamian “magician” inscribed the following incantation upon a simple hemispherical bowl:

Cursed. Overturned, (overturned, overturned,) overturned, overturned, overturned, overturned. Overturned is the earth and heavens, overturned are the stars and the planets, overturned are markets and alleys, overturned is the talk of all the people, overturned is the curse of the mother and her daughter, of the daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law, of men and women who stand in the open field, and in the village and on the mountain, and the temple(s) and synagogue(s).¹

In form and content, this incantation is a fairly typical expression of the genre. Its purpose was to protect someone who felt threatened by curses emanating from different sources, including the earth, the heavens and celestial bodies, and people of different relations positioned across a variegated topography. The topographical banality described here is actually quite helpful in the way it provides a snapshot of late antique Mesopotamian settlement. Space is divided between open fields and villages, markets and alleyways, and mountains, temples, and synagogues. Other incantations give us a distinctive view of private territory, which is apportioned into houses, thresholds, living quarters, and the four corners of the home.² From the perspective of the bowls, these external and internal spaces are populated by a terrifying menagerie of demons and monsters. They also form the battleground for an impressive variety of magic, which is both ethnically and religiously marked. One bowl, written for a certain

Farroxdād b. Zebinta and Qamoy b. Zādaq, refers to “Aramaean sorceries, Judaeen sorceries, Arabian sorceries, Persian sorceries, Indian sorceries, Greek sorceries, Roman sorceries,” and “sorceries that are performed in (any of) seventy languages, whether by a woman or a man.”³ The incantation bowls reflect not only a world overpopulated by demons, gods, spells, and other supernatural forces, but also an environment crowded with various ethnic identities, religious affiliations, and linguistic preferences that can be positioned along different stations in an ordered landscape.

Comparative research of the Bavli and Middle Persian literature that is grounded in historical reality and material *realia* must somehow descend into the heterogeneous topographical and human terrain in which people lived in Sasanian Iran. My goal in this chapter is to consider the Bavli’s place in the complex of Sasanian religious communities and texts, and in particular alongside Zoroastrianism and Pahlavi literature—which seem most promising for comparative research—by surveying the interactions between Jews and Persians in late antique Iran. By consulting literary sources and some material remains, I explore the different sites where Persians and their texts may have come into contact with Babylonian rabbis and rabbinic literature.

The yield from this inquiry will take the form of an inventory of interactions of varying significance and degree, including everyday encounters in residential areas and public places, different levels of economic collaboration, and more intimate forms of exchange like intermarriage and conversion. Portals that seem particularly significant for intellectual intercourse between the communities include the cross-religious transmission of oral texts, the translation and distribution of written works, and religious disputations. Encounters with Persian officials will also be noted, including the possibility of religious persecutions. The results of this inquiry lead into the next two chapters, which consider how Jews and Zoroastrians constructed opposing, mirror images of each other. That in turn will inform a discussion of how scholars might productively study the Bavli and Middle Persian texts in tandem.

MAPPING BABYLONIA

The first issue that needs to be addressed is where, in relation to local non-Jewish populations, Sasanian Mesopotamian Jews lived. Despite

a relative dearth of material remains, we know from the archaeological record and references scattered across Middle Persian, Syriac, and rabbinic literature that Sasanian Mesopotamia was on the whole religiously and ethnically mixed. True, there were areas of concentration, for example Christians in the North, Mandaeans in the vicinity of Ḥuzistan, and Jewish majorities evidenced in certain Babylonian towns.⁴ Zoroastrians were far more prevalent in the Iranian highlands than in Babylonia, where they seemed to have formed a ruling minority. Still, by synthesizing all the evidence it seems that Zoroastrians, Christians, Jews, Manichaeans, and Mandaeans could be found throughout the region.

Evidence for Jewish settlement comes overwhelmingly from the Bavli. A well-known talmudic passage maps a region of “pure lineage” in Babylonia⁵—that is, an area whose Jewish residents were considered ritually fit for marriage by the rabbis since they were not assumed to have been born from intermarriages or illicit sexual unions.⁶ As important as this source may be for understanding the rabbinic “idea” of Jewish Babylonia,⁷ it cannot be used to determine the actual historical boundaries of Jewish settlement.⁸ Instead, most of our knowledge on the subject derives from the numerous place names mentioned in the Bavli.⁹ Further evidence might also be sought from Babylonian Jewish Aramaic incantation bowls of known provenance.¹⁰

Regarding Sasanian Mesopotamian Christianity, there is a relatively significant pool of archaeological evidence, including churches found in Ḥira—which was also home to a Zoroastrian community¹¹—Raḥaliya, as well as a church, saint statue, and liturgical (?) ostrakon all found in Kokhe in the vicinity of the Sasanian capital, Ctesiphon.¹² Furthermore, incantation bowls written in Syriac—the Aramaic dialect generally spoken by Christians—have been discovered just a few kilometers north of Baghdad, in other words, in the heart of “Jewish” Babylonia.¹³ The textual evidence, especially from synods, identifies a number of Episcopal provinces and sees that overlapped with areas associated with certain rabbis. As for the Mandaeans,¹⁴ a number of incantation bowls written in Mandaic, to give one example, have been unearthed in Kuta¹⁵ in proximity to and therefore associated with bowls inscribed in Babylonian Jewish Aramaic.¹⁶ The founder of Manichaeism, Mani, was originally from Mesopotamia, and a number of Mesopotamian sites are referred to in Manichaean writings.¹⁷

Regarding the Zoroastrian community, clay sealings and Syriac literary sources identify a number of official Zoroastrian authorities

who resided in Babylonia.¹⁸ This is not surprising given Mesopotamia's status as a breadbasket and administrative center of the Sasanian Empire. For that reason, it is somewhat surprising that no remains of Zoroastrian fire temples have been discovered in Babylonia.¹⁹ Perhaps the most significant issue for the purpose of comparing a learned work like the Bavli with Middle Persian literature concerns where Zoroastrian sages and centers of religious learning might have been located. Unfortunately, there are not yet enough data to fully answer this question. The most significant source on Zoroastrian learning, the *Hērbedestān*, contains virtually no prosopography. Aside from a few names,²⁰ the priests of Sasanian Zoroastrian literature, unlike many of their rabbinic counterparts, are generally not linked to specific places.²¹ Syriac martyrologies only occasionally link Zoroastrian schools to specific locations. So, for example, the sixth-century *Life of Mar Aba* describes a major center of Zoroastrian learning in the Azerbaijan region.²² Moving closer to Babylonia, there is reference to two fifth-century Persians named Yazdīn and Dādgūšnasp from Balashfarr—northeast of Jewish Babylonia—who attended a Zoroastrian school.²³ In short, while it is difficult to properly address the question of where the major centers of Zoroastrians and Zoroastrian learning were, there is no doubt that numerous Zoroastrians, and presumably some learned ones among them, made their home in Mesopotamia. The Bavli and Syriac sources refer to Persians in Mesopotamia, and a fair number of the some two thousand surviving Aramaic incantation bowls were written for clients bearing Persian and often Zoroastrian theophoric names.²⁴

EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS AND A COMMON LANGUAGE

While the above demographic sketch is quite rudimentary and tentative, it is significant that talmudic anecdotes that describe interaction between Jews and non-Jews match the general impression of demographic variety. Historians researching Babylonian rabbinic Jewry have sifted through and rehearsed the plentiful data and have found anecdotes describing meetings and greetings in the marketplace, home visits, shared living arrangements, and all kinds and levels of economic collaboration.²⁵ While it is possible to add further instances of everyday Jewish/non-Jewish interaction, I suspect that these would not change the picture dramatically. On the whole, the literary sources show that Babylonian Jews did not inhabit neighborhoods,

marketplaces, and shops that were separate from their Sasanian compatriots. Rather, they encountered each other constantly and consistently as they went about their daily routine.²⁶

These everyday encounters would have allowed for exchanges that could have influenced the shape of the rabbis' religious world and, ultimately, the very contours of the Bavli. But this would require a means of communication and, more specifically, a common language. There were essentially two or perhaps three major languages in use in Sasanian Mesopotamia, which could be further divided into a variety of dialects.²⁷ The Jewish community spoke an Eastern dialect of Middle Aramaic now referred to by scholars as Babylonian Jewish Aramaic. Babylonian Jewish Aramaic is essentially the language of the Babylonian Talmud and a majority of the Aramaic incantation bowls.²⁸ Presumably, with moderate effort Babylonian Jews would have been able to converse with non-Jewish speakers of related Aramaic dialects such as Mandaic used by Mandaeans, and the Aramaic dialect spoken by Eastern Christians.²⁹ On the other hand, Middle Persian—the language spoken by the Persians who from the rise of the Sasanian dynasty to power were apparently represented in the region in ever greater numbers—might have represented a not insignificant linguistic hurdle for Babylonian Jews. Aside from Middle Persian and Babylonian Jewish Aramaic constituting different languages, we might also point out that Aramaic is Semitic, while Persian is a member of the Indo-European family.

Nevertheless, there are indications that some rabbis and Babylonian Jews were able to understand and even speak Persian.³⁰ According to one talmudic passage, the fifth-generation Babylonian amora Rav Pappa would ask non-Jews to read Persian documents that came before him.³¹ Jacob Neusner has drawn attention to the apparent Persian illiteracy depicted in this anecdote,³² yet given the well-known difficulties in reading Pahlavi³³ and the pervasiveness of orality in this part of the world, one wonders whether even most ethnic Persians could read the script. In any case, Rav Pappa's teacher, Rava, deems Persian documents handed over in the presence of Jewish witnesses legally valid.³⁴ Presumably, this ruling assumes that some Jewish witnesses were capable of reading, or at least understanding, Persian contracts.³⁵ An anecdote preserved in the Palestinian Talmud describes the first-generation amora Rav using a visual pun that hinges on the Persian word for "bird" in order to convey the proper reading of a *mishna* to his student, Rav Kahana.³⁶ Likewise, the first-generation

amora Shmuel is shown using a Persian phrase in conversation with King Shapur I.³⁷

In this context it is worth noting that despite the relatively low number of Persian loanwords in the Bavli³⁸ (when compared with the frequency of Greek and Latin terms in Palestinian rabbinic works), there is still an impressive variety of Iranian elements that Babylonian Jewish Aramaic did absorb.³⁹ These include not only the anticipated bureaucratic terms or clothing and food items, but also a number of prepositions,⁴⁰ calques of Middle Persian legal and theological concepts,⁴¹ and the use of Middle Persian literary *topoi* and words that occasionally replace deeply entrenched biblical and Middle Hebrew terms like *korban tamid* (daily sacrifice) and *nidda* (menstruation). These and other phenomena demonstrate rabbinic familiarity and comfort with Middle Persian in spite of a thriving, Aramaic-speaking population in Babylonia, and the deep and ancient roots of Aramaic in the region.

Perhaps the greatest proof that language did not constitute an insurmountable communication barrier between rabbis and Zoroastrians is simply the existence of talmudic anecdotes that describe rabbis conversing with people identified as Persians explicitly (*parsi / parsai*), by name (for example, Wahman b. Ristaq),⁴² or by religious title (*amgusha / magosha* or *habara*). Nowhere does the Bavli emphasize or even mention any linguistic difficulties inherent in these encounters—for example by describing misunderstandings or by ascribing a role to translators. Evidently, whether they used Aramaic, Persian, or a mixture of both,⁴³ some rabbis were able to converse with Persians without great difficulty.

INTIMATE EXCHANGES: INTERMARRIAGE AND CONVERSION IN JEWISH BABYLONIA

Intermarriage may have constituted another way by which Iranian ideas and practices influenced the rabbis. Far beyond everyday encounters in the market, intermarriage would have allowed for a slow yet steady influence capable of producing more drastic religious changes, initially on the family of the intermarried couple, and subsequently on the wider community. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know whether intermarriage was a historically significant factor, as the data on this topic are wanting. There is, for example, no Iranian parallel to the 212 C.E. Roman edict permitting marriage between

Jews and non-Jews,⁴⁴ nor is there anything similar to the series of (Western) Christian condemnations issued against interreligious marriage.⁴⁵ Instead, we have to make do with the Bavli's mixed data where certain legal and cultural postures might be identified in the complex architecture of Babylonian *sugyot* (talmudic topical sections).⁴⁶

In this regard, the following developments are noteworthy, if far from clear-cut. The Bavli diverges from the Yerushalmi by apparently subscribing to the view that children born from intermarriages⁴⁷ are not legally considered "bastards" (*mamzerim*) forbidden in marriage to other Jews.⁴⁸ Similarly, unlike the Yerushalmi's stance, the Babylonian amoraim who discuss rabbinic enactments against non-Jewish bread and beer⁴⁹ are reluctant to interpret them as anti-intermarriage legislation.⁵⁰ Yet there also appear to be real concerns about the possibility of Jews having sex with non-Jews,⁵¹ while Rava unexpectedly resuscitates a doctrine of Jewish "Holy Seed"⁵²—perhaps in an attempt to discourage intermarriage among his acculturated townsfolk. Further, the Bavli seems particularly interested in a minority opinion that traces the prohibition against intermarriage all the way back to the Bible.⁵³ In short, intermarriage does seem to have been occurring in talmudic Babylonia, and the Bavli apparently both accommodates to this reality yet also puts forth significant resistance in its response.

As noted previously, an untapped source of information on the subject may be the Aramaic incantation bowls. Shaul Shaked has pointed out that the names of clients listed in the bowls evince "a fair amount of mixture of blood between Semites and Iranians in Sasanian Babylonia."⁵⁴ Still, it is unclear how far the mingling of Iranian and Semitic names will take things, since there were plenty of non-Jewish Semites in Mesopotamia. Also, while Rav Pappa acknowledges a class of typical non-Jewish names,⁵⁵ it certainly is possible that some Jews nevertheless adopted these names. All one can say is that interethnic marriages were quite common, that there is evidence that interreligious marriage between Jews and non-Jews seems to have been taking place in Sasanian Babylonia, and finally that the rabbis may have in some senses been resigned to the phenomenon even while they tried to use strong rhetoric to combat the problem. In sum, it seems possible that exchanges resulting from intermarriage might have constituted an important site of interaction between Jews and non-Jews. However, we cannot know to what extent.

Conversion might also have brought an influx of Iranian peoples, practices, and ideas into the Jewish community. It is important in

this regard to remember that converts not infrequently retain some of their former practices and beliefs even while otherwise successfully adapting to their new religious communities. To take one example from the realm of menstrual purity laws, we know of female Zoroastrian converts to Islam who wished to continue to practice a form of menstrual seclusion, and Syrian Jewish women converts to Christianity who continued to immerse themselves in a ritual bath following their menstrual period.⁵⁶ It is possible that the inability of some converts to excise all ties with their past can help explain the Bavli's infamously negative attitude toward them. In one severe tirade, the Bavli cites a *baraita* that pairs converts with pedophiles, and it is claimed that both "delay the (coming of the) messiah."⁵⁷

Unfortunately, conversion statistics are also quite difficult, if not impossible to retrieve.⁵⁸ Some scholars have made a great deal out of a smattering of talmudic anecdotes that describe Babylonian converts and conversion, but Isaiah Gafni has correctly stated that there is little evidence that points to conversion to Judaism as a *major* factor in the Sasanian empire.⁵⁹ Still, there are a couple of interesting and even startling talmudic passages in the Bavli that point in the direction of conversion to Judaism—and, as expected, weighted toward cosmopolitan centers like Maḥoza⁶⁰ and away from predominantly Jewish areas like Mata Meḥasiya.⁶¹

It is tempting to connect this with evidence of conversion to and from other religious communities in the Sasanian Empire. We know from Syriac martyrological accounts and Pahlavi legal texts that conversion from Zoroastrianism to Christianity was occurring in significant numbers.⁶² Manichaeism, with its program of proselytizing, would also have attracted Zoroastrian and Christian, if not necessarily Jewish, converts. Yaakov Elman has recently suggested that a phenomenon of conversion was related to a broader discourse of identity that can be traced in rabbinic and Zoroastrian purity and theological texts as well.⁶³ Indeed, it is well worth considering the potential influence of conversion on rabbinic society not merely in terms of non-Jews bringing foreign ideas and practices into Judaism, but as a particular cultural reality in which religious identities, as well as practices and beliefs, were in flux. Some non-Jews converted, that is, came to sympathize, identify with, and practice Judaism,⁶⁴ while others moved away from Judaism to different communities. In the end, it must still be admitted that as with exogamy, we can only speculate about the frequency and significance of this reality.

INTELLECTUAL INTERACTIONS: RABBINIC ACCESS TO ZOROASTRIAN LEARNING

As this monograph is primarily interested in the relationship between Zoroastrian texts and the *Bavli*, it is worth considering whether Babylonian rabbis might have somehow gained direct access to Zoroastrian learning. Given the textual terrain of late antiquity, it is possible to divide the possibilities into oral and written registers. Rabbinic instruction took place almost entirely, if not exclusively orally. Similarly, apart from the evidence provided by a handful of references, Zoroastrian instruction also seems to have taken place orally.⁶⁵ This being the case, in order for a member of one religious community to study the texts of another religious community he would quite simply have had to gain access to someone who was willing to teach him.⁶⁶ Alternatively, one might access foreign religious texts in the context of religious disputations, when the material would presumably have been carefully modified and repackaged for public and official consumption. Despite the prevalence of oral instruction, since both religious communities were in possession of some written texts—at least by the final years of the Sasanian period—it is worth exploring the distant possibility that physical books or scrolls might have functioned as another avenue for Babylonian Jews accessing Zoroastrian traditions.

Sasanian Iran boasted an important scribal class,⁶⁷ and some Zoroastrian texts were written down in Iranian languages—perhaps as early as the third century C.E.⁶⁸ Mani boasts of making use of the technology of writing, and Eastern Christians produced numerous written tracts. A significant factor for intercultural exchange in the Sasanian Empire in general may have been the translations made between Middle Persian and other languages. Dimitri Gutas and Kevin Van Bladel have argued that the origin of the great Abbasid translation movement, which brought many Western scientific, philosophical, and other learned texts into the stream of Arabic thought, can be traced back to Sasanian times.⁶⁹ The various lists in Pahlavi literature of foreign books translated into Middle Persian do not include the Bible or any Jewish literature for that matter. Nevertheless, there is evidence that parts of the Hebrew Bible may have been rendered into Middle Persian.⁷⁰ As I suggest below, this may be connected with some official Sasanian interest in sacred Jewish books. On the other hand, despite the circulation of pseudo-Zoroastrian books in Greek

from the third century on, there is little evidence of authentic Zoroastrian works being translated into other languages. In terms of translations from Middle Persian into Aramaic, all we seem to possess are a handful of translations into Syriac. Specifically, along with certain forms of Greek philosophy entering Sasanian Iran in the sixth and seventh centuries C.E., public philosophical debates were held in Middle Persian and some Middle Persian philosophical texts were apparently translated from Persian into Greek and Aramaic, respectively.⁷¹ In short, while it does seem possible that Zoroastrians had access to Jewish texts, including the Bible, given the paucity of authentic Zoroastrian written works during Sasanian times, the lack of translations, and also the difficulty of reading Pahlavi script, it would seem rather unlikely that Jews could have gained regular access to Zoroastrian tradition via the written word.⁷²

On the other hand, there is some evidence that Jews studied orally with Zoroastrian priests.⁷³ The following declaration appears in a triad of warnings that Rav Zutra b. Ṭuviya transmitted in the name of the early third-century C.E. sage, Rav:

אמ' רב זוטרא בר טוביה אמ' רב . . . והלמד דבר מן המגוש חייב מיתה . . .

Rav Zutra b. Ṭuviya said that Rav said . . . And he who learns something (*davar*) from a magus is worthy of death.⁷⁴

Presumably, Rav would only need to warn Jews against committing offenses that they were already perpetrating. It is thus possible to think of this text as a type of evidence, derived negatively, that Jews were indeed studying with magi. At the same time, the purpose of Rav's warning is to declare that learning from the magi is considered highly problematic, to the point that it had to be combated with some considerable verbal bullying. The statement is frustratingly vague. What were people actually learning from the magi, and why did Rav deem them worthy of death? The discussion appended to Rav's declaration seems to have been placed there by the redactors in order to provide some answers. As usual, however, the particulars are initially rather unclear:

אמגושתא רב ושמואל חד אמ' חרשי וחד אמ' גדופי תסתיים דרב הוא דאמר גידופי דאמ' רב
זוטרא בר טוביה אמ' רב הלמד דבר אחד מן המגוש חייב מיתה דאי ס'ד חרשי והכתי' לא
תלמד לעשות אבל אתה למד להבין ולהורות תסתיים

[As to] Magianism, Rav and Shmuel [disagree]: One said [that it is] sorceries; the other said [that it is] blasphemies. It may be concluded

that it is Rav who maintains that it is blasphemies. For Rav Zutra b. Tuvya said that Rav said: He who learns something from a magus is worthy of death. Now should you think that it is sorceries, surely it is written, “You shall not learn to do [the abhorrent practices of those nations]” (Deuteronomy 18:9), [implying], but you may learn in order to understand and instruct! This proves it.

Here, the Bavli knows only that Rav and Shmuel disagree about “Magianism,” yet it does not have a tradition about which rabbi said what. It deduces that it was Rav who deemed “Magianism” blasphemous because elsewhere it is he who rules that one who learns from a magus is worthy of death. Since the rabbis understand Deuteronomy 18:9—which appears in a list of forbidden rituals performed by Canaanites—as prohibiting only the practice of certain “pagan” rituals but not their study,⁷⁵ the Bavli’s anonymous layer assumes that Rav could not have ruled that “Magianism” was sorcery.

The passage is worthy of careful attention, and there will be more discussion devoted to it next chapter when I consider its significance for reconstructing rabbinic perceptions of Zoroastrianism. For the present, it is necessary to explain the basic meaning of “Magianism” since it may shed light on what Jews were possibly learning from the magi.⁷⁶ Because one of the amoraic opinions claims that “Magianism” is blasphemous—a sacrilegious speech act—this means that the term probably refers to something that is recited. Along these lines, a geonic (post-talmudic Babylonian) opinion suggests that the term “Magianism” at the center of the debate describes the inchoate speech that Zoroastrians use during mealtime when they are technically barred from talking.⁷⁷ This seems like an unnecessarily limited application. Instead, I would suggest that while we cannot know for sure, it seems possible that “Magianism” refers to the recitations of sacred texts by Zoroastrians. By placing the debate about “Magianism” here, it seems possible that the redactors wish to signal that Rav’s statement is directed against learning from a magus something “Magian”—that is, texts coming from the Zoroastrian oral tradition.

If this is the case, then we may proceed to the next question. Why would Jews want to learn sacred Zoroastrian scriptures from the magi? It seems possible that Zoroastrians were seen by Jews and others as proficient in the magical arts and that *mantric* powers were attributed to their texts. Notably, the Jews who may have been studying Zoroastrian texts for “magical” reasons did not necessarily consider themselves in violation of biblical or even rabbinic prohibitions

against sorcery. Gideon Bohak has recently compiled an extensive list of rabbinic exceptions of permitted magical activities.⁷⁸ One of these exceptions, the permission granted to study magic, actually appears in the passage under discussion. Perhaps not coincidentally, the proof-text for this exception stems from the very same section in Deuteronomy that prohibits the ritual practice of *hover haver*—a designation interpreted by some Babylonian Jews as referring to Zoroastrianism.⁷⁹ Accordingly, Deuteronomy 18:9–11 may have been seen by Babylonian Jews as prohibiting the *recitation* of specific Zoroastrian utterances while at the same time permitting their study.⁸⁰

Even more interesting, the Bavli employs the same midrashic justification not only to permit the study of foreign, non-Jewish ritual and magical practices, but also to authorize the pronouncement of Jewish divine names in the context of religious instruction.⁸¹ If the Bavli could group the study of Jewish divine names together with foreign practices like Zoroastrian scriptural recitations, this means that in rabbinic culture there had been a blurring of boundaries between different kinds of magic—Jewish and non-Jewish—and, more important, concerning who might possess this secret, forbidden knowledge. An anecdote in which Shmuel hears a Persian pronounce the explicit divine name (*shem hameforash*) to fatal effect might be seen as assuming that Persians somehow possessed this centrally important Jewish divine name.⁸² In other words, it would seem that the domains of magic, Zoroastrian recitation of the Avesta, and the use of Jewish divine names were related to one another. This suggests a possible motivation for why Jews would want to study with magi in the first place, what they hoped to gain, and how they may have justified their actions. In addition, it also explains why Rav would have reacted so negatively to the phenomenon in the first place, for if Jews were running to the magi to learn efficacious texts, what did this say about the power of Torah, the rabbis, and rabbinic authority?

The midrashic interpretation of Deuteronomy 18:9 also conveys the sense that increasingly in rabbinic culture, magic was becoming a branch of technical learning to be mastered.⁸³ In order to pass judgment on a magician, a judge must know what is deemed a legally prohibited magical act and what is not. Likewise, if he wishes to avoid the dangers of a vengeful magician, a judge had better be schooled in the art of counter-magic. Knowledge is also a form of power. Thus, understanding magic for the rabbis was not merely a fulfillment of the study of Torah but also a means of achieving a modicum of control

against those who were perceived as possessing potent esoteric knowledge and their sympathizers.

Based on their language of composition, we know that a majority of the Aramaic incantation bowls discovered in Mesopotamia were produced by Jews. At the same time, a large number of the clients—that is, the people who commissioned the bowls—bear distinctly Persian names. Indeed, virtually every Sasanian Mesopotamian religious and ethnic group played some role in the production, transmission, and “consumption” of the magic bowls. Despite attempts to enact separations between those who possessed special divine knowledge and those deemed merely experts in sorcery, the “magic trade” flourished both in terms of the exchange of magical goods as well as the transmission—oral and written—of spells and formula.

I would like to suggest that those who studied with the magi and elicited Rav’s warning may have been part of this “trade.” In addition, there are related examples in the Bavli of this sort of exchange. Amemar learns from the “leader of the witches” an incantation that turns up in an Aramaic incantation bowl.⁸⁴ The attribution of demonological knowledge to Yosef the demon⁸⁵ by Rav Yosef and Rav Pappa on the same page may hint at a foreign source. The relationship between Shmuel and a non-Jewish figure named Ablat might likewise testify to an exchange of astrological and medical knowledge between rabbinic and non-Jewish cultures.⁸⁶ Finally, it has been demonstrated that a long pharmacological and magical tract in the seventh chapter of Tractate Gittin derives almost directly from Akkadian healing texts.⁸⁷

Regarding the passage with which I began this discussion, one possible understanding is that it may serve as evidence that Jews were learning Avestan texts from Zoroastrian priests which they thought were magically efficacious. If so, this (Zoroastrian) teacher–(Jewish) student relationship would have been part of a wider phenomenon where magic and other sciences like astronomy, astrology, and pharmacology were being exchanged in the marketplace of ideas. Either way, even if many thought of the magis’ texts as possessing only magical meaning, the possibility that Jews were actually learning Zoroastrian scriptures from the magi meant that further instruction in the meaning of these texts could easily have occurred. At that point, Jews would actually be approaching Zoroastrian scriptures as a comprehensible tradition—as opposed to one consisting of the “irrational” language typical of magical texts. Still, there is to be sure no direct evidence of such a shift.

In this regard it is worth revisiting the opinion—identified by the Stam (the Talmud’s anonymous layer) as that of Rav—that declares “Magianism” to consist of blasphemies. In my view, the “Magianism” debate represents the legal reflections of Rav and Shmuel concerning the phenomenon of Zoroastrian priestly recitation.⁸⁸ Again, instead of assuming that these recitations were seen as incomprehensible magical formula, the claim that they are blasphemous ascribes a certain level of meaning to them. According to the *mishna*’s technical definition, a “blasphemer” (*megadef*) is defined as someone who curses the divine name.⁸⁹ The *mishna* rules that only one who uses the tetragrammaton is put to death by stoning, although there also is a debate concerning the extent to which a divine “nickname” (*kinuy*) is prosecutable, and also whether non-Jews are governed by the same set of rules.⁹⁰ In that light, even the opinion that declares Magianism a form of blasphemy may also be concerned with the alleged use of divine names by Zoroastrian priests—either “explicit” divine Jewish names, such as the Palestinian tradition about Shmuel and the Persian seems to assume—or Iranian approximations. On the other hand, as I discuss in the next chapter, there is evidence that even the technical category of “blasphemy” included more than cursing God’s name, with implications for Jewish-Zoroastrian relations.

Either way, what is significant in all this is that the passage prohibiting learning from a magus hints at the existence of Jews studying sacred Zoroastrian texts with Zoroastrian priests. Further, it preserves some of the assumptions that Jews made about Zoroastrian learning, including the belief that it was repetitive and consisted of magical formula. On the other hand, it is possible that some Jews even gained some actual understanding of the Avesta and there were rabbis who deemed that meaning blasphemous.

In this context it is interesting to look at chapters 18 and 19 of the *Hērbedestān*, which discuss the related scenarios of Zoroastrians learning from or teaching non-Zoroastrians, respectively. Chapter 19 opens with the following question:

<kaṭ> nā daēuuaiiasnāi vā tanu.pərəθāi vā *aēθriiāi *cašāiti.
 “ēiyōn mard ō ōy ī dēwēsnnān”—anērān
 “ayāb ō *tanābuhligān”—ō margarzānān
 “hawišt ēw čāsed”—ay ēd-iš čāšt.

{Avestan:} Shall a man teach a student who sacrifices to the daēuuas or one whose body is forfeited?

{Pahlavi:} “How can a man, to one who is of the dēwēsnnān”—

(i.e.) non-Iranians,
 “or to those guilty of a *tanābuhl* (sin),”—(i.e.) to those worthy-
 of-death,
 “be supposed to teach a student?”—This means/implies that he
 is (already) teaching him this.⁹¹

The answer to the question quoted here is essentially that if a priest lacks basic sustenance, then he may teach anyone upon receiving a fee.⁹² Nevertheless, there is a clear warning in a subsequent section of the text:

*vəhrkai hizuuqm dadāiti yō azrazdāi *mąθrəm cašte*
*“gurg uzwān dahēd kē ō ōy ī *arawāg-dabišn”—ī anēr*
*“*mānsr čāšēd”—ast kē gurg ahlomōy gōwēd*

{Avestan:} He gives a tongue to the wolf who teaches the sacred word to an unbeliever.

{Pahlavi:} “He gives the tongue to a wolf to one who does not give (it) currency”—a non-Iranian.

“He who teaches the sacred word”—There is one who says “wolf” is a heretic.⁹³

The parallel between the scenario described in this passage and Rav’s warning against studying with a magus is tantalizing. The Zoroastrian text reads like a mirror image of the very same scenario, though one that is seen from the perspective of the teacher’s religion instead of that of the student. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the problem with teaching “Others” was first raised during Avestan times. This is a challenge if one wishes to approach the rabbinic and Zoroastrian discussions as two sides of the same coin. Even if it can be argued that Rav’s statement reflects a reality in which late antique Jews were indeed learning from the magi, at best the *Hērbedestān* provides evidence of interreligious teaching many centuries earlier—and almost surely not involving Jews—along with a Sasanian translation and commentary that attempts to render this discussion comprehensible.

It is clear that much had changed regarding these matters during the intervening millennium between the Avestan composition of the *Hērbedestān* and its Sasanian Zand. The Middle Persian glosses and extended discussions evince a fresh attempt to make sense of the Avesta, and this attempt seems to have transpired squarely within a new Sasanian reality. As I suggested in the last chapter, the processes of the Zand can provide a window, however narrow, into the world of late antique Zoroastrianism. Even if the Zoroastrian authorities who

composed the Zand were unaware of any interreligious study taking place in their sphere, it is interesting that the issue was being discussed both in rabbinic and Zoroastrian circles at roughly the same time.

In the passage from the *Hērbedestān* there are a number of adjustments apparent in the Zand's glosses. First, in the opening line the Avesta asks whether one may teach "a student who sacrifices to the *daēuuas*" or "one whose body is forfeited." The Zand understands this line not as a question, rather as an instruction regarding *how* it might be permissible to teach such people.⁹⁴ More significant, the Pahlavi understands that we are dealing with a member of a group (*ōy ī dēwēsñān*)—"of the *dēwēsñān*." This shift apparently acknowledges the presence of non-Zoroastrian religious *communities*, as also witnessed in Kerdīr's inscriptions. Further, the term *dēwēsñān* (demon-sacrificers) is rendered as *anērān* (non-Iranians)—a fascinating word that carries both ethnic and religious connotations.⁹⁵ One may detect a shift from an early Zoroastrian reality in which competing ritual poets were considered demon-worshippers and thus not worthy of being taught the "sacred word," and a Sasanian challenge in which members of other religious *communities* came to study the efficacious word, perhaps for magical reasons.

The warning that teaching an "Other" the holy word is like giving a tongue to a wolf is a notable and colorful comparison. Here, too, the original Avestan phrase seems to reflect the nomadic context of early Zoroastrianism where wolves were a real and regular threat, particularly to livestock. One may be tempted to understand the metaphor simply as expressing concern that transmitting the sacred word to evil people ("wolves") will help them devour ("tongue") the flock.⁹⁶ Yet there is another possibility. According to the picture provided by ancient Zoroastrian texts, these "holy words" were composed by oral poets—that is, people capable of crafting the poetic, sublime thoughts in their heads into sacred performances. These texts were then transmitted for future performances and finally crystallized into a more rigid form for accurate memorization.⁹⁷ Instructing the sacred words to someone outside the community was akin to giving a tongue—that is, the capacity to articulate these efficacious words⁹⁸—to a wolf, which in the Zoroastrian dualistic system is the evil counterpart of the benevolent dog.

The legal view advanced in this chapter of the *Hērbedestān* becomes more stringent in the Zand's final summation and analysis. In *Hērbedestān* 19.8–9, Sasanian authorities reduce the permission

to teach “Others” even further than the plain sense of the Avestan original requires.⁹⁹ It is therefore possible to read the Zand’s interpretive processes as relating to the same phenomenon that Rav warns against. All said, even if it would have gone against the wishes of most if not all rabbis and Zoroastrian priestly leaders, the other side of the warnings and prohibitions against teaching or learning from non-believers is that direct study with Zoroastrian priests could have constituted one mode by which Zoroastrian texts entered rabbinic society.¹⁰⁰

INTERRELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERS: THE BEI ABEIDAN AND ITS SASANIAN BACKGROUND

Related to this topic, it is worth discussing a number of anecdotes that depict Babylonian Jews in dialogue with other Sasanians about *halakhic* matters. A peculiar set of sources in the Yerushalmi depict Babylonian rabbis discussing *halakhic* questions with Persians or pagan Babylonians. It is not clear what should be made of these passages.¹⁰¹ A perhaps more promising pair of sources in the Bavli claims that King Shapur II and the non-Jewish Mesopotamian sage Ablat were aware of and respected certain laws of *kashrut*.¹⁰² Since Zoroastrian burial customs differ markedly from Jewish (and Christian) traditions, it is not surprising that one source describes a rabbi justifying the Jewish practice of burial to King Shapur II by citing relevant biblical prooftexts.¹⁰³ A conversation between Shmuel and King Shapur I that appears almost entirely in Middle Persian concerns the arrival of the messiah.¹⁰⁴ And a fascinating theological dialogue between an unnamed magus and Amemar touches upon Zoroastrian dualism.¹⁰⁵ While the historicity of most if not all of these sources should be approached with suspicion, the fact that stories of this nature did circulate remains significant and points to the plausibility of similar conversations actually taking place. Similarly, it is worth mentioning that the Bavli is able to imagine non-Jews being present in rabbinic study halls.¹⁰⁶ While it seems that beyond Rav’s warning against learning from a magus there are no other sources that describe Jews actually *learning* from Zoroastrians, further evidence for learned interactions between the two communities can still be gleaned from explicit references to Persian law in the Bavli.¹⁰⁷ Likewise, one Middle Persian text discusses non-Zoroastrian purity law, and Yaakov Elman has suggested that the referent is Judaism.¹⁰⁸

A final, potential portal of Jewish-Zoroastrian intellectual intersection is known in the Bavli as “*bei abeidan*” (house/place of *abeidan*).¹⁰⁹ The term has been interpreted by some Talmud commentators as denoting a location in which official religious disputations were convened. It is of course impossible to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that, historically speaking, a place known as the “*bei abeidan*” housed religious disputations between Zoroastrians and Jews. Nevertheless, following careful analysis of the sources, I suggest that a set of intertwined traditions preserved in Middle Persian literature, Arabic historical writings, and references to the *bei abeidan* in the Bavli reflect a particular way in which knowledge may have traveled between the different communities and learned traditions in the Sasanian Empire.

Scholarly interest in the *bei abeidan* has been encouraged by a medieval exegetical comment that is perhaps based on an old and reliable oral tradition, though it may just as well have stemmed from talmudic exegesis and other second-order factors.¹¹⁰ Before analyzing the talmudic texts in which the term *bei abeidan* appears, it is necessary to discuss its etymology, which incidentally has been contested for well over a century.¹¹¹ Notwithstanding his own hesitations, Shaul Shaked’s suggestion seems the most likely. He argues that Middle Aramaic “*abeidan*” developed from the Iranian compound **bay-dān*. Not unlike the Old Persian word *daiva-dāna*, used in Xerxes’ inscription at Persepolis to denote “temple of the *daivas*,” “*abeidan*” could mean a temple of the *bay*, or god.¹¹² In the appendix to the article in which he discusses the term, Shaked also refers to the forms “*bit abadana*” and “*bit abugdana*” that appear in some Mandaic incantation texts and may refer to the temple of the god Bagdana.¹¹³ Thus, the talmudic term *bei abeidan* refers to a generic, unspecified temple, or perhaps even the temple of the deity Bagdana. In light of Shaked’s etymology, advances in talmudic source-critical methodology, and the recent movement to read the Bavli alongside Middle Persian literature, the talmudic *bei abeidan* sources warrant reexamination.

The most detailed discussion of the *bei abeidan* appears in the Bavli’s treatment of m. Shabbat 17:1. The *mishna* rules that people should save sacred Jewish scriptures from a burning fire even on the Sabbath, although there normally is a rabbinic ban against rescuing possessions from a blaze on this day lest one come to put out the fire and thus violate a Sabbath prohibition. The Yerushalmi, Bavli, and Tosefta—a rabbinic collection of tannaitic (early rabbinic) material

that parallels the Mishna—all discuss which scrolls may be saved.¹¹⁴ One of the Bavli's passages on the topic concerns the Gospels and the "scrolls of heretics." In the course of discussion it cites a *baraita* (tannaitic textual unit)¹¹⁵ that has a parallel in the Tosefta.¹¹⁶

[א] גופה הגליונין וספרי מינין אין מצילין אותן מפני הדליקה
 [ב] ר' יוסי אומ' אף בחול קודר את האזכרות שבהן וגונזן והשאר שורפן
 [ג] אמ' ר' טרפון אקפח את בני שאם יבואו לידי שאני שורפן ואת האזכרות שבהן ואפי' רדף
 אחריו להורגו ונחש רץ אחריו להכישו נכנס לבית ע'ז ואינו נכנס לבתיהן של אלו שהללו
 מכירין וכופרין והללו אין מכירין וכופרין¹¹⁷ ועליה' הכתוב אומ' ואחר הדלת והמזוזה שמת
 זכרוניך
 [ד] א"ר ישמעאל קל וחומ' ומה כדי לעשות שלום בין איש לאשתו אמרה תורה שמי שנכתב
 בקדושה ימחה על המים הללו שמטילין קנאה בינינו¹¹⁸ ואיבה ותחרות בין ישראל לאביהם
 שבשמים על אחת כמה וכמה ועליהם אמ' דוד הלא משנאיך יי' אשנא ובתקוממך אתקוטט
 תכלית שנאה שנאתים לאויבים היו לי
 [ה] וכשם שאין מצילין אותן מפני הדליקה כך אין מצילין אותן מפני המפולת ולא מן המים
 ולא מכל דבר האיבדן¹¹⁹

[A] The previous subject: (As for) the Gospels and the scrolls of heretics—we do not save them from a fire.

[B] R. Yose says: Even on weekdays one excises the divine names from them and stores them away, and the rest one burns.

[C] R. Tarfon said: May I harm my son! For if they come into my possession I will burn them together with their divine names. And even if [a man] pursued someone to slay him, or a snake ran after him to bite him, he may enter an idolatrous temple but not the temples of these. For these recognize and deny, whereas those do not recognize and deny. And of them Scripture says, "Behind the doors and doorposts you have set up your memorial" (Isaiah 57:8).

[D] R. Yishmael said: [One can reason] *maius a minori*: If in order to make peace between man and his wife the Torah said, "Let my Name, written in sanctity, be blotted out in water," these, who stir up jealousy among us, and enmity and wrath between Israel and their Father in Heaven, how much more so?! And of them David said, "O Lord, you know I hate those who hate You, and loathe your adversaries. I feel a perfect hatred toward them. I count them my enemies" (Psalms 139:22).

[E] And just as we do not rescue them from a fire, so we do not rescue them from a collapse or from water or from anything that destroyed them.

This *baraita* is a composite of different sources. Only sections A and E actually relate to the *mishna*'s topic of rescuing scrolls on the Sabbath. On the other hand, B, C, and D discuss how the scrolls of heretics are to be destroyed.¹²⁰ R. Tarfon contrasts heretics and pagans

in order to clarify why one should also destroy the holy names that appear in the scrolls of heretics. He argues that pagans do not truly deny the God of Israel since they do not recognize Him to begin with. Thus, their temples are not forbidden as refuge in an emergency. On the other hand, because heretics—in a second-century Roman Palestinian context these are presumably Christians—maintain some kind of a relationship with the God of Israel yet still deny Him, R. Tarfon would not enter their temples in an emergency. It follows that the scrolls of heretics are particularly problematic¹²¹ and therefore one even destroys the divine names that they contain. Based on a different argument, R. Yishmael concurs.

Subsequently, the Talmud records a question asked regarding scrolls of the *bei abeidan*:

- [א] בעא מיניה יוסף בר חבוש מא¹²² מר' אבהו הני סיפרי דבי אבדן מצילין מפני הדליקה או אין מצילין אותן אמ' לו אין ולא ורפיא בידיה
[ב] רב לא אזיל לבי אבדן וכל שכן לבי נצרפי¹²³ שמואל לבי ניצרפי לא אזיל אבל לבי אבידי אזיל
[ג] אמרו ליה לרב¹²⁴ מאי טעמא לא אתי מר לבי אבדן אמ' להו דיקלא פלוניא איכא באורחא וקשי ליה ליעקרוה אמ' להו דוכתיה¹²⁵ קשיא ל¹²⁶
[ד] מר בריה דרב יוסף¹²⁷ אמ' אנא מיניהו אנא ולא מסתפינא מיניהו זימנא חדא אזיל להתם ובעו לסכונה¹²⁸

[A] Yosef b. Havushma asked R. Abbahu: As for the scrolls of the *bei abeidan*, do we save them from a fire or do we not save them? “Yes” and “no,” and it [i.e., the answer] was weak in his hand.

[B] Rav would not go to the *bei abeidan* and *a fortiori* not to the *bei nizrafei*; Shmuel would not go to the *bei nizrafei*, yet he would go to the *bei abeidan*.

[C] They said to Rav: What is the reason that the master did not come to the *bei abeidan*? He said to them: A certain palm tree stands in the way and it is difficult for me. [They said to him:] Let us uproot it. He said to them: Its space [following excavation] is difficult for me.

[D] Mar the son of Rav Yosef said: I am one of them and I am not afraid of them. On one occasion he went [to the *bei abeidan*] and they wanted to harm him.

The passage opens with a question posed to R. Abbahu, a Palestinian amora who flourished in the late third and early fourth centuries C.E.,¹²⁹ yet there is reason to suspect the reliability of this report. First, the etymology of the term “*bei abeidan*” has been established as deriving from an Iranian word that was assimilated into two Eastern forms of Middle Aramaic—Mandaic and Babylonian Jewish

Aramaic. Likewise, “*bei abeidan*” never appears in Palestinian rabbinic literature, yet it shows up three times in the Bavli. In addition, the phrase used to express R. Abbahu’s indecision, “‘yes’ and ‘no,’” is distinctly Babylonian.¹³⁰

Now that Shaked’s etymology more or less establishes the *bei abeidan* as a kind of temple, it is remarkable how well the question about the books fits within its textual context. R. Tarfon’s argument in the preceding *baraita* presumes a relationship between the temples of heretics and their scrolls. Since heretics “recognize” the God of Israel but deny Him, R. Tarfon would never enter their temples, and their scrolls are deemed entirely devoid of holiness. On the other hand, R. Tarfon states that he would seek emergency shelter in an idolatrous temple. Thus, in a sense the amoraic question picks up where the *baraita* left off: What about the scrolls of a pagan temple? Since its worshipers do not deny God after having “recognized” Him, are their scrolls to be saved?¹³¹ Admittedly, this question is somewhat strange, as it is not immediately clear why a pagan temple would have housed scrolls that are sacred to Jews. While the *baraita* assumes that heretics might have sacred scrolls, this is because they “recognize” the God of Israel in some capacity—presumably including a respect for the Hebrew Bible, especially as they are “Jewish” heretics and most likely Christians. On the other hand, those associated with the *bei abeidan* should have had no immediate reason to house the scrolls since they do not maintain any kind of relationship with the Jewish God.

The passage continues with a related discussion about whether it is permitted to go to the *bei abeidan* at all. It contrasts Rav and Shmuel’s behavior regarding both the *bei abeidan* and a place known as the *bei nizrafei*. Rav was stringent and would go to neither, while Shmuel would go to the *bei abeidan* but would avoid the *bei nizrafei*. In his article about the *bei abeidan*, Shaked suggests that *nizrafei* derives from a Parthian abstract noun, **nāsrāyift* (Nazarene)¹³²—an appellation for Christians.¹³³ Although this etymology seems less assured than the proposal for *abeidan*,¹³⁴ it may be possible to support a Christian interpretation of the term since “*bei nizrafei*” parallels the “God-knowing” heretics of the *baraita*. The tradition about Shmuel avoiding the *bei nizrafei* yet attending the *bei abeidan* corresponds to the hierarchy established by R. Tarfon in the *baraita* wherein heretical temples are deemed completely off-limits while pagan houses may be sought as shelter in an emergency. If this interpretation is plausible,

then the passages' first two amoraic sources are closely linked to the *baraita* that precedes them. Specifically, the status of the sacred scrolls of pagans, as opposed to heretics, is now considered. In addition, the permissibility of entering two temples that parallel the *baraita*'s heretical and idolatrous temples is debated.

It is important to note that Rav and Shmuel's disagreement does not include their respective statements on the topic, rather short descriptions of their practices. In fact, what we seem to have is a combination of traditions about their practices coupled with logical reasoning—in this case an *argumentum a fortiori*. This brings the historicity of the two accounts into question, as the tradition claims to know only that Rav would not go to the *bei abeidan*. It merely reasons that he would also not go to the *bei nizrafei*. We might even say that from a report about Shmuel's avoidance of the *bei nizrafei* it was deduced that Shmuel was still willing to enter a *bei abeidan*. The combination of reasoning and reportage suggests that Rav and Shmuel's students did not merely record and then transmit their master's practices vis-à-vis these two places. Instead, some authority had a hand in the shaping, if not the manufacturing, of the traditions. Indeed, the very next line (C) records a tradition about people questioning Rav's avoidance of the *bei abeidan*, and this may have engendered the source that reports on Rav not going to the *bei abeidan*. As for the report that Shmuel avoided the *bei nizrafei*, it is possible that it too is derivative and stems from a disagreement between Shmuel and Rav elsewhere in the Talmud.¹³⁵ There, Shmuel rules that priests who say "Let these dates be for the beer of the *bei nizrafei*" render the palm on which the dates grow a cultic tree (*asheva*), forbidden in rabbinic law. While their disagreement is not about which houses of worship one may or may not enter, it is Shmuel who expresses a negative opinion about the *bei nizrafei*. Perhaps this association provided the source for the report of Shmuel's avoidance of the *bei nizrafei*. Based on R. Ṭarfon's hierarchy, this may have been understood as implying that Shmuel would go to the *bei abeidan*.

The final portion of the Bavli's discussion describes how Rav was forced to excuse his avoidance of the *bei abeidan*. It also preserves Mar the son of Rav Yosef's boast that since he is "one of them" he is not afraid of them. This is apparently bravado, as we are told that when Mar son of Rav Yosef finally went to the *bei abeidan* "they" attempted to harm him. What precisely Mar could have meant by saying that "*I am one of them*" is unclear. It is noteworthy how this

statement both highlights and attempts to deconstruct the distinction between “us” and “them” which already undergirds the discussion about the *bei abeidan* and the preceding *baraita*. Again, the pagan temple and the *bei abeidan* seem to have been considered more foreign than the temple of the *minim* and the *bei nizrafei*, since the latter’s occupants do not even know the God of Israel. Mar the son of Rav Yosef is apparently saying that there is nothing to fear since unlike regular rabbis, he is somehow “Otherly.”¹³⁶

Many of the themes in this passage appear in the other talmudic occurrences of the term “*bei abeidan*” as well. In both cases a significant governmental authority questions why a rabbi did not come to the *bei abeidan*. One text appears in a longer section that contains riddles about old age inspired by Ecclesiastes 12:2:¹³⁷

א"ל קיסר לר' יהושע בן חנניה מ'ט לא אתית לבי אבידן א"ל טור תלג סוחרנוהי גלידא כלבוהי
לא נבחין טחנוהי לא טחינן בי רב אמרי אדלא אבידנא בחישנא¹³⁸

The emperor said to R. Yehoshu'a b. Hananiya: Why did you not come to the *bei abeidan*? He responded: A mountain [is covered with] snow, its surroundings [are] ice, its dogs do not bark, its grinders do not grind.¹³⁹ The school of Rav¹⁴⁰ says: That which I did not lose, I seek.

The conversation involves the early second-century Palestinian rabbi R. Yehoshu'a b. Hananiya. Nevertheless, it is again important to note the presence of the Iranian term *abeidan*. Interestingly, like the amora R. Abbahu, who was undecided about what to do with the books of the *bei abeidan*, R. Yehoshu'a b. Hananiya has a reputation in rabbinic literature for disputing with “Others.”¹⁴¹ In one particularly interesting anecdote about R. Yehoshu'a debating a heretic in the presence of the emperor, the Bavli uses the technical Zoroastrian Middle Persian term *māwāg* to describe the disputing technique.¹⁴² The anecdote about R. Yehoshu'a and the *bei abeidan* also seems to reflect Babylonian and not Palestinian realities.

In a different passage, also allegedly about a Palestinian rabbi, a *baraita* describes how R. El'azar b. Perata and R. Hanina b. Teradyon were seized on suspicion of heresy (*minut*)—in this case probably Christianity. After a brief tangential discussion, the story continues in Aramaic. Scholars have demonstrated that this part of the narrative is a Babylonian creation, given the passage’s linguistic character and the way it misunderstands the earlier Palestinian material.¹⁴³ The governmental authorities probe R. El'azar with a series of questions, one of which is, “Why did you not go the *bei abeidan*?”¹⁴⁴

אמרו ליה . . . ומ"ט לא אתית לבי אבידן אמר להו זקן הייתי ומתיירא אני שמא תרמסוני
ברגליכם אמרו ליה¹⁴⁵ ועד האידנא כמה סבי אירמוס אתרחיש ליה ניסא ההוא יומא אירמוס
חד סבא.

They said to him . . . : And why did you not go to the *bei abeidan*?
He replied: I am old and fear lest you trample me with your feet.
They said to him: How many old people have been trampled until
now? A miracle happened for him. On that very day an old man was
trampled.

All the traditions consist of "Others" asking rabbis why they did not go to the *bei abeidan*¹⁴⁶ and the rabbis excusing themselves. The sources are related to a talmudic motif wherein rabbis excuse their absences from the synagogue or study sessions by pointing to physical difficulties.¹⁴⁷ However, at least the present passage suggests that there was a particular reason for avoiding the *bei abeidan*—a fear of being trampled. Recall that Mar the son of Rav Yosef alludes to some kind of peril when he asserts that he is not afraid of them. Indeed, in the end he actually finds himself in danger. In short, it would seem that a tradition circulated in Babylonia about rabbis excusing their absence at the *bei abeidan* by concocting excuses about physical difficulties.

There is a final issue to discuss regarding the saying attributed to Rav's school. Based on the context, commentators have interpreted the phrase "that which I did not lose, I seek" (*a-de-la avedna bahishna*—אדלא אבידנא בחישנא) as another riddle about old age,¹⁴⁸ though not entirely convincingly. I suggest that the statement was placed here since it puns on "*bei abeidan*." The saying can be read more playfully as "since I did not (go to) the *bei abeidan* (*a-de-la avedna*—אדלא אבידנא), he seeks me (*bahishna*—בחיִשנא)."¹⁴⁹ This corresponds to all three traditions—including one about Rav who is depicted as avoiding the *bei abeidan*—where rabbis who avoided the *bei abeidan* were sought and questioned. At the same time, the pun also seems to cryptically censure the institution as a place where people would seek things that they had never lost.¹⁵⁰

This attention to the evolution of the *bei abeidan* sources illustrates once again that scholars do not have unmediated access to the historical activities of the late antique rabbis. Nevertheless, my point in the source-critical analysis of these traditions is not to dismiss the existence of this place in Sasanian Mesopotamia or the tensions that it may have engendered in Babylonian rabbinic society. Based on the Iranian etymology and the collection of rabbinic texts,

it does seem that we are dealing with a Babylonian reality of some sort, which was apparently “grafted” onto two anecdotes told about Palestinian sages. What is significant is the very growth of these traditions and their recurrent patterns, which may testify to a fascinating cultural institution that held the attention of the Babylonian Jewish community.

To sum up what I am suggesting: (1) The *bei abeidan* was a kind of temple in late antique Mesopotamia with an Iranian name. (2) Stories and puns circulated about rabbis attempting to avoid official pressure to go there. (3) The *bei abeidan* may have been associated with Iranian authorities who seemed to have sought rabbinic attendance there. (4) The *bei abeidan* and an apparently Christian house of worship known as the *bei nizrafei* were compared with one another, and the *bei abeidan* fared better in some rabbinic eyes, apparently since it was not deemed heterodox. (5) It may be possible that attendance at the *bei abeidan* was justified on the authority of R. Tarfon, who would seek refuge from violence in a pagan temple. (6) There are hints of violence in the *bei abeidan*, such as Mar son of Rav Yosef’s bravado and the report that he was hurt there. (7) Finally, Yosef b. Ḥavushma’s question assumes the presence of Jewish scrolls in the *bei abeidan*.

The suggestion of some medieval commentators that the *bei abeidan* was a place of interreligious disputations is a fair attempt to pull all the pieces together, but is admittedly not an ironclad conclusion. Nevertheless, the way in which these traditions combine an Iranian temple, Jewish scrolls, rabbis, and characters linguistically marked as “Others” is in some respects inherently interreligious. This would accord well with the image of Sasanian Iran as a place where religions of various stripes flourished and were sometimes in conflict with one another.¹⁵¹ Best known are the intrareligious Christological debates that, in part due to their political significance, were noticed and sometimes presided over by Iranian authorities. The presence of authorities also comes through in the above-mentioned disputation between R. Yehoshu’a b. Ḥananiya and the heretic, where a ruler umpires a debate about whether the Jews are still God’s chosen people.

A number of years ago, Shlomo Pines suggested a link between (a) Jewish texts about losing and reclaiming Torah and (b) a trope that appears in Middle Persian literature, wherein various Iranian rulers endeavor to recover lost portions of the Tradition by collecting and then collating foreign wisdom with a primary “copy” of the Avesta.¹⁵² A passage from the fourth book of the *Dēnkard* is one such account.

As I described in Chapter 1, the *Dēnkard* is a voluminous Zoroastrian work that was redacted in the ninth and tenth centuries. Much of the material is preserved in, broadly speaking, a Sasanian form, and it is sometimes possible to push the *terminus ad quem* earlier by pointing to parallels in Arabic works. Significantly, this has been argued¹⁵³ regarding the following citation, which seems to have derived from the court of King Khusrau I (r. 531–579).¹⁵⁴

[A] *dārāy ī dārāyān hamāg abestāg zand čiyōn zarduxšt az ohrmazd padirift nibištāg 2 pačēn ēk pad ganj ī *šasabīgān¹⁵⁵ ud ēk pad diz ī nibišt dāštan framūd.*

[B] *walaxš ī aškānān abestāg zand čiyōn abēzagihā andar āmad estād hammōg-iz ī aziš harw čē az wizend ud āšuftkārīh ī alakasandar ud ēwār ud rōb ī hrōmāyān andar ērān-šahr pargandagihā abar nibištāg tā čē uzwān abespārišnīg pad dastwar mānd estād andar šahr čiyōn frāz mad estād nigāh-dāštan ō šahrīhā [ī] ayādgār kardan framūd.*

[C] *ōy bay ardaxšahr šāhān šāh ī pābagān pad rāst-dastwarīh tansar ān-iz hammōg ī pargandag ud hamāg ō dar xwāst tansar abar mad ān ī ēk frāz padiriftan ud abārīg az dastwar hišt ud ēn-iz framān dād kū frāz ō amā harw nigēzišn anīy bawēd az dēn mazdēsēn čē nūn-iz āgābih ud dānišn aziš frōd nēst*

[D] *šābuhr ī šāhān šāh ī ardaxšahrān nibēgihā-iz ī az dēn bē abar biziškīh ud star-gōwišnīh ud čandišn ud zamān gyāg gōhr jahišn bawišn ud wināhišn jadag ērih ud gawāgih ud abārīg kīrōgih ud abzār andar hindūgān hrōm abārīg-iz zamīgihā pargandag būd abāz ō ham āwurd ud abāg abestāg abāz handāxt harw ān ī drust pačēn ō ganj ī *šasabīgān dād framūd ud estenīdan ī hamāg a-ristān abar dēn mazdēsēn ō uskār kard.*

[E] *šābuhr ī šāhān šāh ī ohrmazdān hamāg kišwarīgān pad pahikārišn ābān āhōg kardan hamāg gōwišn ō uskār ud wizōyišn āwurd pas az bōxtan ī ādurbād pad gōwišn ī passāxt abāg hamāg awēšān *jud-ristagān ud nask-*ōšmurdārān-iz ī jud-ristagān ēn-iz guft kū nūn ka-mān pad *gētīy ī bē did kas-iz agdēnīh bē nē hišt tā-š abar tuxšāg tuxšēm hamgōnag kard.*

[F] *im bay xusrōy šāhān šāh kawādān čiyōn-iš ahlomōgih ud sāstārīh spurr-hamēstārīhā wānīdan pad paydāgih az dēn andar harw ahlomōgih 4 pēšag āgāhīh ud uskārīšn ī gōkānīg wasihā bē abzūdan.*

[A] Dārāy, son of Dārāy, having committed to writing the entire Avesta and Zand as it had been received by Zarathustra from Ohrmazd, commanded two copies to be made, one to be kept in the gubernatorial treasury and one in the Fortress of Books.

[B] Walaxš, son of Aškān, commanded a memorandum to be made and sent to the various provinces with orders for the safekeeping of

the Avesta and Zand as it had come down in unadulterated form, as well as the teachings, to the extent each had escaped the harm and chaos caused by Alexander and the pillaging and robbing by the Romans and were now scattered throughout Ērānšahr, remained with *dasturs* in writing, but also in the oral transmission.

[C] His majesty, Ardashir, king of kings, son of Pābag, guided on the straight path by Tansar, asked that all those scattered teachings be brought to the court. Tansar took charge: some he received and some he left out of as non-authoritative. And he issued the following order: As far as we are concerned, any exposition that differs from that in the Mazdayasnian [worshippers of Ahura Mazdā, i.e., Zoroastrians] Tradition, but which provides awareness and knowledge, is not inferior to it.

[D] Shapur (I), king of kings, son of Ardashir, brought back together the writings outside the Tradition on medicine, what the stars say and their movements, time and place, nature and accident, becoming and decay, and the many other crafts and skills that were scattered in India, Rome, and other lands. He compared them with the Avesta and ordered any copy not contaminated by different ways to be given to the gubernatorial treasury. And he put up for discussion whether to place with the Mazdayasnian tradition all those that were not contaminated.

[E] Shapur (II), king of kings, son of Ohrmazd, brought everything that was said (in the Tradition) up for discussion and examination in the dispute with all of the countrymen regarding what constitutes “contamination of the waters.” After Ādurbād (son of Māhrspand) escaped unharmed by the word of the ordeal, he said this too (in dispute) both with those (regular) heretics¹⁵⁶ and “*nask*-studying heretics.” And he also said: “Now, we have seen in this world, unless a person leaves his evil Tradition, we shall work on him diligently (to see that he does).” And so he did.

[F] The present majesty, Khusrau, king of kings, son of Kawād, it is told, when he had overcome heresies and false doctrines by fully opposing them, he increased greatly, according to what was manifest in the Tradition, in every heresy the awareness and detailed examination of the four branches (priests, soldiers, farmers, artisans).

Section A refers to ancient copies of the Avesta deposited in a governmental treasury (*ganj ī šasabīgān*) and a “fortress of books” (*diz ī nibišt*). The notion of an ancient written Avesta appears in a number of places in Middle Persian literature.¹⁵⁷ However, in light of what scholars now know about the oral transmission of the Avesta,¹⁵⁸ this idea is anachronistic. That said, it is quite possible that at the point in which this account took shape there indeed were official copies deposited somewhere in the Empire, and the tradition merely retrojects current realities back to ancient times.

Section B discusses another important motif; namely, Alexander of Macedon's destruction of the sacred tradition.¹⁵⁹ This sets the stage for the remaining paragraphs of the passage, which detail the supposed efforts to recover the lost tradition. Thus, in section C we learn of how the first Sasanian king, Ardashir I, attempted to collect the great tradition that had been scattered by Alexander the Great. The endeavor apparently consisted of gathering different forms of wisdom and determining whether they were worthy and thus originally part of the Avesta. Section D describes how the project was advanced by King Ardashir I's son, Shapur I, who "brought back" various forms of wisdom that had made their way to India, Rome, and other lands, compared them with the Avesta, preserved all "corrected" copies in the treasury, and then put up for discussion whether to place everything that was "non-contaminated" with the Mazdayasnian tradition.¹⁶⁰ The effort continued in the fourth century with King Shapur II (section E), when it encountered some difficulties. The text describes debates with heretics whom the high priest Ādurbād son of Māhrspand defeated through an ordeal, but note how King Shapur II continued to pursue the matter more or less unfazed.¹⁶¹ Only centuries later, probably in the wake of the Mazdakite revolt, did King Khusrau I put an end to the deliberations. At that point, we see a policy reversal away from the methodical "examinations" of earlier times.¹⁶²

In light of my analysis of the *bei abeidan* traditions, the *Dēnkard* account is fascinating in the way it combines official Sasanian disputations, a distinct kind of interreligious exploration, Zoroastrian priests, "countrymen," various heretics, and the storage of scriptural books. In particular, the description of King Shapur I discussing whether to place writings kept outside the "canon" together with the Avesta conjures up images of an interreligious library such as may be assumed in Yosef b. Ḥavushma's question. While it is important to stress that the *Dēnkard* passage cannot be treated as a transparent historical account, like the *bei abeidan* sources it too may be seen as reflecting traditions that circulated among a Sasanian community—in this case at King Khusrau I's court and more generally in Zoroastrian culture.

As noted above, parallel versions of the *Dēnkard* source turn up in Arabic and New Persian. Fascinatingly, there also seems to be an echo of the passage in a talmudic anecdote. Again, the *Dēnkard* text describes how King Shapur II conducted a disputation (*pahikārišn*)

with all of his subjects and with the heretics in the empire. Apparently, the disputation centered on what constituted heresy, known here as “contamination of the waters.”¹⁶³ The passage might be connected with a talmudic anecdote about Rava, King Shapur II, and the queen mother, Ifra Hormiz, found at b. Ta’anit 24b. The passage describes how Shapur wanted to chastise Rava for administering corporal punishment. As in a parallel talmudic story, Ifra Hormiz defends Rava and praises the Jews, while Shapur remains skeptical of Jewish distinctiveness.¹⁶⁴ According to the better witnesses of the text, Ifra Hormiz tells Shapur: “Do not have any dispute (*paykār*) with these Jews.”¹⁶⁵ It is significant that the only place in the Bavli in which the Iranian loanword *paykār* appears is in reference to a disagreement between King Shapur II and his Jewish subjects—just as the *Dēnkard* passage describes King Shapur II’s efforts to engage all the countrymen (*hamāg kišwarīgān*) in dispute (*pahikārišn*). To be clear, the talmudic story depicts a clash between the rabbinic and imperial authorities regarding capital punishment and not the religious disputations of the *Dēnkard* passage. Nevertheless, it is still possible that the apparent echo of the Zoroastrian source reflects a Jewish tradition that King Shapur II attempted to draw the rabbis into his deliberations as part of the broader effort to engage all the “countrymen”—perhaps about matters of wisdom. If this is indeed the case, the source may also relate to the minor motif of authorities requesting rabbinic attendance at the *bei abeidan*.

Beyond this small but fascinating parallel, it is the broader cultural institution described in the *Dēnkard* passage that best illuminates the *bei abeidan* traditions. It would seem that the notion of Sasanian rulers gathering and debating the writings of other peoples in order to consider their compatibility and identity with the ancient Iranian Tradition accords well with the *bei abeidan* sources. At the very least it helps explain the presence of Jewish scrolls in a building associated with Iranians, the reason for official involvement in the activities taking place there, the pressure on rabbis to attend, and, in light of Ādurbād’s ordeal, perhaps even the perceived threat of danger.

There are still some elements that do not completely cohere. For one, the *Dēnkard* refers to a governmental treasury while the Bavli discusses a kind of temple.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, although there is evidence for the existence of a partial Middle Persian translation of the Bible,¹⁶⁷ the *Dēnkard* only explicitly considers the incorporation of Greek and Indian works and does not once refer to the Pentateuch or any Jewish

text in this regard. Indeed, if we are to trust the anti-Jewish passages in *Dēnkard* III and the *Škand-gumanīg wizār* (The Doubt-Dispelling Explanation), the Bible was seen by some Zoroastrians as deriving from a demonic source and therefore incompatible with the *dēn*.¹⁶⁸

As mentioned above, two of the talmudic sources refer to Palestinian sages, though these seem to have been adapted for the Bavli's purposes. More problematic is the involvement of the third-century amoraim Rav and Shmuel in the debates regarding attendance at the *bei abeidan*, while the *Dēnkard* passage stems from the sixth century. Nevertheless, I suggest that these talmudic passages were constructed over time and probably reflect a broader motif of rabbis avoiding the *bei abeidan* current toward the end of the Sasanian era, that is, when the Talmud was redacted. It should be recalled that the *Dēnkard* passage does indeed claim that Kings Ardashir I and Shapur I played an important if preliminary role in the alleged collection of the scattered traditions of the Avesta.¹⁶⁹ But regardless of the differences, there seem to be enough similarities to offer a final, admittedly speculative claim: in a place that Jews referred to as a *bei abeidan*, Sasanian authorities gathered scrolls and people of various extractions in order to explore, discuss, and dispute their learned traditions in an effort to "recover" the sacred Zoroastrian tradition.

Whether or not this conjecture matches historical realities, it does seem that the Middle Persian, Arabic, and talmudic sources reflect a particular Sasanian approach to interreligious intellectual relations. The *Dēnkard*'s repeated emphasis on the value of foreign wisdom might appear to us as strangely "modern." On the other hand, the notion that all wisdom ultimately derives from one's own sacred revealed tradition is familiar as an ancient and widespread intellectual chauvinism. What is novel here is the way in which the Sasanian myth brilliantly welds these two postures together.¹⁷⁰ In short, the cultural mood reflected in the *Dēnkard* passage, its Arabic parallels, and in the talmudic *bei abeidan* sources would seem to have had major repercussions in Sasanian Iran, and on the way Jewish and Zoroastrian traditions intersected.

Constructing “Them”

Rabbinic and Zoroastrian Discourses of the “Other”

One of the Bavli’s more amusing stories about Jews and Zoroastrians describes a dispute between a late fourth- and early fifth-century Babylonian amora named Amemar and an unnamed Zoroastrian priest:

אמר ליה ההוא אמגושא לאמימר מפלגך לעילאי דהורמיז מפלגך לתתאי דאהרמין¹ אמ' ליה
היכי שביק ליה אהרמין² להורמיז לעבורי מיא בארעיה

A certain magus said to Amemar: From your waist upwards is of Hormiz. From your waist downwards is of Ahreman. [Amemar] said to [the magus]: [If so,] how does Ahreman let Hormiz pass urine through his land?³

The magus claims that the human body can be divided into two domains. The upper half is associated with the omnipotent and benevolent Zoroastrian god Ohrmazd, while the lower half constitutes the sphere of his evil and “backward-thinking” foil, Ahreman. Amemar responds by noting that the physiology of urination⁴ contradicts the magus’s theology, since the process requires both halves of the body to work in unison. And thus, with a clever bit of bathroom humor, the Jewish monotheist bests his Zoroastrian dualist interlocutor in debate.

Dualism, in the philosophical sense of “a theory or system of thought which recognizes two independent principles,”⁵ is strongly present in some of the earliest and most important texts to have survived from ancient and late antique Iran. Indeed, the very “idea” of Iran is tied up with various forms of dualism, particularly those that occupy the twin peaks of politics and religion.⁶ The concept

undergirds King Darius I’s sixth-century B.C.E. imperial inscriptions, and it is latent in important theological formulations, as can be found in the Middle Persian cosmological work the *Bundahišn*. Researchers may still debate the extent of dualism in the *Gāōās*—the earliest poems of the Avesta—or quibble about the role it played in Zoroastrian self-conception prior to the Sasanian era, yet there is no denying that Iran has been closely associated with dualism both in the modern scholarly conception and in the imagination of people since antiquity.⁷

Dualism often manifests itself socially as a stark division between “us” and “them,” where “them” constitutes an undifferentiated mass of “Others.” The Middle Persian terms *ēr* (“Iranian”) and *an-ēr* (“non-Iranian”) played an important function in Zoroastrian identity formation, one that among other things collapsed the great variety of ethnic and religious communities living in Sasanian Iran into a single non-Zoroastrian and non-Iranian “Other.” This kind of social dualism is also found in other cultures around the world from antiquity until today. Not insignificantly, Ishay Rosen-Zvi and Adi Ophir have recently traced the origin of the binary division between the Jew and an undifferentiated gentile (*goy*) “Other” back to tannaitic—that is, early rabbinic—literature. Crucially, Rosen-Zvi and Ophir have also demonstrated how this form of social dualism constituted an essential ingredient in rabbinic self-conception.⁸ Since the Bavli’s basic perception of non-Jews grows out of the Jew/*goy* distinction found in tannaitic literature, we would seem to have a fascinating situation wherein late antique Zoroastrians and Jews encountered one another from strikingly similar, socially dualistic perspectives.

In the previous chapter I briefly described the geographical and social topography of Sasanian Mesopotamia, and examined the various cultural spheres and institutions in which Jews and Persians may have intersected in late antiquity. My task in this chapter is to overlay a further dimension onto the map by looking at the dynamics of *how* Jews encountered Zoroastrians in late antiquity, and, more specifically, at the kinds of discourses both communities developed in describing each other. Here I suggest that despite the presence of a strong, non-differentiating form of social dualism in both traditions, Sasanian Jews and Zoroastrians nevertheless constructed discourses that did indeed make some distinctions among their respective “Others.” In particular, the Bavli contains a set of sources that magnify and forcefully critique Persian and Zoroastrian identities in specific

ways, while Middle Persian texts conceive of the Jews as constituting an especially troubling religious entity. For Sasanian Jews and Zoroastrians, the opposing community constituted a “significant Other.” While the goal of constructing these “discourses of the Other” would undoubtedly have been to drive the two communities apart, it is still possible to read them as evidence of an ongoing Zoroastrian-Jewish intersection that elicited the vigorous responses in the first place. As I suggest in the next chapter, this dynamic would explain how despite the stark realities of the Persian-Jewish oppositional scheme, one still finds concurrent forms of rabbinic discourse that sought to nuance, familiarize, and even bring nearer to rabbinic culture the Persian and Zoroastrian “Other.”

REVERSING DISCOURSE: RESPONSES TO PERSIANS IN THE BAVLI

The Bavli is a complex literary artifact with a multi-vocalic textual architecture that frequently confounds attempts to read for consistency—notwithstanding the valiant efforts of scholastic geniuses from the medieval French Tosafists to modern Lithuanian Talmud dialecticians. To a certain extent, rabbinic culture itself can be said to emerge from an environment characterized by and tolerant of a certain amount of legal and theological plurality and contradiction. The earliest talmudic commentators, the Geonim of early medieval Iraq, were well aware of talmudic texts that expressed diametrically opposed views. Even the Bavli itself is conscious of many of the contradictions. One finds in the Talmud’s later layers editorial voices that note some inconsistencies—often without intervening—and other texts that were shaped by redactional strategies that wove contradictory sources together in order to form larger, more harmonious units. While such phenomena are commonplace in the Bavli, their persistence in particular areas is worthy of note and may indicate cultural tensions, shifts, and related phenomena.

This is arguably the case in regards to a group of talmudic passages that can be seen as “reacting” to Persians. Here one finds a persistent attempt to shift and even subvert more positive assessments of Persian rulers and customs that were originally attributed to Palestinian rabbis. Notice what happens, for example, in the following passage in which the Palestinian sage Rabban Gamliel lists three reasons that he likes the Persians:

תניא אמ' רבן גמליאל בשלשה דברים אוהב אני את הפרסיים צנועין באכילתן צנועין בבית
הכסא צנועין בתשמיש המטה כתיב אני צויתי למקודשי תני רב יוסף אלו פרסיים שמקודשין
לגיהנם

It has been taught [in a *baraita*]: Rabban Gamliel said: For three things do I like the Persians. They are modest in their eating, in the bathroom, and in sex. It is written, “I have summoned my consecrated ones (*mequdashai*)” (Isaiah 13:3). Rav Yosef taught: these are the Persians who are “designated” (*mequdashin*) for purgatory.⁹

Rabban Gamliel expresses his respect for the modesty that Persians display even, or especially, when the body is engaged in some of its messiest activities. Following this somewhat surprising rabbinic admiration of Persians, a verse from Isaiah is cited that refers to the future destroyers of the Babylonians—ultimately the Persians—as God’s “designated ones.” Rather abruptly, Rav Yosef riffs on the verse from Isaiah and asserts that what the Persians are actually designated for is hell.

It is not immediately apparent where the line should be drawn between Rabban Gamliel’s praise of the Persians and Rav Yosef’s derision of them, but there is no doubt that the short passage evinces a dramatic shift. It goes without saying that the juxtaposition of these sources makes it impossible to distill a simple “pro” or “anti” talmudic view of the Persians, or for that matter of their personal hygiene. Even intuiting the redactors’ own position is quite tricky. Conventionally, the passage has been split between Rabban Gamliel’s positive statement on the one hand, and the verse from Isaiah along with Rav Yosef’s negative exegesis, on the other. As a matter of fact, it is advisable to read both rabbinic teachings as straddling the verse from Isaiah.¹⁰ The biblical word for “designated” (*mequdashai*), which forms the basis of Rav Yosef’s bitter remark, is from the Hebrew root QDŠ. Both the plain sense of the verse and Rav Yosef’s exegetical scheme clearly assume a meaning of designation—either divinely selected to destroy the Babylonians or designated for purgatory. However, for the typical rabbinic reader QDŠ would have primarily connoted sanctification and holiness.¹¹ It seems possible that Rabban Gamliel’s praise of Persian modesty was placed prior to the verse from Isaiah in order to explicate that the Persians might be considered sacred (*qadosh*) on account of the list of modest behaviors. However, this positive view of the Persians was immediately subverted when Rav Yosef’s negative reading of the appellation “*mequdashai*” (“my designated

ones”) was added. Regardless of redactional intent, the result of this textual development is striking: by sharing a single verse, we have a kind of atomized contradiction in which two opposing views dwell together in close quarters. This only serves to strengthen the question of how these conflicting views coexisted in one short passage and in the broader culture.

One approach to an incongruity of this sort involves first gingerly extracting the separate components, as I just attempted, and then considering where in rabbinic culture they might be located. Rabban Gamliel lived in Roman Palestine in the first century C.E., and his statement, introduced with the term “*tanya*”—a semi-reliable marker of tannaitic texts—is in classical Rabbinic Hebrew. Thus, the passage presents itself as reflecting the view of a prominent early Palestinian tanna, even if there is no direct parallel preserved anywhere in Palestinian rabbinic literature. At the very least, one might say that the observations attributed to Rabban Gamliel were borne from a distance, and more specifically from the space that separates Roman Palestine from Sasanian Mesopotamia. Indeed, a statement attributed to Rabbi Akiva cited immediately before Rabban Gamliel’s lists three reasons to respect the Medes—a group of people who were marked in rabbinic literature as “Easterners.”¹² As such, it is possible to read the two lists as expressing a form of Palestinian rabbinic Orientalism. From this perspective the *baraita* is worth comparing to parallel depictions of “Orientals” in Greek and Latin literature.¹³ A number of classical texts describe the magi as careful not to urinate while standing, while in rivers, or in the presence of one another.¹⁴ It is possible that the reference to Persian sexual modesty may likewise be related to their alleged disdain of nudity.¹⁵ Rav Yosef, on the other hand, lived in the Sasanian Empire and his rejection of Rabban Gamliel’s positive view of the Persians reflected the knowledge and frustrations of a more intimate observer.

This is not the only instance where Rav Yosef reverses a view that initially praised the Persians. In a different context he refers to Persians *improperly* engaging in intercourse while clothed. To be specific, according to some rabbis the word *she’era* (interpreted as “her flesh”), used in a verse about a man’s obligations to his first wife (Exodus 21:10), indicates that husbands are required to fulfill their wives’ sexual needs. Rav Yosef suggests that, additionally, the term implies bodily contact, and he thus rules that a man must not treat his wife “*in the manner of the Persians who have sex in their clothes.*”¹⁶ Given

Rav Yosef's negative approach in the previous source, it may even be possible that this sharply formulated ruling obliquely responds to Rabban Gamliel's respect of Persian sexual modesty.

A further example of Rav Yosef's anti-Persian reinterpretations can be found in his exegesis of the second beast in Daniel's vision of the four beasts:

וארו חיויא אחרי תניינא דמא לדוב תני רב יוסף אילו פרסיים שאוכלין ושותין כדוב
ומסורבלין כדוב ומגדלין שער כדוב ואין להם מנוחה כדוב ר' אמי כי הוה חזי פרסאה אמ'
היינו דובא דנאדא

"Then I saw a second, different beast, which was like a bear" (Daniel 7:5). Rav Yosef taught: This [refers to the] Persians, who eat and drink like a bear, are fleshy like a bear, grow hair like a bear, and have no rest like a bear. When Rav Ami would see a Persian he would say: There is a wandering bear!¹⁷

Like other parts of the book of Daniel, the vision of the four kingdoms inspired a good deal of traditional exegesis and messianic speculation during late antiquity. Rav Yosef's interpretation is based on a fairly established exegetical tradition that links the vision's second beast with Persia, or at least with the Medes, who were seen as the Persians' partners in the so-called Medo-Persian Empire.¹⁸ Interestingly, the church father Jerome transmits the following "Hebrew" interpretation of the verse:

And what is said [about the bear], that "it stood up on the one side," the Hebrews interpret thus, that they [the Persians] perpetrated nothing cruel against Israel. Hence they are also described in the prophet Zechariah as "white horses" (Zechariah 1:8; 6:3, 6).¹⁹

The Jewish tradition that Jerome cites interprets the second beast as representing the Persian Empire. Again, this was a common reading that, incidentally, was the view expressed by Rav Yosef's Sasanian Christian near-contemporary, Aphrahat.²⁰ However, the tradition that Jerome quotes differs in the way that it emphasizes the bear's relative harmlessness, especially when compared with the frighteningly cruel final beast in the vision.²¹ According to Jerome, the Jewish association of the bear with the Persian Empire is based on a generally positive assessment of Persian rule. Although Rav Yosef is obviously not directly responding to the "Hebrew exegesis" cited by Jerome, the fact that positive views of Persians are well attested throughout Palestinian rabbinic literature²² suggests that Rav Yosef may be subverting an accepted pro-Persian view by explaining that the second beast

refers to the Persians on account of their crassness and carnality.²³ In light of a passage about calendrical conventions where Rav Yosef explicitly rejects the Palestinian amora R. Abbahu's claim that "Cyrus (Hebrew: *koresh*) was worthy (*kasher*),"²⁴ a trend emerges. Evidently, Rav Yosef maintained a decidedly negative view of the Persians to the point that he could scarcely tolerate the more positive assessments preserved in Jewish tradition. When he encountered praise of Persians, Rav Yosef glossed the text or somehow managed to alter its meaning toward negativity.

This phenomenon is not limited to passages attributed to Rav Yosef. Witness the following discussion of God's election of Cyrus the Great:

דרש רב נחמן בר רב חסדא מאי דכת' כה אמר יי' למשיחו לכורש אטו כורש משיחו הוא אלא
אמ' לו הקב"ה למשיח קובל אני לך על כורש אני אמרתי הוא יבנה ביתי והוא גליתי ישלח
והוא אמ' מי בכם מכל עמו יהי אלהיו עמו ויעל

Rav Nahman b. Rav Hisda expounded: What is it that is written, "Thus said the Lord to Cyrus, His anointed one"? What, is Cyrus His messiah? Rather, the Holy One Blessed is He said to his [real] messiah: I lodge a complaint with you concerning Cyrus. I said: "He shall build my house and my exiles he will send forth" (cf. Isaiah 45:13). Yet he said: "Who is there among you of all his people, his God be with him, and let him go up [to Jerusalem]" (Ezra 1:3).²⁵

In the verse, Cyrus is addressed as God's "*mashiah*" (conjugated *meshiḥo*). According to most scholars, the word *meshiḥo* simply refers here to God's designation of Cyrus as playing an important role in Israelite history.²⁶ However, some rabbis evidently interpreted the term to mean that God actually crowned Cyrus as his long-awaited messiah.²⁷ This reading forced the fourth-generation Babylonian amora Rav Nahman b. Rav Hisda to suggest a rather creative punctuation of the verse, wherein God complains *to* the (future) messiah *concerning* Cyrus's poor performance.²⁸ In this way, God's initially positive view of Cyrus in the Bible is deftly turned into a serious critique of his performance.²⁹

BLASPHEMIES AND SORCERIES: THE STATUS OF ZOROASTRIANISM IN THE BAVLI

The sources collected above concern talmudic reactions to positive assessments of Persian customs and rulers. My primary interest, however, is regarding encounters between Jews and Zoroastrians—that

is, between two Sasanian religious communities. How did Jews respond to Zoroastrians and Zoroastrianism and vice-versa? To be sure, this question must be handled with special care. For one, the distinction between a Persian or Iranian affiliation and a Zoroastrian religious identity is not without its complications, particularly given the slippage of some of the terminology involved.³⁰ Further, the question of ethnic versus religious identity in regards to Judaism is a particularly fraught one.³¹ What is more, the methodological danger of ascribing to late antique writings a conception of “religion” that follows modern usage has been rightly emphasized by historians of religion.³² For this reason it is surprising to note a talmudic source that at first blush actually seems to preserve a debate about the very status of Zoroastrianism. The passage follows the rabbinic warning against Jews learning from magi that was examined in the last chapter. For the sake of convenience, I cite the translated text again in full:

[A] Rav Zutra b. Ṭuviya said that Rav said . . . he who learns something (*davar*) from a magus is worthy of death . . .

[B] [As to] Magianism, Rav and Shmuel [disagree]: One said [that it is] sorceries; the other said [that it is] blasphemies.

[C] It may be concluded that it is Rav who maintains that it is blasphemies. For Rav Zutra b. Ṭuviya said that Rav said: He who learns something from a magus is worthy of death. Now should you think that it is sorceries, surely it is written, “you shall not learn to do [the abhorrent practices of those nations]” (Deuteronomy 18:9), [implying], but you may learn in order to understand and instruct! This proves it.³³

Section B consists of a concise disagreement between two prominent first-generation Babylonian amoraim on the status of something called “*amgushta*.” The word ultimately derives from Old Persian “*maguš*” and its meaning is obscured, among other things, by the complicated history of the term and its reception in other languages and cultures.³⁴ Still, the use of the abstract form “*amgushta*”³⁵ would seem at first to imply that Rav and Shmuel are having a fundamental debate about “Magianism” or Zoroastrianism—in other words, that their discussion foreshadows later medieval Jewish disputes about the *halakhic* status of other religions, such as Christianity and Islam. In fact, as I noted in the previous chapter, it seems that their disagreement actually concerns Zoroastrian recitation of sacred texts. We know that the recitation of the Avesta was deemed by both Zoroastrians and

non-Zoroastrians alike to constitute a centrally important Zoroastrian ritual act. The *Dēnkard*, for example, states that the Zoroastrian tradition, here called *weh dēn* (“good *dēn*”—religious tradition),³⁶ is made manifest through the recitation/enumeration and practice of the Sacred Word.³⁷ In their debate as well, Rav and Shmuel apparently deem Zoroastrian recitation as synonymous with something referred to as “Magianism.” As such, while the debate about *amgushta* should not be seen as dealing with the religious *entity* known today as “Zoroastrianism,” the fact that the discussion focuses on an equivalent abstract term means that it still constitutes a rare and important rabbinic assessment of Zoroastrian tradition.

Rav and Shmuel’s debate is submerged within a longer, three-part sequence. This makes it difficult to discern the initial import of their disagreement. Arguably, the dispute was first placed here in order to shed light on Rav’s warning against learning from a magus (section A). In time, however, the direction of discourse shifted and Rav’s statement was used to help clarify a secondary question regarding which amora authored which opinion in the “Magianism” debate (section C). Unfortunately, since the disagreement itself does not appear anywhere else in rabbinic literature, it is nearly impossible to discern its original context.³⁸ It is worth noting that discussions concerning the definition of the term “magus” and the priestly function of the magi can be found in Greek and Latin literature.³⁹ Perhaps we have here a similar kind of definitional or ethnographic disagreement about the nature of Zoroastrian tradition? Given the normal preoccupations of the rabbis, it seems more likely that Rav and Shmuel are debating the legal status of this Zoroastrian ritual in rabbinic jurisprudence. The seventh chapter of the Mishna’s Tractate Sanhedrin concerns the punishments administered by higher rabbinic courts for illicit activities like blasphemy and sorcery.⁴⁰ It seems possible that this amoraic dispute might represent an attempt to determine which rabbinic term, and therefore set of legal principles and punishments, applies to “Magianism.” The discussion probably concerns whether “Magianism” is deemed a form of blasphemy and thus governed by certain rabbinic rules, or rather a type of sorcery with its own prohibitions.

A related critique of Zoroastrian recitation appears in another passage. There, the amora R. Aḥa b. Ya‘aqov derides anyone who studies only Bible and Mishna but does not “serve the sages”—that is, does not engage in further investigation of the Mishna’s meaning—as being a magus. As support for this view, R. Naḥman cites the popular

saying: “The magus mumbles (*ratin magosha*) and knows not what he says, the (rabbinic) reciter recites (*tani tanna*) and knows not what he says.”⁴¹ “*Ratin*,” the verb used in the rabbinic aphorism for mumbling, has an interesting history relating to non-Zoroastrian perception of the Zoroastrian study and recitation of the Avesta.⁴² The verbal root RTN appears in Babylonian Jewish Aramaic, Mandaic, and Syriac, where it has negative overtones not unlike the word “murmur” in English. Yet what is particularly interesting is the technical usage of the root to describe Zoroastrian study and liturgical recitation.⁴³ Apparently, some Sasanian Jews and Christians conceived of Zoroastrian priestly learning as consisting of mindless repetitions. This assessment is confirmed in some Middle Persian texts, though of course without the negative coloring apparent in the Bavli and Syriac literature. Again, the *Hērbedestān*, the Avestan text and accompanying Middle Persian Zand about the rules of priestly study, describes Zoroastrian learning as essentially a process of memorizing sacred texts through frequent repetition.⁴⁴ Although I have previously discussed the evidence that some Zoroastrians engaged in highly complex forms of study, it remains significant that the Middle Persian text devoted to the laws of learning is essentially preoccupied with accurate recitation.

Aside from the Christian and Jewish perception that Zoroastrian learning consists of the repetition of Avestan texts, there was another common assumption made about Zoroastrian priests, and this concerns the ancient link between the magi and magic. The English word “magic” ultimately derives from the Greek incorporation of the Old Persian *magu-*. Yet it is not only Greek and Latin writers who drew this connection. For one, a similar perception can be found in Babylonian Jewish texts as well. Once again, the Aramaic root RTN is instructive in this regard. Deuteronomy 18:9–14 lists a variety of prohibited “magical” ritual acts practiced by the Canaanites:

When you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to do the abhorrent practices of those nations. Let no one be found among you who consigns his son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, *hover haver* or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead. (Deuteronomy 18:9–11)

The meaning of “*hover haver*” is debated in ancient Bible translations, including the Aramaic Targumim. For example, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan translates the first part of the verse as follows: “Nor

charmners nor spellbinders (*u-meḥabrin ve-asarin*) of serpents, scorpions, and all kinds of reptiles.”⁴⁵ Only Targum Onkelos, an ancient Babylonian rendition of the Bible, renders “*hover haver*” as “mumbling (*ve-rateyn retan*).” Based on the previous usage of RTN as referring to Zoroastrian recitations, the appearance of this verb in Targum Onkelos may suggest that some Babylonian Jews considered Zoroastrian priests to be performing the ritual act known as *hover haver*. As Eliezer Shimshon Rosenthal has noted, “*hover haver*” constitutes the source of the other name in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic for a Zoroastrian priest, namely, *ḥabara*.⁴⁶

It would thus appear that the opinion in the amoraic “Magianism” debate that deems Zoroastrian recitations to be a form of sorcery taps into an old, deep Babylonian Jewish prejudice. Furthermore, in other instances the Bavli depicts the magi as skilled at magic. A story told about Rava creating a kind of “proto-Golem” (artificial man) assumes that Zoroastrian priests (*ḥabaraya*) were similarly proficient.⁴⁷ Even more instructive, a Palestinian tradition records how the Babylonian amora Shmuel heard a Persian fatally cursing his/her son with the divine (Jewish) name.⁴⁸ Expertise in the knowledge and uses of divine names was a central aspect of magic in late antiquity, and the attribution of this skill to a Persian is perhaps worthy of note.⁴⁹ All said, the dual perception of Zoroastrian priests as proficient in magic and Zoroastrian learning as the murmured repetition of foreign, undecipherable texts suggests that Jews may have approached the magi to learn words that they deemed magically efficacious, as indeed I have suggested. It is even possible that Rav’s warning against learning a “*davar*” from a magus does not mean a thing, rather a word.⁵⁰

Regarding the other opinion in the “Magianism” debate, there is evidence that the crime of blasphemy might have been conceived as broader than simply cursing the divine name or its substitutes. There are some rabbinic texts that interpret idolatrous worship as an act of blasphemy,⁵¹ and perhaps the declaration that Magianism is blasphemy is merely another way of saying that the liturgical recitation of the Avesta was conceived as a form of idolatrous *worship*. Still, if this actually is the point, it is not clear why the opinion does not use the standard term *avoda zara* (“foreign worship”)?

Unlike the modern English word “blasphemy,” the Greek βλασφημεῖν and the Hebrew and Aramaic root GDP are relatively flexible and can even be used to describe the derision of humans as well. Even if in terms of determining the application of capital punishment

the rabbis articulate a stricter definition, it is still possible that the *sin* of blasphemy could have been more broadly conceived. Perhaps the opinion that considers “Magianism” to consist of blasphemies might refer to hymns in praise of the Iranian gods that detract from a monotheistic power.⁵² The Avesta is replete with the worship of entities other than the supreme Deity, and, theologically, the Avesta and Pahlavi literature have some rather “un-rabbinic” things to say about, for example, the source of evil in the world.⁵³

To sum up, the passage about Magianism provides us with a crucial source for assessing rabbinic perception of Zoroastrian tradition. While not preserving an actual debate about Zoroastrian religion *per se*, its discussion of Zoroastrian recitation of the Avesta is not terribly different from providing a more general assessment of Zoroastrian tradition. Even if the actual subject under discussion is indeed not the religious entity “Zoroastrianism,” it remains significant that the term used in the debate to describe Zoroastrian recitation is the abstract form of the word “magus.” As the above-cited *Dēnkard* passage indicates and as one finds in some Christian descriptions of the magian “arts,” Zoroastrian tradition is sometimes seen as metonymic with the recitation of sacred texts. It is striking that the Bavli portrays the Zoroastrian “Other” as preoccupied with mumbling a sacred text that was perhaps deemed magically efficacious or, alternatively, blasphemous.⁵⁴

“DAHĀG GAVE THE TORAH TO ABRAHAM AND ABRAHAM TO MOSES AND MOSES TO JOSHUA”: JEWS AND JUDAISM IN MIDDLE PERSIAN LITERATURE

The rabbis were not alone in their attempt to consider the status of another Sasanian religious tradition. Jews and Judaism appear on a number of occasions in Pahlavi literature, where they are referred to as *jahūd* and *jahūdih*, respectively.⁵⁵ The clearest “statement” on Judaism, if we can call it such, appears in a Middle Persian legal compilation called *Šāyest nē šāyest* that is difficult to date. The conventional, “automatic” ninth-century dating of Pahlavi literature notwithstanding,⁵⁶ it is telling that Islam is not mentioned once in the work—even in the following passage where it might be most expected:

*abēzag-dād ud weh-dēn amāh hēm ud pōryōtkēš hēm
ud gumēzag-dād sēnīg-škoftih⁵⁷ hēnd
ud wattar-dād zandīg ud tarsāg ud jahūd ud abārīg ī az ēn šōn
hēnd.*

Those of pure laws and good *dēn* are we—and also (of) the teachers of old.

Those of mixed laws are practicing the weirdness of Sēn.

Those of bad laws are the Manichaeans, Christians, Jews, and the rest who are of that sort.⁵⁸

Aside from the content, the structure of this passage is noteworthy. Somewhat similar to Kerdīr's list of religious communities examined earlier, we have a tripartite division of religions.⁵⁹ At the top of the hierarchy are the upholders of the "pure law," a term that evidently refers to the producers and audience of this text who, at least in their own eyes, properly abide by the Zoroastrian tradition. At the opposite end are Manichaeans, Christians, Jews and other adherents of *separate* traditions that are considered "bad laws." The middle rung is occupied by the "school of Sēn"—a Zoroastrian teacher deemed a heretic (*ablomōg*) by one Middle Persian text.⁶⁰ Sēn's school is called a mixture—a loaded term in Zoroastrian writings—probably since it was deemed to reside within the basic framework of Zoroastrianism and yet nevertheless represent a dangerous and misleading interpretation.⁶¹ Apparently, the basic framework of social dualism seems to have led to a categorization of Judaism and other Sasanian religious traditions as "bad laws."

Related to this classification are some Middle Persian passages that differentiate between Judaism and other traditions on theological grounds. Thus, in one text in the *Dēnkard* the philosophical implications of Judaism's monotheism, or "belief in one principle," are attacked.⁶² There one finds a discussion of Judaism's belief in a single, eternal God contrasted with the "Sophistic"—that is, Aristotelian—belief in the pervasive eternality of matter, as well as Manichaean dualism.

Other Middle Persian passages, on the other hand, go further and single out Judaism as a religion to be avoided in particular since it constitutes the very antithesis of Zoroastrianism. One source that expresses this view is, interestingly enough, attributed to Sēn:

*ek čiyōn gehān-frāyēnīdār *dād ī dēn mazdēsñ gehān-marnjēnīdār dād
ī jahūdīh kēš ān ī dahībedān framān abēzag dādīg u-šān dād ān ī dēn
mazdēsñ u-šān az ān ī jahūdīg dād pahrēxt *sēn andarz *ēdōn-iš guft*

One is how the law of the Mazdaean *dēn* furthers the world of living beings, while the law of the beliefs of the Jews destroys the world of living beings; (that) the command of the (Iranian) rulers is pure and according to the law and their law is the Mazdaean *dēn*. And Sēn

spoke (this) counsel in this manner to them about their staying away from the Jewish law.⁶³

Just as Rav warned Jews against learning from the magi, Sēn exhorted Zoroastrians not to draw near to Judaism. The parallel attempt of Jewish and Zoroastrian religious leaders to prevent these two communities from intermingling is certainly interesting, but more so is the way in which Judaism is perceived as a clear and present danger that stands in total opposition to Zoroastrianism. As Shaul Shaked has pointed out on a number of occasions, Judaism—and not Islam—is chosen by Zoroastrian authors writing in Middle Persian to serve as the representative of monotheism in crafting a kind of proto-“comparative religion” taxonomy. This is significant in arguing for the Sasanian provenance of these sources.⁶⁴ More relevant for the present discussion is the way in which Judaism stands above other “bad laws” as the primary antagonistic rival of Zoroastrianism.

In his research on Jews in Middle Persian literature, Shaked has collected a number of texts that present Judaism as the legacy of Dahāg—an ancient mythological dragon-figure who is adapted in Zoroastrianism to counteract the efforts of Yima—an Indo-Iranian character who functions in Zoroastrian tradition as an early proponent of Ohrmazd’s will in this world.

[A] *ān paymān dād ahlawih bun yazdīg gōwišn *az jam pad paywand-raftārān xēm būd dahibed ud hu-xwadāyān rāyēnīdan padīš petyārag az dāmān spōxtan kišwar pad paymān dād ārāst wirāst ud payrāst*

[B] *ud ham yazdīg bun ērih dādestān hangerdīgih ud dēn <ī> mazdēsñ fragān pad ān ī mehtom dādestān ud ān ī abartom kirbag andar dēn ošmurdan az yašt-frawahr zardušt pad pōryōtkēšān paywand raft u-šān padīš dēn ī mazdēsñ andar āwāmihā winnārd dām pad nekīh mehēnīd ō sūdīmānd ī pērōzgar fraškerd meh-abzārih paywast weh-dēn paydāgih*

[C] *ud ān bun dēwān frēb wirāyišn ō tāz-tōhmag dahišn-kāhēnīdār dahāg wirēxtan ud dahāg xēm padīš *wināstan ō kār kardan u-š frēh-būdīg ud abē-būdīg sāsārih ud ahlomōgih waxšēnīd ud padīš mardom xēm wināstan gēhān *wizandēnīdan⁶⁵ dām margēnīdan*

[D] *ōraytā <ī> jahūdih bun-nibēg kardan, ud ōrušlem dēsīdan padīš dāštān dahāg fradom ō abrahām ī jahūdān dastwar, ud az abrahām ō *mōšē⁶⁶ ī ōy paywand kē jahūd pad paygāmbār ud kēš-āwurdār dār dārēnd madan ud āsān burd<an>ō *mōšē * āš-kerdan⁶⁷ jahūdih kēš rawāgēnīdan*

[E] *ud az pas ēd dēwān frēb ud dahāg pad wizand ī dāmān dōšid ag-dēnīh bun wāzag <ī> jahūdagīh stūn andar zamānag zamānag abērtar andar dēn <ī> mazdēsn ud ērān nišēb pad ahlomōgīh čārēnīg(?) brāhīhā didīgarīg ud sidīgarīg andar gēhān nōgīhistan padīš dēwān čērīh ud mardom xēm winastagīh gēhān ālūdagīh ud auvērānīh ud dāmān frašēb <ud> anāgīh ud wehān nigōnīh ud tangīh ud dušwārīh ud wattarān afrāz frāxwīh ud pādixšāyīh.*

[A] How that law of moderation, the principle of being righteous, the divine speech, by which those proceeding in the lineage [as an interconnected chain] (of humanity toward the eschaton) have their character from Yima by which the rulers and good kings rule, push the adversary back from the creatures, and arrange, cultivate, and adorn the country according to the law of moderation.

[B] And how the same divine principle, the summation of the Iranian law, the foundation of the Mazdaean *dēn*, through the greatest law and the supreme good deed in enumerating the Tradition (*dēn*), went from Zardušt (=Zoroaster) “of worshipped soul” through the lineage of the Teachers of Old, and they through it established the Mazdean tradition in the various ages, enlarged the creation in goodness, and thus connected to the Beneficent and Victorious great power of the Renovation. (This is) what is manifest in the Great Tradition.

[C] And how that principle, which is the setting up of deceit by the demons, fled to Dahāg, of the Arab race, the diminisher of creation. And how Dahāg corrupted character through it and put it into action, and increased (*waxšēnīd*) excess, and deficiency, tyranny (probably, “false teachings”) and heresy. Through it he caused corruption to the character of people, caused the world to quake, and the creatures to die.

[D] How he made the *ōraytā* the fundamental book of Judaism, and built Jerusalem in order to keep (*ōraytā*) in it. How Dahāg first came to Abraham, the priest of the Jews, and from Abraham to Moses of his lineage, whom the Jews hold as a prophet and a bringer of (their) faith, and took rest(?). He revealed it to Moses, and how he propagated the Jewish faith.

[E] And how, after that, this deceit of the demons, Dahāg, to the harm of the creatures, delighted in the foundation word of evil tradition, the column of Judaism. How, in time period after time period, especially in the Mazdaean tradition and Iran (there) was decline. How it was renewed a second and third time in the world by making heresy shine, and through that (there came) victory to the demons and corruption to the character of people, impurity and lying waste to the world, decline and evil to creatures, inversion, distress and hardship to the good, ascent, broadness, and kingship to the bad.⁶⁸

In this passage we learn that while Yima and his successors propagate the proper and good religious tradition, the demonic Dahāg codifies

his evil views in the teaching of Judaism, alternately called *ōraytā*—the conventional Aramaic word for the Torah in the Talmud—and *wāzag*—the “Word.” The text considers the Torah to be the quintessential “bad law.” Everything positive in the world that Yima’s teaching accomplishes, Dahāg’s *ōraytā* attempts to reverse.

Fascinatingly, according to this passage, Jewish and Zoroastrian tradition each possess a distinctive transmission history. Thus, Yima’s teaching is present in the foundation of the Iranian law (*ērīh dādestān hangerdīgīh*) and in the Mazdaean tradition (*dēn ī mazdēs*n). The latter reached Zoroaster and was handed down to the Teachers of Old (*pōryōtkēšān*)—a term that incidentally is also used in regard to Sasanian authorities,⁶⁹ and from them it reached the people. Dahāg, on the other hand, creates the Torah, builds Jerusalem, and stores it there. This motif is reminiscent of the (anachronistic) descriptions of the official deposition of the Avesta in some kind of treasury, as detailed elsewhere in Middle Persian literature.⁷⁰ Like Yima’s teaching, Dahāg’s wisdom also has a transmission history. He gives the Torah first to Abraham (parallel to Zoroaster), then to Moses who is considered the prophet and bringer of the faith (parallel to the *pōryōtkēšān*), and, implicitly, onto the Jewish people. A parallel *Dēnkard* passage even describes the Torah as going from Abraham to Moses to Joshua⁷¹—almost a kind of alternate, Zoroastrian version of the famous rabbinic tradition that describes the propagation of the Oral Torah as follows: “Moses received the Torah on Sinai, and gave it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the men of the great assembly” (m. Avot 1:1).

What is to be made of this negative reflection on the role of Judaism and its Torah? One might first compare the *Dēnkard*’s presentation of Jewish tradition with the heavy-hitting criticism of Judaism found in the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of the *Škand-gumānīg wizār*. Samuel Thrope has astutely pointed out how these chapters present Judaism not simply as a religion, rather as a kind of text that rivals the Zoroastrian textual tradition.⁷² It might also be noted that the *Dēnkard*’s scheme nicely parallels a related phenomenon in regards to Christian-Zoroastrian relations. There, too, as Adam Becker has suggested, the religion of the “Other” is perceived as an alternative form of learning,⁷³ so that, for example, conversion means adopting an alternate practice of study.⁷⁴ The strategy of assigning a demonic source to the Hebrew Bible, however, means that Jewish tradition represents a uniquely destructive problem. While this idea may be connected to

some of the beliefs then current among groups in late antiquity that claimed that the Demiurge was the God of the Hebrew Bible,⁷⁵ the presence of related passages in Middle Persian literature about Judaism suggests that we are dealing with a distinctly Zoroastrian response.

There are a number of passages in the *Dēnkard* that detail some of Dahāg's—and therefore the Torah's—supposedly evil teachings.⁷⁶ They are ten in number and oppose Yima's beneficial Decalogue. The first of Dahāg's "ten commandments" teaches that cattle can be slaughtered freely (*Dēnkard* 3:288.9). As scholars have pointed out, the bloody reality of Jewish ritual slaughter alluded to in this "commandment" may have led to a Zoroastrian ban on the slaughtering of meat—and hence its consumption by Jews—referred to in a talmudic passage about Zoroastrian decrees.⁷⁷ Other Jewish practices come under criticism, including the circumcision (*drōšīdan*—literally, "to brand") of males. Since Zoroastrianism maintains a generally positive view of the human body as a creation of Ohrmazd and a stalwart in the war against evil, a deliberate attempt to harm a child must have been seen as sadistic and demonic. The same could be said of the alleged Jewish castration of animals.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN: JEWISH DEPICTIONS OF ZOROASTRIAN PRIESTS

There is little doubt that the purpose of the negative view presented in these Middle Persian texts is to sharply critique Judaism. The scheme is particularly noteworthy when seen in contrast to some forms of social dualism that paint *all* "Others" in undifferentiated dark hues. It may not be going too far to say that the stark depiction of Judaism as perfectly opposing Zoroastrianism accords the former a kind of respect, as if to say: "Judaism is a religion worth reckoning with, and here is why it must be avoided."

Interestingly, it seems that Zoroastrians were painted in just such a light in the Bavli. Some talmudic sources depict the Zoroastrian priesthood as a kind of evil counterpart to talmudic jurists and sages. One example can be deduced from the following passage, which immediately follows Rav Yosef's negative comparison of the Persians to bears discussed above:

ר' אמי כי הוה חזי פרסאה⁷⁸ אמ' היינו דובא דנאדא א'ל ר' [ל] לוי⁷⁹ הראני פרסיים א'ל דומין לחיילותיו של בית דוד הראיני חברים דומין למלאכי חבלה הראי' ישמע' [ל'] דומין לשעירים של בית הכסא הראיני תלמ' חכ' שבבבל דומין למלאכי השרת

When R. Ami saw a Persian he would say: “There is a roaming bear!” Rabbi said to Levi: “Describe to me the Persians.” He responded: “They are like the armies of the House of David.” “Describe to me the Magi (*ḥabarim*).” — “They are like the destroying angels (*mal-akhei ḥabala*).” “Describe to me the Ishmaelites.” — “They are like the goat-demons of the bathroom.” “Describe to me the scholars of Babylonia.” — “They are like the Ministering Angels.”⁸⁰

Apropos of the comparison of Persians to bears, the Bavli cites a conversation that allegedly took place between the Palestinian patriarch, Rabbi Yehuda (commonly known simply as “Rabbi”) and Levi.⁸¹ Here the Persians, or at least their armies, fare relatively well in that they are compared to King David’s soldiers.⁸² The Ishmaelites, however, are literally demonized. More germane to the current discussion, the magi are compared to destroying angels.⁸³ Although there is no exact counterpart for the Ishmaelite comparison, it would appear that the equation of the magi to destroying angels does receive its exact opposite in the form of the comparison between Babylonian rabbinic sages and ministering angels.

Another arena in which Zoroastrian priests are pitted against Jewish equivalents appears in regard to one of the magi’s primary responsibilities in the Empire, namely the administration of courts. One statement attributed to the fifth-generation amora Rav Pappa suggests that the success of the magi serves as punishment for Jewish haughtiness—apparently among the exilarch’s court:

אמ' רב פפא אי בטלי יהירי בטלי אמגושי אי בטלי דיאני בטלי גזירפטי אי בטלי יהירי בטלי
אמגושי דכת' ואצרף כבר סיגין ואסיר' כל בדילין אי בטלי דיאני בטלי גזירפטי שנ' הסיר
י"י משפטיך פנה איבך

Rav Pappa said: If the haughty cease to exist (among the Jews) the magi shall cease to exist; if the (Jewish) judges cease to exist, the (Sasanian) officers⁸⁴ shall cease to exist. “If the haughty cease to exist the magi shall also cease to exist”—as it is written, “And I will smelt out your dross as with lye and remove all your slag” (Isaiah 1:25). “If the (Jewish) judges cease to exist, the (Sasanian) officers shall cease to exist,” as it is written, “The Lord has annulled the judgment against you, He has swept away your foes” (Zephaniah 3:15).⁸⁵

The passage functions as a dual critique of certain aspects of both Persian and Jewish legal and societal institutions. The logic of the passage is as follows: The Sasanian officers commissioned to enforce justice—and from Rav Pappa’s perspective, injustice—are seen as a

form of divine punishment for the activities of their Jewish judicial counterparts—apparently those judges associated with the occasionally despised exilarchate.⁸⁶ The removal of these judges would lead to an easing of the problems caused by the Sasanian court-officers. Likewise, the power of the magi would wane were only the “haughty ones” of Israel—perhaps another veiled reference to the exilarch’s court or even to the elitist, acculturated rabbinic jurists associated with him—to disappear. Incidentally, for the measure-for-measure dynamic of this couplet to work properly, Rav Pappa would have to perceive the magi as somehow conceited—a character trait that, while objectively unquantifiable, may have been exacerbated by the rise in power of the Zoroastrian priestly bureaucracy during the Sasanian period.⁸⁷

Rav Pappa constructs a symmetrical relationship between the magi and their evil Jewish counterparts. A different text offers another kind of symmetry that follows the pattern of setting up Zoroastrian priests as the perfect opposites of their *positive* Jewish equivalents. In this source, R. Yoḥanan asks the perennial theosophical question of Jewish antiquity—why was Jerusalem destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E.?⁸⁸ In a classical theology of misfortune, national catastrophes result from national sin. But strangely enough, R. Yoḥanan explains that Jerusalem was destroyed because Jewish judges actually ruled *according* to Torah law. As a result, the Stam (the Talmud’s anonymous layer) exclaims: “And should they rule according to Magian law (*dina de-magista*)?!”⁸⁹ As I note below, “Magian law” is a technical term that seems to function here not simply as a generic form of non-rabbinic law, but as a direct opposite of Jewish law.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have examined a talmudic dispute about the legal status of Zoroastrian tradition and a set of related texts, all of which take a rather negative view of Zoroastrianism. By a similar token, I have traced the demonization that Judaism underwent in some Middle Persian texts. The chapter opened, however, with some more complex rabbinic passages about Persians that begin on a more positive register, yet soon after take a decidedly pessimistic turn. As noted, persistent shifts of this nature require attention and explication. Some scholars have suggested that the shifts in talmudic attitudes toward Persians reflect actual changes in Sasanian religious policy.⁹⁰ In this

view, sources that offer a positive assessment of Persians are thought to have originated during periods of tolerance, while negative views and accounts of persecution are attributed to more difficult times. Recently, however, some researchers have begun to question whether talmudic sources can indeed be interpreted in this way, and whether this approach is not just another permutation of the much-maligned lachrymose conception of Jewish history.⁹¹ True, there are some indications that Babylonian Jews experienced difficulties under King Pērōz (459–484), as well as sporadic harassment for Jewish rituals that offended Zoroastrian religious sensibilities.⁹² However, it is problematic to uncritically link undated sources with specific time periods, both because the texts themselves offer so few clues that might help locate them chronologically, and also because one finds plenty of conflicting, more positive sources about Persians and Persian rule that may just as well have originated during the same time period. These include more or less sunny anecdotes about specific rabbis and the Sasanian royal family, which even if they are completely ahistorical would still reflect something of then current Jewish perceptions of Persian rule, and in certain cases of Zoroastrianism as well.

As opposed to a chronological framework, another approach is to examine whether the negative views of Persians can be attributed to the experiences of specific amoraim, their schools, and their geographical locations. This method has been pursued by Yaakov Elman, who has profitably employed a "resister"/"accommodator" distinction to classify the posture of different rabbis and their geographic locales toward Persians and their mores. To take one example, Rav Yosef's generally negative view of the Persians seems to fit nicely with some of the other sources associated with him, and may be related to his residence in Pumbedita at some distance from the Sasanian winter capital.⁹³ Unfortunately, this sort of correlation is often not possible and is dependent on discerning a consistent pattern of statements when, due to the nature of the extant sources, it is not always there to be found.

A final approach might look to the compilatory character of the Bavli as encouraging a multivalent appreciation of the different kinds of attitudes and perceptions that can be recovered from the Bavli. As a complex, multi-vocalic oral document that was not redacted by an identifiable person or committee in a specific time and place, the Bavli may be seen as a textual representation of the intricate rabbinic culture that engendered it and in which it later reembedded itself. As

some feminist Talmudists have recently suggested, movements, shifts, gaps, and contradictions in the talmudic text can occasionally be read for cultural ferment, movement and jockeying in the gender hierarchy of rabbinic culture⁹⁴—in other words, phenomena that typically cannot be divided up among known players or assigned to specific geographical locales. We might similarly look to the different postures regarding Persians as not only reflecting a movement from Roman Palestine to Sasanian Babylonia, but also as a sequence in which various elements of Babylonian rabbinic society worked through their relationship with their Sasanian neighbors and overlords. From this perspective, one cannot easily assign incompatible views to specific rabbis or movements. Rather, the seemingly conflicting data are taken to reflect a set of ongoing cultural processes, undergone collectively.⁹⁵

This final approach can prove useful for interpreting other developments in the Bavli's response to and reception of Zoroastrians. Although I attempted to demonstrate here how the Bavli and Middle Persian literature constructed "discourses of the Other" that constitute exceedingly stark and menacing caricatures, in a number of passages one also finds in the Talmud more nuanced depictions of a number of Zoroastrian and Persian cultural elements. These texts adopt a far less bleak and sometimes even gregarious tone toward aspects of Sasanian and Zoroastrian society that other talmudic sources depict quite negatively. How could this be?

The most likely reason can take a cue from the popular adage "When there is smoke, there is fire." The strong rhetoric, the demonization, and the general focus on keeping away from Zoroastrians does not necessarily establish that there was actual bad blood between the two communities. Sometimes, the erection of high intercultural fences can be taken as evidence that the two neighboring communities were engaged with one another at relatively high levels.⁹⁶ Instead of approaching the more nuanced sources as contradicting or conflicting with the material surveyed here, I suggest that they evince a variety of concurrent attempts to bridge the very divide that the Bavli (and Middle Persian literature) elsewhere worked so hard to establish. It is to this task that I now turn.

Closer Than They May Appear

*Alternative Depictions of Sasanians
and Zoroastrian Priests in the Bavli*

ZOROASTRIAN AND BABYLONIAN RABBINIC “DESTRUCTORS”

תנו רבנן שלשה שונאין זה את זה אלו הן הכלבים והתרנגולין והחברין ויש אומרים אף הזונות ויש
אומרים אף תלמידי חכמים שבבבל

Our rabbis taught: Three hate each other, and these are they: dogs, fowl, and Zoroastrian priests (*habarin*). And some say even prostitutes. And some say even rabbinic scholars in Babylonia.²

This strange talmudic vignette, although not quite at the level of Borges’s famous quotation from the Chinese encyclopedia,³ houses a deliciously motley crew of animals, clergy, sinners, and sages who are supposedly consumed by strife. Dogs and birds struggle for scraps of food, while prostitutes battle it out for fees. Less clear, however, is why Zoroastrian priests and Babylonian rabbis are thought to be plagued by hatred. Another question has to do with the relationship between the different components of the list: Ostensibly, hatred is the sole organizing principle at work in the passage. Nevertheless, one still wonders, for example, if the internal strife ascribed to Babylonian rabbis and Zoroastrian priests is merely a symptomatic coincidence or whether it belies a deeper, more profound connection.

One can only speculate about why the magi were thought to detest one another. Perhaps the phenomenon should be connected to the

institutionalization of the Zoroastrian priesthood during the Sasanian era—an ongoing political process that presumably bred the expected jealousy and intrigue.⁴ Middle Persian literature also preserves evidence of major competition between Zoroastrian priests that was in part powered by the supply-and-demand economics of performing paid rituals for lay worshipers. As for Babylonian rabbis, here we seem to be on firmer ground. The sense of hatred ascribed to the sages probably has to do with the way the so-called “war of Torah”—the confrontational, intellectual sparring that characterizes the traditional study of rabbinic texts to this day—had a tendency to get out of hand.⁵

The Bavli itself seems to be aware of a difference in tone between Babylonian rabbinic study and its Palestinian counterpart:

אמ' ר' הושעיה מאי דכתי' ואקה לי שני מקלות לאחד קראתי נעם ולאחד קראתי חבלים נעם
אלו תלמידי חכמ' שבארץ ישראל שמנעימין זה לזה בהלכה חבלים אלו תלמידי חכמ' שבבבל
שמחבלין זה את זה בהלכה

R. Hosha'ya said: What is the meaning of the verse: “And I took for myself two staves; one of which I name No'am ('favor') and the other I called Ḥoblim ('unity')” (Zechariah 11:7)? “No'am”—these are the scholars of the Land of Israel who treat each other graciously (*man'imim*) in [the study of] *halakha*; “Ḥoblim”—these are the scholars of Babylonia, who injure each other (*meḥablim*) in [the study of] *halakha*.⁶

In the context of contrasting Babylonian and Palestinian rabbinic study practices, R. Hosha'ya refers to the Babylonian rabbis as “injurers” (*meḥablim*)—a moniker that evidently points to a violence fueled by ruthless academic competition. As such, R. Hosha'ya's teaching might serve as an intertext useful for explaining why Babylonian rabbis hate each other. More unexpectedly, it also sheds light on the relationship between the magi and Babylonian sages in the talmudic list of “haters.” It may be recalled that the same term, “injurers” (*meḥablim*), appeared in a passage examined last chapter, where Zoroastrian priests and Babylonian rabbis were compared to two different types of angels. That text considered Babylonian rabbis as similar to heavenly angels while it was the magi who resembled angelic destroyers (*malakhei ḥabala*).

Rabbi said to Levi: “Describe to me the Persians.” He responded: “They are like the armies of the House of David.” “Describe to me the Magi (*ḥabarim*).” —“They are like the destroying angels (*malakhei ḥabala*).” “Describe to me the Ishmaelites.” —“They are like the goat-demons of the bathroom.” “Describe to me the scholars of Babylonia.” —“They are like the Ministering Angels.”⁷

At the time, it was suggested that this passage exemplifies the sharply drawn “discourses of the Other” produced by Sasanian Zoroastrians and Jews alike. Indeed, this it does. Somewhat paradoxically, however, it is also possible to read the source and its co-texts as pointing toward a kind of equivalency between the communities. The ability to contrast opposites requires a certain parity; in this case, an ability to see the magi and Babylonian rabbis as operating on the same plane. Like the two sides of a coin, which are fused together on a single monetary instrument, Rabbi’s distinction forces the supposedly angelic Babylonian rabbis to coexist with the Magian “destroying angels” in a single comparative moment.⁸ More than that, given the way the “injurer” designation seems to flit between Babylonian talmudic sages and Zoroastrian priests, one cannot help but question how seriously we are supposed to take the Bavli’s depiction of Babylonian rabbis as absolutely angelic and the magi as totally demonic. In all, it seems possible that the coexistence of Babylonian rabbis and Zoroastrian priests in the talmudic list of “those who hate each other” may be indicative of a deeper connection than might have initially been assumed.

As suggested previously, despite the strategies aimed at keeping them apart, Jews and Zoroastrians intersected with one another in a number of ways. This situation helped engender some rather severe Babylonian rabbinic and Zoroastrian “discourses of the Other.” Yet paradoxically, it also seems to have given way to concurrent talmudic texts that engage in a different set of cultural processes. In a sense, these sources do not *contrast* Jews and Zoroastrians. Instead, they *compare* them with one another. Some passages even attempt to “localize” Persian and Zoroastrian elements, thereby bringing them closer to rabbinic culture. In that light, the goal of the present chapter is to collect a group of alternative talmudic texts that are *not* socially dualistic, and try and show how the distinctive architecture of these sources can be taken to reflect the Bavli’s protracted cultural work, performed while it processes rabbinic culture’s multifaceted relationship with Persian and Zoroastrian society.

THE ZOROASTRIAN AMONG US: ZOROASTRIANS IN RABBINIC CRITIQUES OF JEWISH INSTITUTIONS

To begin, let us return to an earlier question: In what way might Babylonian rabbinic hatred have resembled Zoroastrian in-fighting? In a pair of articles published in 1987, Philip Kreyenbroek assembled a

group of texts that describe some very serious competition between learned and more theoretically inclined Zoroastrian priests, and professional and less “intellectual” liturgical reciters.⁹ The passages appear in Middle Persian compilations of the ninth century C.E. that generally preserve the perspective of the intellectual camp. Nevertheless, there are indications that some of the tensions went back to late antiquity. Though their responses to the intellectualist critique have not survived, at the very least we can surmise that the more technically oriented liturgist priests would not have had very nice things to say about their scholar-priestly colleagues.

Moulie Vidas has recently suggested that the well-documented animosity in rabbinic literature between more scholastic amoraim and professional reciters of rabbinic texts known as “tannaim”¹⁰ mirrors the Zoroastrian priestly tensions.¹¹ Indeed, in one colorful expression of the amora/tanna competition, a Babylonian amora named Rav Aḥa b. Ya‘aqov derides anyone who studies only the text of Bible and Mishna but does not “serve the sages”—that is, does not engage in thoughtful investigation of the Mishna’s meaning—as being a magus. As support for this view, Rav Naḥman cites the following popular saying: “The magian mumbles (*ratin magosha*) and knows not what he says; the (rabbinic) reciter recites (*tani tanna*) and knows not what he says.”¹² As I emphasized previously, “*tanna*”—the verb used for “recites” in the popular saying that disparages the “thoughtless” recitation of rabbinic texts—appears in a Syriac text that describes Zoroastrian recitation of the Avesta.¹³ The proximity between the mumbling Zoroastrian priests and the reciting rabbinic tannaim is thus even closer than it first appears.

At this point in the monograph, it is already clear that Zoroastrian priests and Babylonian rabbis shared both religious sensibilities and cultural trappings. I have stressed how the proximity between the two communities may have seemed threatening to some communal leaders, which in turn engendered stark and mutually informing “discourses of the Other.” Now, in the texts presently under discussion one can begin to see the first inklings of a type of discourse that actually draws the Zoroastrian “Other” closer. True, these sources initially employ Zoroastrians in order to critique certain elements in rabbinic society, such as the injurious character of Babylonian rabbinic study and the mindless repetition of rabbinic reciters. Still, they point in a new direction that reflects an alternative set of cultural processes.

One hitherto ignored expression of this form of discourse can be found in a cryptic comment attributed to Rav Yosef.¹⁴ Mishna Yoma 3:3 states that all but the first of the High Priest's immersions on the Day of Atonement must take place in a chamber called the *בית הפרווה*.¹⁵ Regarding this chamber, Rav Yosef notes:

מאי פרוה אמ' רב יוסף פרוה אמגושא

What is (the) Parva (chamber)? Rav Yosef said: Parva—a magus.¹⁶

The meaning of this line is quite ambiguous. What does a chamber in the Second Temple have to do with a Zoroastrian priest? Medieval commentators suggested creative but ultimately unsatisfactory ways to connect a magus (or to their mind, a sorcerer) to the chamber. Rashi suggests that the structure was named after a sorcerer (*mekhashef*) named Parva who built it. R. Hananel records a more imaginative tradition which claims that a magus named Parva tunneled his way into the sacred precincts of the Temple in order to watch the High Priest perform the ritual proscribed for the Day of Atonement. The chamber in which he was caught was named after him.

There is, of course, no historical link between a magus and the Parva chamber. It is clear that Rashi's and R. Hananel's suggestions do not reflect independent traditions regarding the meaning of Rav Yosef's statement, rather second-order, exegetical attempts to explain it.¹⁷ In order to properly appreciate Rav Yosef's comment, it should be compared with a similar observation recorded earlier in the same tractate. Mishna Yoma opens with a discussion of another Temple chamber that has a foreign name—the Parhedrin chamber.¹⁸ Historically, the name Parhedrin refers to the city counselors (*πρόεδροι*), as does an alternate designation preserved in the Tosefta (*בלווטין* from *βουλευή*—the municipal authorities).¹⁹ Like the Parva chamber, the name Parhedrin also attracted the speculation of the rabbis. A parallel *baraita* and an amoraic tradition²⁰ both attempt to harmonize the two names by appealing to a peculiar historical development: According to the Yerushalmi, when the office of the High Priest was degraded, the name of this chamber was changed from *בלווטין* to *פרהדרין* since the room was now occupied by substitute, discharged priests, or *פראירתי* (apparently from Greek *προϊερατεύω* or *προϊεράγραμμα*). The Bavli's understanding of the word Parhedrin similarly reflects the tradition that in the final years of the Second Temple, high priests served no

longer than twelve months.²¹ The Bavli also records the following, unattributed line:

מאי פרהדרין? פורסי²²

What is the Parhedrin?²³ פורסי.

Although the precise reading and meaning of the term פורסי is unclear, it can be deduced from another talmudic passage that the word denotes a certain class of Jewish leaders in Babylonia. Like the *baraita*, this comment associates the name of the chamber with an official position of leadership—now one held in Sasanian Babylonia—in order to concretize a (negative) aspect of the waning years of the Temple priesthood. It may be argued that a similar trend is at work in Rav Yosef's association of the Parva chamber with the word “magus.”²⁴ He, too, links a Second Temple chamber to a Sasanian administrative office, namely, the office the magi.²⁵

Rav Yosef's equation of the Parva chamber and the office of the magi evinces an ability to see within the Jewish priesthood its Zoroastrian counterpart. On one level, the association probably functioned purely as a critique, just as the link between the Parhedrin chamber and the פורסי criticized the “revolving door” reality of the late Second Temple Jewish high priesthood. Surely, the rabbis had plenty to censure when it came to the priests who served in the Second Temple, including priestly conspiracies and intrigue,²⁶ as well as cutthroat competitiveness.²⁷ Indeed, it is possible that the equation of the Jewish high priesthood to the office of the magi once again has to do with the competition endemic to a Jewish institution—now the priestly bureaucracy of the Second Temple—and its Zoroastrian equivalent. Critique or not, Rav Yosef's suggestion that a Second Temple priestly chamber is associated with the office of the magi belies an ability of Babylonian amoraim to perform the kind of comparative task not foreign to modern scholars, like myself, who wish to compare Jews and Zoroastrians. In this form of discourse, Zoroastrians emerge as an entity that constitutes more than a threatening “Other.” As Rav Yosef also noted elsewhere: “I am one of them” (b. Shabbat 116a), or, as the case may now be, “they” are “us.”

“PERSIAN LAW” AND ITS USES

The harshly formulated “discourses of the Other” examined in the previous chapter were apparently aimed at limiting interactions between late antique Jews and their Zoroastrian neighbors. This form

of discourse influenced medieval and modern Jews and their perception of new “Others” encountered in the often threatening experience of the Jewish Diaspora. Moreover, the sharp rhetoric of these texts also seems to have affected the way modern scholars read some of the other rabbinic passages that respond to Persians. One area where this can be seen is in a set of talmudic passages that ostensibly criticize Sasanian law. However, I argue that when these sources are read carefully, they actually present a far more complex legal and discursive reality.

In late antique Mesopotamia, the legal system was experienced as a complex set of processes that many scholars now refer to as “legal pluralism.” In this framework, different legal communities and actors negotiated for territory within the empire and among a web of communities.²⁸ Scholars of Sasanian law are just beginning to understand the space that the Sasanian legal system carved out for religious communities like Christians and Jews.²⁹ Even with the relative independence that they enjoyed, Babylonian rabbis would have encountered the Sasanian legal system both voluntarily and involuntarily on a regular basis. Their assessment of that system is at least partially registered in the pages of the Talmud, and most explicitly in moments where the rabbis refer directly to Persian law.

When it comes to assessing rabbinic perceptions of the Sasanian courts, one encounters a confusing, sometimes contradictory set of sources. In certain instances, the Bavli roundly criticizes Sasanian legal institutions. To an extent, the negative sources have been read maximally by scholars as evidence that the rabbis viewed the Persian legal system, *in toto*, negatively. However, a close examination of the relevant passages that takes into account alternative “discourses of the Other” reveals that this is not entirely the case, and that a fair amount of complexity can be detected on the issue. First, even in regards to rabbinic sources that do criticize the courts, the broader implications of this phenomenon are not immediately clear. While it is possible to read rabbinic disparagement of these institutions uncomplicatedly as simply reflecting a perception that Persians and their legal systems were problematic, oppressive, ineffective, and/or corrupt, one might also understand the critique as simply a strategy for discouraging Jews from attending Sasanian courts. Indeed, as I soon suggest, one statement on the matter may even represent a kind of “comparative legal approach” to Sasanian law. Only later stages in the history of transmission and interpretation of this set of texts

evinced a later ambivalence and negativity set against a neutral and even positive view of the Sasanian system.

There are only a few terms in the Bavli that explicitly refer to Sasanian law. One of them, “magian law” (*dina de-magista*), appears in a passage cited in the last chapter in which the Bavli refers to “magian law” as a negative alternative to “Torah Law.”³⁰ That said, in the following source “magian law” only refers to a specific form of Persian court protocol that problematically—at least from a rabbinic perspective—accepts the testimony of a single witness in cases of monetary law:

מכריו רבא ואיתמ' רב הונא דסלקין לעילא ודנחתין לתתא האי בר ישראל דידע ליה
שהדותא לגוי אישר' חבריה ואזיל מסהיד ביה בי גוים משמתין ליה מאי טע' כיון דגוים
מפקי ממונא אפומא דחד שהדא משמתין ליה והני מילי במגיסתא אבל בי דואר אינהו נמי כל
חד שהדא למומתא שדו ליה

Rava proclaimed—and others say, Rav Huna: [To] those who go up [to the Land of Israel] and who come down [to Babylonia]—a Jew who knows some evidence concerning a fellow Jew about a non-Jew, and he goes and testifies about him in a non-Jewish court, we excommunicate him. What is the reason? Since non-Jews adjudicate the payment of money [even based] on the evidence of one witness, we excommunicate him. But this is the case only in a magian [court].³¹ However in a **dā(d)war*³² court they too [like the rabbis] impose an oath upon every single witness [before adjudicating].³³

As much as this passage criticizes the practices of certain kinds of Sasanian courts, it nevertheless makes an important distinction. Only “magian courts” accept the testimony of a single witness without verification. On the other hand, those Persian courts known as *bei dā(d)war*³⁴ (“court of judges”) are careful to require a single witness to take an oath. In other words, while it is true that in the Talmud’s eyes one kind of Sasanian court is substandard, the other form of Sasanian justice is actually considered on par with rabbinic standards.

The terminology that the passage uses to differentiate between the two court systems is problematic for a number of reasons, beginning already with the level of copyists.³⁵ Even if the correct reading of the text is indeed “*bei dina de-magista*” and “*bei dā(d)war*,” it is not yet possible to correlate these two institutions to the historical realities on the ground. Recent research has given students of late antique Iran even more tools to reconstruct the Sasanian administrative and judicial system.³⁶ And yet, while surviving seals, bullae, and literary sources make a distinction between a number of different kinds of

mowbeds, *dādvars*, and their respective legal powers and institutions, the sources give no indication that the “*mowbeds*” and their courts exercised a fundamentally different form of law than that of the “*dā(d)vars*.” That said, it certainly remains possible that legal protocol in the two court systems was distinct from one another, even if this talmudic passage constitutes the sole evidence of this fact.

Ezra Spicehandler, who skillfully analyzed the two terms *bei dina de-magista* and *bei *dā(d)war*, concludes his article on the topic by suggesting that the phrase “Persian law (*dina de-parsai*)” was yet another term used in the Bavli in a generally disparaging way.³⁷ If this were true, it would mean that the rabbis not only had problems with specific kinds of Sasanian courts, but that they also perceived Sasanian law as more broadly and fundamentally flawed. And yet, although some rabbis may have seen the Sasanian system this way, a closer examination of the manuscript traditions and the editorial arrangement of the talmudic sources which refer to “Persian law” reveals a far more complicated and fluid picture.

RAV NAḤMAN, MISHNAIC INTERPRETATION, AND THE PROXIMITY OF SASANIAN LAW

Perhaps the most elaborate passage that refers to “Persian law” appears in a discussion at the end of Tractate Bava Batra in regards to the roles and obligations of loan guarantors. The *sugya* opens with a discussion of the following *mishna*:

המלוה את חבירו על ידי ערב לא יפרע מן הערב אם אמ' על מנת שאיפרע מימי שארצה
יפרע מן הערב. רבן שמעון בן גמליא' [אומ'] אם יש נכסים ללווה בין כך ובין כך לא יפרע
מן הערב

If a man lent his fellow money through a guarantor, he may not exact payment from the guarantor. If he said, “On the condition that I may exact payment from whom I wish,” he may exact payment from the guarantor. R. Shim'on b. Gamliel says: If the borrower has property, in either case [the creditor] may not exact payment from the guarantor.³⁸

A straightforward reading of this *mishna* seems to imply, strangely enough, that a typical creditor may *never* approach a guarantor in order to collect his loan. There is no distinction in the text, nor is there a condition attributed to the creditor, indicating that the *mishna* is dealing with a legal category known in rabbinic law as “surety for person”—a type of guarantor related in certain ways to the modern “bail bondsman” who has virtually no financial obligation to the

creditor and only offers commitments to ensure that the borrower shows up to pay his loan when it is due.³⁹ Notably, the Yerushalmi cites R. Yoḥanan as emphasizing that the *mishna* actually absolves the guarantor from paying only when the borrower is solvent.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the first opinion cited in the Bavli reads the *mishna* literally and seems to understand the role of a typical, that is, undefined, guarantor as merely ensuring that the borrower show up when the creditor demands loan payment:

מאי טע' רבה ורב יוסף⁴¹ דאמר ר' תריוהו גברא אשלימת לי גברא אשלימי לך

What is the reason [that the *mishna* does not require the guarantor to pay the loan]? Both Rabba and Rav Yosef say: [Because the guarantor can say,] “You have handed over to me a man; and a man I have handed over to you.”⁴²

Rabba and Rav Yosef normally absolve the guarantor from paying the loan since the latter's job is simply to “produce” the borrower for loan repayment. Presumably, if an undefined guarantor is technically unable to ensure that the borrower shows up to pay—for example in a case where the borrower has fled or died—the guarantor must pay back the loan.⁴³ Nevertheless, Rabba and Rav Yosef are generally content to interpret the *mishna* literally as absolving the guarantor of obligation in many circumstances.⁴⁴

The next opinion is attributed to Rav Naḥman who is apparently not satisfied with a literal reading of the Mishna. This part of the *sugya* clearly has two chronological layers, so for clarification purposes, in the translation I have italicized the editorial voice:

מתקיף לה⁴⁵ רב נחמן⁴⁶ האי דינא⁴⁷ דפרסאי הוא דינא דפרסאי⁴⁸ אדרבה בתר ערבא אזלי אלא כי דינא⁴⁹ דפרסאי דלא יהבי טע' למלתיהו אלא אמ' רב נחמן מאי לא יפרע מן הערב לא יתבע הערב תחלה תנאי נמי הכי המלוה את חברו על ידי ערב לא יתבע⁵⁰ הערב תחלה ואם אמ' לו על נגת שאיפרע ממי שארצה יתבע הערב תחלה

Rav Naḥman *raised an objection*: This is the law of the Persians! “*The law of Persians*”?! *On the contrary; they pursue the guarantor! Rather [the following is Rav Naḥman's objection]: “[Is not this ruling] like Persian law [where we find that the judges] do not give reasoning for their matters (i.e., rulings)!” Rather, said R. Naḥman: What is [the meaning of] “he may not exact payment from the guarantor?” [That] he [may] not demand [payment from] the guarantor first. Indeed, it was also taught [in a baraita]: If a man lent his fellow money through a guarantor, he may not demand [payment from] the guarantor initially. And if he said, “On the condition that I may exact payment from whom I wish,” he may demand [payment from] the guarantor first.*

The first statement in this section is attributed to Rav Naḥman, who according to the Talmud was “close to the exilarch’s court where judges are to be found” (b. Bava Batra 65a). Rav Naḥman was one of the Babylonian amoraim depicted as acculturated to elite Persian society, and there is evidence that he was well aware of, and occasionally even adopted, certain facets of Persian law.⁵¹ Here, however, Rav Naḥman’s exclamation that the *mishna* looks like Persian law apparently led to an alternative interpretation of the rabbinic text that begins with the word “Rather.”⁵² In other words, the similarity of this *mishna* to “Persian law” is deemed problematic enough to necessitate an alternate explanation.

There are a number of questions raised by this passage. First, why indeed would the proximity of the *mishna* to Persian law be objectionable—especially in the eyes of a relatively acculturated Sasanian rabbi like Rav Naḥman? There is no evidence anywhere in rabbinic literature that Jewish civil law is not allowed to agree with a non-Jewish counterpart. In fact, in two instances the Talmud explicitly rules in accordance with Persian law.⁵³ Second, is it indeed the case that Persian law forbids the creditor from *ever* collecting loans from the guarantor and does not contain regular debt surety? How could a credit system that only recognizes “surety of the body” have been viable in the enormous and greatly developed Sasanian economy where the free-flow of credit would have been crucial for fiscal functionality? More to the point, who would be willing to lend money knowing that guarantors are virtually useless?⁵⁴

Interestingly, the latter question is actually pursued in the Talmud’s anonymous layer, which responds in the negative—“On the contrary; they (i.e., the Persian courts) pursue the guarantor!” This exclamation is traditionally interpreted to mean that the Persians go *directly* to the guarantor without first approaching the borrower. In this way, the Stam’s objection may be read as constituting the passage’s second critique of Persian law, for what kind of legal system allows a creditor to always indiscriminately collect from a guarantor without first approaching the borrower?! Unfortunately, the Stam’s objection only creates more problems. Were it the case that undefined guarantors are *always* at the mercy of the creditors’ demands for payment, why would anyone want to serve as a guarantor? Again, the effects of such a system of credit would be just as damaging to the Sasanian economy as one in which regular guarantors took on no financial obligation.

The early seventh-century Sasanian lawbook *Mādayān ī hazār dādestān* (MHD; Book of a Thousand Judgments) preserves an entire chapter dealing with guarantors of various sorts and their associated obligations.⁵⁵ One important passage in that chapter states that a borrower may approach the guarantor for payment only “at a time when the debtor is insolvent or does not show up (*pad ān zamān bawēd ka mērag an-ādān ayāb nē mad ēstēd*).”⁵⁶ Otherwise, the guarantor has no obligation to pay. Indeed, as the rest of that passage states, if the guarantor goes ahead and pays the loan without the debtor’s consent, he cannot receive his money in return.⁵⁷ In other words, there is little doubt that, generally speaking, Sasanian law does not permit the creditor to go directly to an undefined guarantor in a case where the debtor is both present and solvent.

This sharpens a number of challenges in the talmudic passage. Foremost of these is about the very facts of Sasanian credit law, as there are three mutually exclusive depictions to contend with. On the one hand, the Sasanian law book spells out the only truly economically viable option, where guarantors normally guarantee a typical loan in a case of either default or disappearance of the debtor. Rav Naḥman, however, seems to think that Persian courts do not hold regular guarantors accountable to pay a loan unless, perhaps, the borrower flees or passes away. Finally, the Stam seems to depict Sasanian law as rather absurdly allowing creditors to *always* collect payment from undefined guarantors.

Regarding the meaning of Rav Naḥman’s equation of the *mishna* to “Persian law,” there actually are other possibilities beyond those considered above. First, recall that even the anonymous layer of the Talmud *reinterprets* Rav Naḥman so that he does not actually equate the (literal understanding of) the law in the *mishna* with a corresponding Persian law. According to this view, Rav Naḥman is merely saying that reading the *mishna* literally so that it generally absolves the guarantor from obligation is unreasonable—much as Persian courts (or, depending on the reading, simply Persian “law”)⁵⁸ are at fault for not expressing the reasoning behind their rulings. This Stammaitic reinterpretation of Rav Naḥman is not without its problems, including the fact that the Sasanian court memos cited in MHD actually *do* on occasion preserve a ruling’s legal reasoning.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, it is worth employing the Stam’s basic reinterpretive strategy and reading Rav Naḥman’s exclamation “This is Persian law” as simply a general

term of critique without necessarily directly corresponding to Sasanian law. In such a way, “Persian law” may be taken as similar to the phrase “magian courts,” which in contrast to “*dā(d)war* courts” refers negatively to the Sasanian legal system. Such a negative view of “Persian law” might indeed reflect a level of rabbinic animosity to the Persian system. Alternatively, it might simply express competition on the part of Rav Naḥman despite, or perhaps on account of, his proximity to Sasanian law.⁶⁰

At first blush, understanding Rav Naḥman’s use of the term “Persian law” as wholly negative has what to recommend it. The two other occurrences of the phrase in the Bavli apparently refer to the injustice of certain rulings, and both are connected to Rav Naḥman. However, further examination of these traditions reveals that this is not necessarily the case. Moreover, the complexity of these sources might actually be indicative of later cultural tensions.

One source appears to depict a litigant complaining about the exilarch’s ruling—“What have I to do with the exilarch who judges in accordance with Persian Law?!”⁶¹ The Bavli subsequently cites Rav Naḥman and other amoraim who offer an alternative ruling. Based on this reading of the passage, scholars have suggested that the passage serves as evidence that Rav Naḥman’s rulings were directed specifically against the exilarch and the Persian law with which he was associated.⁶² However, attention to a parallel passage in the Yerushalmi⁶³ as well as knowledge of botanical science reveals that the man’s complaint had actually nothing to do with Persian law, rather with Persian palm trees.⁶⁴

The other source that uses the term “Persian law” may indeed preserve some negative coloring. The Bavli presents a conversation between the second-generation Palestinian amora Reish Laqish and the younger Babylonian sage Rav Naḥman:

ההוא דא' לי' לחבר'י מנה מניתי לך בצד עמוד זה אמ' לי' לא עברתי בצד עמוד זה אתו תרי
סהדי אסהידו ביה דהשתין מים בצד עמוד זה אמר ריש לקיש הוחזק כפרן מתקיף לה רב
נחמן האי דינא פרסא הוא מי קאמ' מעולם בעסק זה קאמ' ליה

Someone said to his fellow, “I counted out for you one hundred *zuz* by the side of this pillar.” He said to him, “I did not pass by the side of this pillar.” Two witnesses came. They testified that he had urinated by the side of that pillar. Reish Laqish said: He is deemed a liar. R. Naḥman raised an objection: This judgment is a Persian one! Did

[the defendant] ever say “never”? He was saying [simply that he never passed by the side of the pillar] “in connection with this affair!”⁶⁵

In this passage, Reish Laqish considers any misstatement, regardless of how apparently inconsequential, damaging to a litigant’s creditability. Therefore, if a defendant says that he never passed by a pillar where a plaintiff claims to have given him a loan and witnesses come and testify that the defendant urinated next to the pillar, the latter is declared a liar. Rav Naḥman, however, objects that such a strict interpretation of a defendant’s words is unwarranted, and that considering him a liar is akin to Persian law.⁶⁶ By claiming never to have passed the pillar, the defendant merely intends to say that he never passed by the pillar in connection with this particular case.

As such, this passage does seem to contain a negative usage of “Persian law,” which just so happens to be attributed to Rav Naḥman. Nevertheless, two important factors complicate a simple reading of Rav Naḥman’s remark here. First, the subsequent section apparently contains an alternative tradition⁶⁷ about an identical case in which it was Rav Naḥman, and not Reish Laqish, who stated that the defendant, by denying ever passing by the pillar, is established as a liar. Further, in this second passage it is Rav Naḥman’s student, Rava, who disagrees and reasons that people can make mistakes in regards to inconsequential matters. Notably, Rava does not use the phrase “This is a Persian judgment.” It should also be noted that the version of the exchange between Reish Laqish and Rav Naḥman as it appears in the Vatican 140 manuscript is missing the crucial word “Persian” and simply reads: “This is a judgment (האי דינא) (הוא?)!” While one may be tempted to dismiss this variant by saying that the scribe merely forgot to write the word “Persian,” it may be just as likely that the Vatican 140 manuscript preserves the original reading⁶⁸—one that is opposed to the *vulgate* which was textually “contaminated” by Rav Naḥman’s response in b. Bava Batra 173b.⁶⁹ In sum, while it may be that the phrase “Persian judgment” in the passages does reflect a negative approach to Persian courts and the Sasanian legal system, this need not be the sole interpretation of the data.

Yaakov Elman has suggested another interpretation of Rav Naḥman’s statement in b. Bava Batra—one that is perhaps more in line with the image of a rabbi relatively acculturated to the Persian milieu and in contact with judges in the exilarch’s court and beyond.⁷⁰ Specifically, if one peels away the Stam’s comments and editorial framing

of Rav Naḥman's statement (including even the word "rather"), it is possible to recover a more neutral-to-positive assessment of Persian law:

מתקיף לה \ אמר רב נחמן האי דינא דפרסאי . . . מאי לא יפרע מן הערב לא יתבע הערב
תחלה

Rav Naḥman raised an objection / said⁷¹ this is the law of the Persians! . . . What is [the meaning of the *mishna*'s ruling that] "he may not exact payment from the guarantor?" [That] he [may] not demand [payment from] the guarantor first.

Without the intervening anonymous commentary, the two statements attributed to Rav Naḥman actually cohere quite well. Rav Naḥman notes that the *mishna* should be interpreted in line with Persian law, and that the creditor may go to the guarantor when the debtor is insolvent. It is possible that the Bavli's anonymous layer took two statements of Rav Naḥman that it received independently. In the course of weaving these statements into a pericope, their meaning was reversed so that Rav Naḥman is said to disagree with the literal reading of the *mishna* specifically because it is like Persian law. While the text of this passage as it comes down to us does seem to initially present Rav Naḥman as criticizing Persian law in some way or another, the work of a higher and lower text-critical approach suggests that this need not be the case. It is possible that actually Rav Naḥman originally suggested that the *mishna* should be interpreted in line with Persian law and this approach was deemed problematic by the Stam.

Regardless of how one chooses to interpret Rav Naḥman's statements, the Stam apparently understands them—and also the particulars of Sasanian credit law—differently and apparently quite negatively. Nevertheless, here too there is a fair amount of evidence that the Bavli's anonymous voice is not as extreme in its depiction of Sasanian law as may first appear. Furthermore, a close reading of Sasanian credit law as it survives in MHD suggests the possibility that the Stam may be reacting to a specific feature in the credit system and is not criticizing a caricatured, impossible system of credit law.⁷²

In short, notwithstanding its reception in late talmudic and medieval times, Rav Naḥman's original comments regarding Persian law should not be read as evidence of a generally negative view of the Sasanian legal system. When disembedded from its editorial framework, his remarks on the penultimate *mishna* in Bava Batra actually seem to reflect a rather neutral-to-positive comparative posture

toward Sasanian law. According to one reading, Rav Naḥman's knowledge of Persian law actually encourages him to reinterpret the *mishna* and bring it *in line* with the Sasanian view on the matter. The negative sense that accompanies Rav Naḥman's statement is actually the legacy of a series of reinterpretations by the Stam; medieval scribes who introduced some changes; medieval commentators and their exegetical decisions; and finally, the interpretations of modern scholars.

The complex and dynamic evolutionary processes that this material underwent are markedly different from the form of discourse studied in the last chapter. Most visibly, the original statement of Rav Naḥman without its editorial framing reflects an ability to think clearheadedly along non-dualistic grounds about a Sasanian institution. According to the most positive interpretation of his remarks, Rav Naḥman is going beyond the phenomenon of merely "using" Zoroastrianism and its institutions to critique internal Jewish problems. In fact, his respect for Sasanian jurisprudence leads him to new interpretative positions. The apparent shift in later layers and commentaries of the Talmud apparently reflects an inability to imagine that the rabbis might have seen anything at all positive in Persian law, or might have seen Persian law as somehow equivalent for the purposes of comparison. Interestingly, this ability to openly consider the proximity of Sasanians and their institutions to rabbinic society, accompanied by a subsequent failure of the imagination in later, anonymous layers of the talmudic tradition, is something that shows up in the next set of texts.

SASANIAN ROYAL "RABBIS" AND THE SCOPE OF THE RABBINIC IMAGINATION

Babylonian rabbis, like other non-Persians in Sasanian Iran, looked warily at the long hand of Empire, which seemed always to be collecting taxes,⁷³ confiscating property,⁷⁴ and limiting authority.⁷⁵ In truth, Jews had it relatively good—certainly if one compares their situation with the Manichaeans for most of their history in the Sasanian Empire, and the Sasanian Christian community after Rome adopted Christianity. For one, the Babylonian Jewish community was also able to trust their overlords in ways that neither Eastern Christians nor Jews living under Roman/Byzantine rule could.⁷⁶ And yet through all of this, Babylonian Jewry remained a minority in the Sasanian

Empire—never able to ascend to real positions of power and essentially at the mercy of the royal and religious ruling classes. Authority was available to Jews solely within the framework of partial *self*-governance, and it was realized primarily in the institution of the exilarch and his courts. It would seem that access to the imperial court could be achieved only in the grand halls of the rabbinic imagination.

Reality did not prevent Babylonian rabbis from telling stories about encounters with Sasanian royals. In fact, it may well have encouraged it. Since the early third century of the Common Era, rabbinic culture had established pathways for thinking about its relationship with the sovereign; famously, in the form of stories told about Rabbi Yehuda the patriarch and the Roman Caesar Antoninus son of Severus.⁷⁷ Within the space of these tales, the rabbis were able to conceive of an equivalency between the rabbinic patriarch and the Roman sovereign. Some texts went even further and painted Antoninus as graciously subservient to Rabbi. Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin have suggested that the Rabbi-Antoninus story-cycle performs important cultural work as rabbinic society thought through its distinct situation in the Diaspora.⁷⁸ Some of the Bavli's anecdotes about Babylonian rabbis and Iranian rulers, which in certain cases closely echo Rabbi-Antoninus vignettes,⁷⁹ might be read along the same lines. In other words, talmudic stories told about Babylonian rabbis and their Iranian sovereigns were, so to speak, good to think with.

A few of the talmudic sources portray Antoninus as curious about the Torah and its commandments, a motif that perhaps functioned as a wish fulfillment assuring rabbis that the exceedingly particularistic task of rabbinic study and praxis held greater significance in the wider world of the Roman Empire. Interestingly, although in these stories Antoninus is portrayed as very close to Rabbi, he remains essentially apart from rabbinic study culture. Even according to the talmudic tradition that Antoninus converted to Judaism,⁸⁰ there is no indication that the storytellers thought that the Roman ruler ever truly became a studying and teaching rabbi.

This final observation serves to highlight a set of stories in the Bavli in which the Sasanian king actually does become a kind of rabbi, so much so that the line between Iranian sovereign and Babylonian rabbinic identity is thoroughly blurred to the point at which later authorities assume that mention of the Sasanian king functions as a nickname for one amora or another. Although the talmudic anecdotes about rabbis and Sasanian monarchs contain much cultural

significance that still needs to be explicated,⁸¹ here I focus only on the motif of the Sasanian king, or, more precisely, his name, functioning as a rabbi or a rabbinic nickname.

To begin with, it is worth citing one passage in which King Shapur is described as knowledgeable in rabbinic ritual law to a fairly impressive degree. The story appears at the very end of Tractate Avoda Zara and concerns its final *mishna*, which describes the different processes necessary to render vessels purchased from non-Jews kosher. Compared with the other utensils in the list, the *mishna*'s ruling regarding knives—that they merely require polishing—is relatively lenient. The relevant passage in the Bavli reads as follows:

[א] אמ' רב הונא⁸² ונועצה בקרקע עשרה פעמים⁸³
 אמ' רבא⁸⁴ ובמקום קשה⁸⁵
 אמ' רב כהנא ובסכין שאין בה גומות⁸⁶
 תניא נמי הכי סכין יפה⁸⁷ שאין בה פגיונות⁸⁸ נועצה עשרה פעמים בקרקע ודיו⁸⁹
 אמ' רב הונא בריה דרב יהושע ולאכול⁹⁰ בה את הצונן

[ב] מר יהודה ובאטי בר טובי הוו יתבי קמיה דשבור מלכא איתיו לקמי' אתרוגא פסק ואכל
 ופסק ויהב ליה לבאטי בר טובי דעצה עשר זמנין בארעא ופסק ויהב ליה למר יהודה אמ'
 ליה באטי אטו ההוא גברא לאו יהודה הוא אמ' ליה מר קים לי בגויה ומר לא קים לי בגויה
 איכא דאמרי הכי אמ' ליה אידכר מאי דעבדת באורתא

[A] Rav Huna said: And one sticks it into the ground ten times.

Rava said: And [it must be stuck] into a hard place.

R. Kahana said: And with a knife without notches.

It has been also taught [in a *baraita*]: A good knife that does not have blemishes—one sticks it ten times into the ground and it is sufficient.

Rav Huna the son of Rav Yehoshu'a said: And [this method is effective only] to eat cold [food] with it.

[B] Mar Yehuda and Baṭi b. Tovi were sitting with King Shapur and a citron was set before them. [The king] cut a slice and ate it, cut a slice and handed it to Baṭi b. Tovi, stuck [the knife] ten times in the earth, cut a slice and handed it to Mar Yehuda. Baṭi said to [the king], “what—am I not a Jew?!” [The King] said to him, “Of him I am certain [that he is a Jew]. About you I am not certain.” And there are those who say that this is what he said to him: “Remember what you did at night?”⁹²

Some witnesses⁹³ of this passage read the narrative as directly supporting the laws discussed by the amoraim immediately prior to it. Nevertheless, this linkage seems artificial and in any case is not present in the best witnesses.⁹⁴ The passage therefore should be seen as containing two different segments—a legal discussion that concerns

the *mishna*'s ruling regarding koshering knives, and a narrative episode marginally related to it. The initial legal discussion contains the opinions of four amoraim regarding the ritual preparation of knives purchased from non-Jews.⁹⁵ The story, which incidentally closes the tractate, describes King Shapur as being sympathetic to Mar Yehuda's rabbinic dietary needs. The narrative seems to accentuate King Shapur's piety by depicting him heroically plunging the knife into the ground ten times⁹⁶ to ensure that Mar Yehuda, unlike his non-rabbinic peer Baṭi b. Ṭovi,⁹⁷ may partake of the citron.⁹⁸ Perhaps significantly, the story appears as the conclusion of a tractate concerned with the laws of idolatry and the interactions between Jews and non-Jews on issues like non-kosher food.⁹⁹

This story about King Shapur, Mar Yehuda, and Baṭi is not the only talmudic depiction of a Sasanian (Zoroastrian) king versed in the intricacies of Jewish law. Note King Shapur (I)'s appearance in the following passage:

אמ' אפרים תלמידו של ריש לקיש משו' ריש לקיש הלכה כרבי שמע' אמרוה קמיה שבור
מלכא אמ' ל' זיל נימטייה אפריין¹⁰⁰ לר' שמעון

Efraim, a disciple of Reish Laqish, said in the name of Reish Laqish:
The law agrees with R. Shim'on. They said it in front of King Shapur.
He said: Let us bring praise (*āfrīn*) to R. Shim'on.¹⁰¹

In this anecdote, a certain rabbinic law was reported to King Shapur and the king praised the ruling, using the proper Middle Persian word *āfrīn*.¹⁰² The passage concerns the relatively obscure, final *mishna* in Tractate Bava Mezia, which discusses the ownership of vegetables that grow between two adjoining, terraced properties.

שתי גנות זו על גבי זו והירק בנתיים ר' מאיר אומ' של עליון ור' יהודה אומ' שלתחתון . . . ר'
שמעון או' כל שהעליון יכול לפשוט את ידו וליטול הרי הוא שלו והשאר של תחתון

[If there were] two [terraced] gardens one above the other and vegetables [grew] between them, R. Meir says: [They belong] to the [owner of the] upper [garden]. And R. Yehuda says: To the [owner of the] lower [garden]. . . . R. Shim'on says: Whatsoever [the owner of] the upper [garden] can take by stretching out his hand belongs to him, and the rest belongs to [the owner of] the lower [garden].¹⁰³

Nothing that has come down to us from Sasanian law deals directly with a scenario like the one described in this *mishna*, though this does not mean that cases of this sort did not interest Sasanian jurists.¹⁰⁴

Regardless, the strangeness of King Shapur involving himself in a technical rabbinic discussion like this is noteworthy. This is emphasized in a comment on the passage by Rashi, the medieval talmudic commentary *par excellence*, which emphasizes that it indeed was King Shapur who expressed his approval of R. Shim'on:

It seems to me that this is actually King Shapur. And he was a Persian King and an expert in the [Jewish] laws. And they recited in front of him this [ruling] of R. Shim'on of our *mishna*. And he praised him and said, "Let us bring praise to R. Shim'on."

Clearly, the significance of the story about King Shapur's praise of R. Shim'on should not be sought on an historical axis, as the king was certainly not an expert in rabbinic law. However, the fact that Babylonian rabbis could imagine him as such is no doubt worthy of pause. At the very least, despite the various tensions, suspicions, and stereotypes that played a role in the relationships between Jews and their Sasanian Iranian overlords, there may be reflected here a sense that the two communities engaged in mutually recognizable forms of discourse, especially of the legal or scholastic variety. Importantly, the insertion of King Shapur into this discussion reflects a form of discourse radically different from the one traced in the previous chapter.

Rashi's remark ("It seems to me that this is actually King Shapur") alludes to passages in which the name "King Shapur" is actually taken to signify an entity other than the Sasanian king. Indeed, Rashi suggests just that in his comments to a text that describes Rav Nahman trying to rule on a case of theft.¹⁰⁵ Almost comically, Rav Nahman's student, Rava, incessantly interrupts him in order to point out that the ruling is incorrect, even after the teacher modifies it somewhat. Frustrated, Rav Nahman exclaims:

אמ' ליה לא אמינא לך כי יתיבנא בדינא לא תימא לי מידי דאמ' הונא חברין¹⁰⁶ אנא ושבור
מלכא אחי בדינא¹⁰⁷ האי איניש גולנא¹⁰⁸ הוא ובעינא דאינקסיה

"Did I not say to you that when I am sitting in judgment you should not say anything to me! For Huna our colleague said: I and King Shapur are [like] brothers in respect to law. That person [who stole the pair of oxen] is a [recognized] robber, and I wish to penalize him."¹⁰⁹

Rav Nahman refers to something Rav Huna "our colleague" said concerning King Shapur in order to demand that Rava respect Rav Nahman's ruling.¹¹⁰ Significantly, Rashi *ad loc* explains that the name "King Shapur" is in fact a reference to Shmuel.

As much as Rashi's interpretation clearly goes against the plain sense of the passage, it does have some basis. Elsewhere, the Bavli's anonymous voice claims that a reference to King Shapur actually means Shmuel or Rava, as the case may be.

אמ' רבה אמינא¹¹¹ מילתא דלא אמרה שבור מלכא ומנו שמואל איכא דאמר [אמ' רב פפא]
אמינא¹¹² מילתא דלא אמרה שבור מלכא ומנו רבא

Rava said: I am saying something that King Shapur did not say—
and who is he? Shmuel. Others say [that it was] R. Pappa [who] said:
I am saying something which King Shapur did not say—and who is
he?—Rava.¹¹³

The topic of discussion in this passage—a relatively minor matter in the exegesis of biblical genealogy—is unimportant, aside from the fact that one doubts whether even the rabbis thought King Shapur could actually have contributed to the discussion. Instead, the invocation of King Shapur functions as a boast,¹¹⁴ which alludes to a perception of the king as impressively knowledgeable and capable of saying wise things. On the other hand, the Bavli's editorial voice is unprepared to accept the plain meaning of this comparative boast. Instead, it suggests that “King Shapur” should be identified with a Babylonian amora associated with him in other stories—either Shmuel or Rava.¹¹⁵ Once again, a later hand shifts a depiction of King Shapur as a rabbinic-like, legally or dialectically accomplished figure, away from its normal signified.

In regards to Rashi's comment at the end of b. Bava Me'zia, it may be noted that the insistence that King Shapur was an expert in Jewish law, and therefore might conceivably participate in a rabbinic discussion, hints at some bewilderment on Rashi's part. In fact, Rashi's comment is reminiscent of another remark he made on a passage considered previously. At b. Nidda 20b, Rashi struggles to explain the surprisingly rabbinic conduct of King Shapur II's mother, known in talmudic tradition as Ifra Hormiz, sending bloodstains to Rava for ritual examination. As I have noted, the image is particularly bizarre since it is not clear why a non-Jewish aristocratic woman would want to observe rabbinic purity rituals. What is more, rabbinic sources explicitly rule that menstruating non-Jewish women do not convey impurity biblically.¹¹⁶ Rashi is thus forced to account for both facts by saying: “She would keep the menstrual laws and she was close to converting.”¹¹⁷ It is quite interesting that the two talmudic portrayals have a Sasanian figure acting surprisingly “rabbinic,” and in both cases Rashi hints at some puzzlement as he struggles to solve the riddle of their rabbinic behavior.

Clearly, what was difficult for an eleventh-century French rabbi to conceive of was apparently not beyond the imaginative scope of his late antique Babylonian rabbinic forbearers. Alongside the provincial rabbinic fantasies of royals lavishing honor upon rabbis and lauding the Torah and its study, we seem to have recorded in these stories a rabbinic assessment of Zoroastrian discourse and behavior as being considered sufficiently close enough to Judaism to allow the mind to envision Sasanian royals as conversant and interested in the intricacies of Jewish law. For one, as I have suggested elsewhere, the apparent similarity between Zoroastrianism and Judaism in regards to rituals of menstruation—which the rabbis seemed to have noticed—led to an attempt to argue for the antiquity and superiority of the Jewish system of menstrual impurity vis-à-vis its Zoroastrian counterpart.¹¹⁸ And there are many other examples of proximity between Zoroastrian ritual law and theology to its rabbinic counterparts. Here, the fact that in some cases both the Bavli's anonymous voice and Rashi suggest that "King Shapur" is really just a code name for a rabbi highlights the level of genuine surprise experienced at discovering a Sasanian king in the very fabric of rabbinic discourse.

CONCLUSION

Like my observations about Babylonian rabbinic hatred, the "non-intellectual" recitation of rabbinic texts, the strange association of the Parva chamber in the Jerusalem Temple with the Zoroastrian priesthood, and Rav Nahman's comparative approach to Persian law, the present motif constitutes an alternative rabbinic "discourse of the Other" that actually brings Zoroastrians or Sasanian officials closer to the world of the rabbis. Notably, in this case Sasanians are not used to criticize internal Jewish institutions. Instead, they appear as participants in central aspects of rabbinic culture. The cultural meaning of these texts is far from transparent, but surely they must be doing something quite different than the distancing rhetoric. The existence of this distinct sort of "discourse of the other" alongside the starker forms surveyed in the previous chapter reflects the complex cultural processes that Babylonian rabbinic society was working through in the "thick" context of Sasanian Iran. These fermentive processes justify, ground, and encourage a deep and wide-ranging project of reading the Talmud in its Sasanian context. It is this endeavor that I now hope to illustrate and theorize.

POSTSCRIPT: DOES THE TALMUD'S ANONYMOUS VOICE
THINK THAT SASANIAN LAW ALWAYS ALLOWS
THE CREDITOR TO PURSUE THE GUARANTOR?

The traditional interpretation of the Bavli's claim that "on the contrary; they pursue the guarantor!" at b. Bava Batra 173b is that in Sasanian law the creditor always pursues the guarantor without approaching the borrower. However, such a claim does not square with the evidence of Sasanian law that has survived, and in any case seems quite extreme. At least two main possibilities present themselves: Is the anonymous voice simply unaware of the basics of Sasanian credit law? Alternatively, is it attempting to dissuade Jews from approaching Persian courts by falsely claiming that these courts are unjust since they allow creditors to collect directly from all guarantors whenever they wish?¹¹⁹

To be sure, the context does seem to dictate that "they pursue the guarantor" actually means "they pursue the guarantor *exclusively*." Accordingly, the classic interpretation of the passage has been to read this anonymous talmudic observation as a negative depiction of Sasanian law.¹²⁰ Yet this is not necessarily the sole, or even correct, explanation. The section in which the phrase and its parallels appear gives no indication that it is meant in a disparaging way. It is possible to read "they pursue the guarantor" as a matter-of-fact observation which claims that as opposed to either the literal interpretation of the *mishna* or general Jewish law, the Sasanian courts do have an established system of debt surety that allows the creditor to pursue the guarantor, at least *in certain instances*. Therefore, since the Talmud's anonymous voice understands Rav Nahman's exclamation "This is Persian law" as based on a literal reading of the *mishna* that forbids the creditor to collect from the guarantor—even when the debtor is insolvent—it immediately retorts that Sasanian law does in fact allow the creditor to pursue the guarantor *when the debtor is insolvent*.

Other anonymous editorial comments that appear elsewhere in the Bavli confirm that there was a perceived difference between rabbinic law—that does not *single-mindedly* "pursue the guarantor"—and Persian law—which *often* gives the creditor access to the guarantor. A passage adjacent to the one under discussion at b. Bava Batra 174b describes a case in which the trustee of an estate¹²¹ paid a creditor without first consulting with the orphans.¹²² In that passage, the notion that non-Jewish law "pursues the guarantor" is significant

for determining whether or not one should assume that the original debtor previously set aside security money (*zrarei*) for the creditor or not. Likewise, a discussion at b. Bava Meḏia 71 a–b considers a *baraita*¹²³ that seems to permit a Jew to serve as a guarantor on an interest-accruing loan with a non-Jewish creditor, even though Jewish law forbids Jews to collect interest-accruing loans from a co-religionist.¹²⁴ The Bavli questions this permissive law, since the non-Jewish creditor will “pursue the guarantor”—that is, since there is a situation of debt surety, ultimately the Jewish guarantor will end up collecting interest from the Jewish borrower when he wants to be reimbursed for paying off the loan, and will thereby sin by taking interest from a fellow Jew. The Bavli’s response is that in this particular case, the non-Jew agreed to follow rabbinic credit law and not collect from the guarantor.

Like the b. Bava Batra 173b passage, these two texts have been interpreted as assuming that non-Jewish creditors always go *directly* to guarantors for loan collection. Accordingly, at b. Bava Batra 174b the argument is that a debtor will probably not have set aside security money for the creditor since he relies on the fact that the guarantor (and not the debtor) will end up paying off the loan.¹²⁵ Similarly, in the b. Bava Meḏia passage concerned with the laws of interest, since creditors *always* collect from the guarantors, in the case of an interest-accruing loan if a non-Jew follows Sasanian law the Jewish guarantor will necessarily end up collecting interest from the Jewish borrower in order to recover his money.

However, there are other interpretive possibilities available. First of all, these passages may actually be assuming that Jewish law follows Rabba and Rav Yosef in accepting a literal reading of m. Bava Batra 10:14 that normally protects the guarantor from having to pay off the loan.¹²⁶ Accordingly, a guarantor for a Jewish-law-abiding creditor assumes that he will normally not be pursued by the creditor. In regards to b. Bava Batra 174b, this may mean that the debtor will set aside security money since he cannot normally rely on the guarantor having to repay the loan. On the other hand, since a non-Jewish law-abiding creditor *may* collect from the guarantor *in the event* that the debtor is insolvent, this will have an opposite effect in regard to security money. Likewise, in regard to b. Bava Meḏia 71a–b, a non-Jewish creditor following non-Jewish law *may* pursue the guarantor in certain instances so that if it is an interest-accruing loan, the Jewish guarantor could end up collecting interest. On the other hand, if the non-Jewish creditor agrees to follow Jewish law, he will normally be

barred from collecting the interest from the guarantor, since Rabba and Rav Yosef normally do not allow the creditor to approach the guarantor.

Admittedly, this approach is radical particularly because it seems to contradict Jewish credit law as it has been conceived from its earliest medieval articulations in geonic literature. It may be more prudent to seek an alternative where the anonymous observation that “non-Jews pursue the guarantor” is not an absolute rule, rather one of degree. In other words, Sasanian law assumes a situation of debt security and allows the creditor to pursue the guarantor in more cases than Jewish law does. If true, this difference of degree might also help explain the related passages at b. Bava Meṣia 71a–b and b. Bava Batra 174b.

Indeed, a closer examination of MHD’s chapter on surety reveals that as much as Sasanian law normally permits the creditor to collect from the guarantor only when the debtor is insolvent or unavailable,¹²⁷ there are contractual formulations that, according to some opinions, construct a kind of debt surety that binds the guarantor to pay regardless of the debtor’s status.¹²⁸ MHD 56:15–57:2¹²⁹ records a discussion between an anonymous opinion and the sixth-century C.E.¹³⁰ juriconsult Puṣānweh son of Āzādmard about a certain clause which a creditor may add to a surety agreement to allow collection directly from the guarantor: *ka ān paymān andar hamē kunēd* (“if he makes the time-frame indefinite”). The first anonymous opinion holds that this clause indeed allows the creditor to collect directly from the guarantor (*ēg-iš rāh ō pāyēnān*), while the jurist Puṣānweh son of Āzādmard elaborates and seems to provide a different approach. In addition, other kinds of co-sureties (*ham-pāyandān*), which are too complicated to fully describe here, may have at least given the impression that Sasanian law provides the creditor with more access to guarantors than rabbinic law. The anonymous voice’s claim that Persians pursue guarantors might be responding to these phenomena.¹³¹ In sum, there is no compelling reason to interpret the Stam’s reference to surety in Persian law as generally disparaging of Sasanian jurisprudence.

In Iran

Reading the Talmud in Its Iranian Context

L. P. Hartley's oft-cited epigraph about the foreignness of the past has in itself become a kind of purloined letter, invisible on account of its very ubiquity. This is a problem even when the historical period under consideration is well attested, yet it presents an even greater challenge in cases where the surviving record is fragmentary. As I have described previously, the material and textual remains that are available for reconstructing Jewish and Zoroastrian life in Sasanian Iran are, quantitatively speaking, rather meager. The evidence that has come down to us is almost entirely literary and it presents numerous difficulties for historical research, particularly on account of its enclosed, "self-sufficient" quality. Almost all surviving Sasanian compositions are inward-looking, so that direct correlations between the text of the Bavli and Middle Persian literature on the one hand and historical realities on the other are relatively few and far in between. Even when they do occur one wonders to what extent they reflect reality, or whether they merely constitute set-pieces assembled as part of an internal discourse. These factors and others similar to them would seem to exclude the possibility of an extensive comparative research program that studies the interactions between late antique Jews and Zoroastrians, their texts, and their religions.

In this chapter I finally attempt to read the Talmud "in" Iran. I will again take up the discussion initiated at the beginning of the book and articulate a number of strategies for reading the Bavli within its Iranian context despite the challenging nature of the evidence. Instead of advancing immediately to the final—and to my mind the

most useful—approach, I intend to work unhurriedly through some of the more standard strategies for comparing religions and religious literatures, since I believe these still have much to contribute, and also because without them it is impossible to appreciate the newer methodologies.

My initial strategy attempts to compensate for the apparent lack of intersection between the Bavli and Middle Persian literature, and constitutes a more traditional examination of influences and its various permutations. As such, I shift my gaze away from texts and literatures toward the people and the minds that created them, and the practices and theologies that the texts reflect. Subsequently, I attempt to hone in on the very discursiveness and textuality of the Bavli and Middle Persian literature that seem to so complicate direct comparisons. Surprising as it may seem, this allows me to consider certain kinds of historical “encounters” between Jews and Persians, namely, between their literatures. With this I consider the use of larger textual systems inhabited by Jews and Zoroastrians as a tool by which to read the Talmud in its Iranian context.¹

THE COMPARATIVE ENDEAVOR

Talmudo-Iranica is first and foremost a comparative endeavor, and predominantly a program of research that normally considers the way one culture and textual tradition influenced another. But what does the term “comparative” mean here and, more generally speaking, in the history of religions? Moreover, what if any is the use of the category “influence”—a term that although much maligned has been central to the scholarly habit of comparing cultures and literatures?

Jonathan Z. Smith has noted that the drawing of parallels and the construction of comparisons are “a fundamental characteristic of human intelligence,” and even “the omnipresent substructure of human thought,” present already in Sumerian similes and ancient Greek philosophical thought.² Smith reminds scholars that the need for self-awareness in the act of comparing cannot be overstated, nor should the deficiencies and potential dangers of the comparative endeavor be glossed over.³ Even if one chooses not to adopt some of Smith’s more radical formulations, for example, that comparisons operate according to the mechanics of the “joke,”⁴ it still should be acknowledged that a comparison can often constitute “an active, at times even a playful, enterprise of deconstruction and reconstitution

which, kaleidoscope-like gives the scholar a shifting set of characteristics with which to negotiate the relations between his or her theoretical interests and data stipulated as exemplary.”⁵ All this is directly relevant for interrogating the types of comparisons available to Talmudists interested in Middle Persian literature, their greater significance, and the potential methodological hazards.

Comparative research methods that could just as well have examined connections between the Talmud and oral texts from twentieth-century cargo-cults do not constitute the most productive approaches to studying Middle Persian literature and the Bavli. While a comparative analysis of the former type might advance our understandings of the machinery of religion and oral text production, Talmudo-Iranica attempts to make a more immediate contribution to the elucidation of religious texts by reference to parallels from their geo-historical context. That is, the goal is ultimately to chart a series of comparative genealogies that consider the development and cross-cultural interactions of Sasanian Jewish and Persian practices and “*mentalités*,” the ways in which these affected the shape of rabbinic and Zoroastrian literatures, and the consequences that such a comparative perspective should have on the reading experience of modern scholars.

This sort of textual analysis is fraught with some basic tensions operative in all comparative endeavors, including the “Same-Different” bifurcation.⁶ The Bavli is obviously not in any meaningful way equivalent to Middle Persian literature, nor does it constitute a purely Sasanian Iranian compilation. And yet, the two corpora are also not irreconcilably different from one another. Any claim that entire systems of beliefs or practices that appear in the Bavli are identical to those present in Middle Persian literature should be immediately dismissed. Likewise, the assertion that an entire system in the Bavli is *sui generis*, “unique,”⁷ or hermetically sealed off from the context in which and from which it developed should likewise be rejected.

Beyond these platitudes, however, how is one to approach the emblematic moment of comparison, when discreet textual units in one literature seem to parallel those in another? Are these parallels merely coincidental? Perhaps they might be related to broader structures of human experience that do not advance the charting of historical connections. Do they evince a common source or perhaps direct borrowing? Alternatively, should they be attributed to more complex forms of interaction? The following is a list of some of the most recognizable interpretations of parallels:

- (1) Scholars of religion often encounter the “false friends” of parallel languages, practices and institutions. Famously, there is no genetic connection between biblical Hebrew “*manna*,” and Oceanic “*mana*,” despite the two terms sharing not only homonymy but conceptual similarities as well.⁸ The problem of course is that it is often difficult to determine whether such parallels are false or true in the case of historically linked communities like Sasanian Jews and Zoroastrians. Parallels that appear in both corpora prior to historical interaction probably preclude clear manifestations of influence, but even this is not always the case.
- (2) Another possibility concerns parallels that may have been generated by widely held beliefs. One example concerns the presence of ritual practices that govern the emission of bodily fluids, like menstruation. One cannot claim that Judaism simply inherited its concern for menstruation from Zoroastrianism, or vice-versa, since menstrual purity ritual practices appear in countless societies divided by great geographical and chronological divides.
- (3) Similarly, a parallel might derive from the effects of shared circumstances, including political, economic, and geomorphic conditions. This sort of parallel does not necessarily derive from real interaction between the two communities, rather from their sharing of space and other circumstances.
- (4) Parallels may stem from direct forms of influence. It is possible that one group was fond of a particular religious motif, practice, belief, or institution and adopted it wholesale. However, with some notable exceptions, communities, especially before the modern era, were more often engaged in forms of boundary drawing and policing.⁹ As such, direct and acknowledged examples of influence are unlikely, though not impossible.

Recently, a number of scholars have argued that while parallels between certain texts may be “real”—that is, reflect some kind of historical interaction—the precise processes of influence are necessarily irretrievable. Moreover, the very search for straightforward pathways of influence is problematic, in part because this process imagines two completely self-contained, impervious (textual, religious, cultural, et al.) entities that meet, intercourse, and part—leaving one entity changed and the other unmoved. In an appropriately named manifesto, Michael Satlow’s article “Beyond Influence: Toward a New Historiographic Paradigm” lists four critical aspects of what he considers to be responsible comparative research in Jewish studies.¹⁰ These include a renewed focus on people and their agency rather than abstractions like “Judaism,” particularly when used in statements like “Judaism believes”; a recognition of the fluid nature of personal,

national, and religious identity; the presumption of similarity between cultures and the need to explicate the differences; and the incorporation of various kinds of *non*-literary data—in antiquity this primarily means material culture. Satlow also demonstrates how recent comparative work in Jewish studies is beginning to avoid many traditional models of influence and instead opts for two basic approaches. Thus, continuing the list above:

- (5) One may look at parallels as related but variant expressions of two communities participating in a broader cultural project.¹¹
- (6) Alternatively, the presence of influence can be accounted for only as a subtle interplay of phenomena like reception, incorporation, rejection, and reaction.

Some permutations of the last two models can be found in the work of Yaakov Elman. Elman has interpreted many of the Middle Persian–Bavli parallels as reflecting what he calls “a common universe of discourse.” On other occasions, he adopts an approach inspired by James R. Russel’s observation that “influences from one quarter . . . do not preclude promiscuous intermingling with material from another tradition . . . ; influences need not be a graft, but can be also a stimulus that brings into prominence a feature that had been present previously, but not important.”¹² Some scholars who research the relationship between Palestinian rabbinic literature and its literary neighbors have used terms borrowed from the study of folklore, such as “ecotypification,” which refers to the local adaptation of motifs.¹³ This terminology might also be applied to the study of the Bavli in its Iranian context.

The final categories of forms of negotiated influence and joint cultural production are attractive in the ways that they acknowledge the inherent messiness of the data and of cultural exchange. Sasanian Iran was effervescent and complex, and so it is no surprise that its literary and material remains are cut from the same cloth. Satlow’s call to also engage forms of non-literary evidence is about more than looking for data in new places. It is part of the recent attempt of some Talmudists to go beyond basic philological research and provide “thick descriptions,”¹⁴ especially when they are encouraged by encounters with evidence that lies outside the borders of the particular canon under examination. As such, the task of reading the Bavli in light of Middle Persian literature requires nothing less than an eclectic and dexterous strategy on par with the diverse forms of historical interaction experienced by Sasanian Jews and Zoroastrians themselves.¹⁵

IN SEARCH OF INFLUENCE

In a type of discourse common in some academic cultures and particularly in Jewish studies, scholars have come to expect illustrations of “undeniable” and presumably uncomplicated instances of influence that can explain why a particular religious phenomenon looks the way it does. In light of the previous discussion, there is a need to take a step back and interrogate this expectation. First, in the context of studying Zoroastrianism and Judaism it is fair to ask whether the search for “influence” includes religious practices, theological thinking, talmudic narratives, or even the Bavli’s building blocks of motifs, vocabulary and linguistic structures. If the question does indeed refer to language, this recalls territory covered earlier when I looked at the possibility of communication between Aramaic-speaking rabbis and Persian-speaking Zoroastrians, and also at the significance of Iranian loanwords in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic. In that regard the simple answer is yes: Iranian language did influence Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, and in a myriad of ways.

But aside from this, the distance between basic aspects of languages and other structures of thinking is not great. To take one example, Geoffrey Herman has pointed out that the appearance of the Middle Persian loanword for “stable-master” (*āxwaryār*) in the Bavli does not merely, neutrally, signify a person responsible for horses. The term also carries with it a set of negative associations that apparently reflect the perception of this profession by talmudic storytellers. Cases like this one, which could be easily multiplied, might be thought of as a form of direct influence. That is to say, in Iranian society, stable-masters were seen as occupying a low rung. This “influenced” the way that Jews living in an Iranian milieu perceived stable-masters as well. This somewhat banal and wooden observation is compounded by Herman’s observation that when the Talmud reconstructs the biblical conversation between Ahasuerus and Vashti that so provoked the king’s wrath (Esther 1:12), it has Vashti insult the king by claiming that he originally served as a mere stable-master in her grandfather, Belshazzar’s, court. The Bavli uses the correct Iranian terminology when referring to Ahasuerus’s alleged former profession, and it follows certain conventions that show up in the Iranian epic tradition.¹⁶ If one wishes to adopt the terminology of “influence” here, it would be necessary to qualify this by recognizing a slightly different phenomenon of *adaptation* in which the host culture “receives” a

motif, absorbs it, and reuses it in subsequent acts of cultural production—again, a kind of ecotypification. In a similar vein, Herman has studied the influence that Iranian (and Armenian) narrative motifs have had on talmudic stories not only in providing a fresh stock of motifs, but even by affecting the arrangement of the various set-pieces by talmudic storytellers.¹⁷

THE MIRAGE OF INFLUENCE: SASANIAN ZOROASTRIAN AND RABBINIC VISIONS OF HELL

Often in the contemporary academic discourse on influence, Jewish studies scholars are particularly interested in evidence proving that core fundamentals of Judaism were clearly affected by non-Jewish religious traditions. The fact remains, however, that cultural exchange of any sort is rarely that simple. As an illustration, I present a pair of passages about postmortem divine punishment which, at first glance, seem to represent clear-cut borrowings, but after further examination nicely illustrate some of the complications inherent in the comparative work of Talmudo-Iranica.

Of the countless studies penned by students of the comparative study of religion, there has been an abiding interest in the relationship between Zoroastrian ideas concerning the afterlife and associated beliefs in Jewish and Christian texts. The argument normally proceeds as follows: Since the Hebrew Bible is more or less devoid of references to life after death, and Zoroastrianism contains a highly developed account of individual eschatology, the appearance of the afterlife in Jewish texts postdating both Persian dominion over the Land of Israel and the Jewish encounter with Iranian peoples in Mesopotamia derives from Zoroastrianism. Other studies either deny these connections altogether or point out that the full expression of Zoroastrian conceptions of the afterlife was not achieved until the writing down of Middle Persian texts in the ninth century C.E.—more than a millennium after the composition of the earliest Jewish apocalyptic texts that detail post-mortem existence.¹⁸ I have already noted the problematics of dating Zoroastrian literature, which especially in regard to research into the afterlife cast a long shadow. There is good reason to suppose that some of the so-called ninth-century texts, including those that relate to hell, comprise Sasanian, if not far more ancient, material. However, the present question is not whether the origins of the rabbinic hell can be found in Zoroastrian texts, but

if some of the Bavli's particular imagery of purgatory was affected by Zoroastrian beliefs.

In one of his two essential studies on the topic of postmortem punishment in rabbinic literature, Saul Lieberman notes that in contrast to Christian and Jewish apocalyptic literature, "rabbinic sources do not portray the topography of Gehenna in its details. . . . They do not mention the refined tortures of Gehenna, their minutiae, and the ramified penal code which governs Hades. The rabbis certainly lacked neither the imagination nor the legal mind required for such descriptions."¹⁹ Indeed, the majority of the few relevant passages preserved in the Bavli contain some rather vibrant imagery. One particularly stark vision appears in a passage at b. Soṭa 35a where a number of amoraim consider the punishment meted out to the Israelite spies for providing negative reports about the Promised Land to their fellow Israelites in the wilderness. The biblical verse that describes the death of the spies is itself relatively colorless: "Those who spread such calumnies about the land died of plague (*ba-magefa*) by the will of the Lord" (Numbers 14:37). The rabbis, however, venture to explain the death of the spies in more lurid detail:

אמר ר' שמעון בן לקיש²⁰ שמתו מיתה משונה אמר רבי חנינא בר פפא דרש רבי שילא איש
כפר תמרתה מלמד שנשתרבב לשונם ונפל על טיבורם והיו תולעים יוצאות מלשונם ונכנסות
בטיבורם ומטיבורם ונכנסות בלשונם רב נחמן בר יצחק אמר באסכרה מתו

R. Shim'on (Reish) b. Laqish said: They died an unnatural death. R. Ḥanina b. Pappa said [that] R. Shila of Kefar Tamarta expounded: This teaches us that their tongue was elongated, and fell to their navel, and there were worms issuing from it and entering their navel and from their navel and entering their tongue. R. Naḥman b. Yitzḥaq said: They died of croup.²¹

This short passage operates according to normative rabbinic exegetical and theological principles. Reish Laqish's interpretation is based on the presence of the definite article in the word "*the* plague (*ba-magefa*)."²² R. Naḥman b. Yitzḥaq's opinion seems to reflect the belief, found elsewhere in rabbinic literature, that croup is one of the punishments meted out for slander, and the spies were understood to have spoken slanderously about the Promised Land. R. Shila's bizarre image of elongated tongues and penetrating worms, however, seems to come out of nowhere.

Interestingly, R. Shila's description of the spies' punishment for slander is almost identical to the postmortem punishments for slander

and lying that appear in the *Ardā Wirāz nāmāg*, a kind of Middle Persian *Divina Commedia*:

u-m did ruwān ī mard-ēw kē uzwān pad zafar bērōn āhaxt ud xrafstarān hamē jūd u-m pūrsīd kū ēn tan čē wināh kard kē ruwān ōwōn pādīfrāh barēd gōwēd srōš-ahlaw ud ādur-yazd kū ēn ruwān ī ōy druwand mard kē-š pad gētiy spazgih kard ud mardōmān ēk abāg did pahikāft u-š ruwān pad pas ō dōšox hamē dwārist . . .

u-m did ruwān ī mard-ēw kē uzwān kirm hamē jūd u-m pūrsīd kū ēn tan čē wināh kard gōwēd srōš-ahlaw ud ādur-yazd kū ēn ruwān ī ōy druwand mard kē-š pad gētiy zūr ud drōw was guft ud ziyān ud wizend pad dāmān az-iš būd

And I saw the soul of a man whose tongue was drawn out from his mouth and the noxious creatures (*xrafstarān*) were chewing [it]. And I asked: What sin did this body commit whose soul is undergoing such punishment? Srōš the righteous and the divine Ādur (Fire) said: “This is the soul of that wicked man who in this world was slanderous and made people fight against each other, and whose soul was constantly scurrying back to Hell. . . .”²²

And I saw the soul of a man whose tongue was being gnawed by worms. And I asked: What sin did this body commit? Srōš the righteous and the divine Ādur said: This is the soul of that wicked man who in this world told many lies and falsehoods, and from it came much harm and damage to creatures.²³

There has been a considerable amount of debate regarding the origins of the work from which these passages have been taken.²⁴ From the outset it should be acknowledged that there is little in the Avesta that comes close to the vividly detailed visions of punishment that appear in *Ardā Wirāz nāmāg*. Some scholars assume that the text was composed at earliest in late Sasanian times, and perhaps even postdates the Muslim conquest of Iran. In light of the second- and third-century flourishing of a related genre in some Christian texts, there are some scholars who have suggested that *Ardā Wirāz nāmāg* actually represents a derivative work indebted to Judeo-Christian literature. Even if this claim has some truth to it, *Ardā Wirāz nāmāg* probably constitutes a reformulation of more ancient Iranian traditions. The prioritization of its sins and punishments reflects a classically Iranian worldview, so for example there is a predominance of worms, reptiles, and other so-called noxious creatures (*xrafstarān*) which in Zoroastrianism are not merely nuances but comprise the army of the Evil Force, Ahreman.²⁵ Notably, this motif is already present in Kerdīr’s description of hell in his third-century C.E. inscription.²⁶ Thus, one

may wish to argue that R. Shila's description of the spies' fate is influenced by these Zoroastrian conceptions, especially since it contains the same general sin (slander/lying), location of punishment (drawn-out tongue), and agent of punishment (worms) as we find in the *Ardā Wirāz nāmāg* passage.

As always, on closer view the truth is more complicated. It first should be acknowledged that although this passage appears in the Babylonian Talmud, it is attributed to a Palestinian sage. Given what we know about rabbinic attributions and their reliability, this does not necessarily mean that R. Shila's statement in the passage solely reflects the views of a Palestinian amora. Still, a swift and superficial contextualization of his words in an Iranian milieu is equally problematic. A further point is the introduction of the description with the phrase "this teaches (*melamed*)" even though it is not clear how the verse functions as a proof-text for a vision of worms parading up and down the spies' elongated tongues, from the mouth to the navel and back.

Furthermore, a source-critical approach demonstrates that the entire Bavli passage incorporates and reshapes a series of midrashic discussions on the spies' punishment preserved in a passage at Ecclesiastes Rabba—a Palestinian midrash.²⁷ The midrash begins as a discussion about a typically sobering verse in Ecclesiastes (9:12): "And a man cannot even know his time. As fishes are enmeshed in an evil trap (*be-meẓoda ra'a*). . . ." Somewhat facetiously, the midrash asks whether from a fish's perspective there are good and bad traps, for why else would Ecclesiastes need to qualify that the trap in question is an evil one? The answer is that the verse must be referring to a hook, which is worse than a regular net since it kills just the same at sea as on dry land. Interspersed in this discussion is a debate between R. Shim'on b. Yoḥai and the rabbis about the punishment of the spies. R. Shim'on states that they died by their limbs dropping off piecemeal (*neshilat evarim*), while the rabbis respond that the punishment was dying of croup. Two fourth-generation Palestinian amoraim then elucidate the reasoning behind these two opinions. According to R. Yehuda b. Simlai, the rabbis' claim is based on comparing the verse about the spies, which uses the word "*ra'a*," with the verse from Ecclesiastes about the death of fish, which does the same. Just as Ecclesiastes must be referring to a hook—and thus death by choking—so must the spies have died of choking. According to R. Beraḥiya, R. Shim'on's claim that the spies died when their limbs fell off

their body is based on comparing that plague with the one that God will send against “those people that warred against Jerusalem,” as described in Zechariah 14:12:

The Lord will smite them with this plague (*ba-magefa*). Their flesh shall rot away while they stand on their feet; their eyes shall rot away in their sockets; and their tongues shall rot away in their mouths.

Continuing the theme of the spies and their sins, the Ecclesiastes Rabba passage concludes with the following, frightening vision.

ר' עזריה ור' יוחנן בן חגרי בשם ר' חנינא . . . כל מי שאו' לשון הרע חוטא בשמים ובארץ
שנ' שתו בשמים פיהם ולשונם תיהלך בארץ א'ר אלעזר מצינו שהן מהלכין ולשונם שותת
בארץ מאי טעמ' שתו בשמים פיהם

R. Azariya and R. Yoḥanan b. R. Ḥagri said in the name of R. Ḥanina: . . . Whoever utters slanders, sins against heaven (i.e., God) and the land (i.e., people), as it is said: “They set (*shatu*) their mouth against heaven (*ba-shamayim*), and their tongues range over the earth” (Psalms 73:9). R. El'azar said: We find that they walk [in heaven] while their tongue ranges (*shotet*) over the earth. What is the reason [for this]? “They wander [*shatu* is apparently now interpreted as if written with a *ṭet*, reading *shaṭu*—“they wander”]; their mouth in heaven [*ba-shamayim* is now interpreted as “in” instead of “against” heaven] [and their tongues range over the earth].”²⁸

The precise relationship between the material preserved in Ecclesiastes Rabba 9:12 and the passage at b. Soṭa 35a is unclear. Nevertheless, it does seem that the Bavli reflects a protracted incorporation and adaptation of certain elements already present in Palestinian midrashic collections which correspond to visions of hell common in late antique Palestine and its environs.²⁹ The idea that the spies were (a) smitten through the elongation of their tongues, which (b) swarmed with worms and then (c) fell onto their navels, seems essentially related to the following elements in Ecclesiastes Rabba: (a) R. Shim'on b. Yoḥai's claim that the spies' *limbs* fell; which was allegedly deduced from (b) the description of the plague in Zechariah 14:12 that includes the rotting of tongues in the mouths of the punished; (c) finally, R. Eli'ezer describes a punishment for slanderers in heaven (after death?) with their tongues elongated to the point that they range over the earth. Again, there is quite a bit of distance between the Bavli's description of the spies' punishment and Ecclesiastes Rabba 9:12, yet most of the elements in R. Shila's vision are already present in some form in the Palestinian midrash.

This being the case, comparative “minimalists” might be tempted to reverse my initial suggestion and question whether the presence in Palestinian sources of certain elements of R. Shila’s statement *negates* the possibility of Iranian influence altogether. The answer to this should be no, and it gets at the heart of the fraught and to my mind ultimately doomed process of looking for direct forms of influence while reading the Talmud in its Iranian context. R. Shila’s statement in the Bavli does indeed derive from Palestinian sources. However, the full effect of the Babylonian passage and the way it depicts the punishment of the spies appears to be modeled after a kind of Zoroastrian template of hell. Without the vivid Iranian depictions of the heavenly torture awaiting slanderers as manifest in the *Ardā Wirāz nāmāg*, I doubt that R. Shila’s statement would have come to look the way it does.

Another passage about postmortem punishment nicely exemplifies the great complexity that is part of the processes by which Zoroastrian ideas influenced and interacted with rabbinic ones in the Bavli. Unlike the source about the punishment of the Israelite spies which may essentially reflect an internal development of elements already present in Palestinian midrash, in this example knowing something about Iranian beliefs concerning the afterlife makes it clear that the Bavli is indeed engaged with Zoroastrian conceptions. Here, however, the Bavli seems to develop these inherited ideas one step further than the Iranian antecedents are actually willing to go themselves. Beyond merely exemplifying a form of ecotypification, this passage demonstrates that the evolution of key Iranian ideas can take place outside the traditional corpus of Iranian texts, in this case within the confines of the Babylonian Talmud.

א"ר שמו' בר נחמני א"ר יונתן כל העושה מצוה בעולם הזה מקדמתו והולכת לפניו לעולם
 הבא שנ' והלך לפניו צדקך וכבוד יי' יאספך וכל העובר עבירה בעו' הזה מלפפתו והולכת
 ליום הדין שנ' ילפתו אורחות דרכם יעלו בתוהו ויאבדו ר' אלע' או' קשורה בו ככלב שנ' ולא
 שמע אליה לשכ' אצ' ולהיות עמה לש' אצ' בעו' הזה ולהיות עמה בעו' הבא

R. Shmuel b. Naḥmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: Whoever performs a precept in this world, it precedes and leads him to the world to come, as it is said, “And your righteousness shall go before you and the presence of the Lord should gather you in” (Isaiah 58:8). And whoever commits a transgression in this world, it clings to him (*melaftu*) and goes to the Day of Judgment, as it is said, “Their course twists and turns (*yelaftu*); They run into the desert and perish” (Job 6:18). R. El'azar says: It is tied to him like a dog, as it is said, “He did not yield to her request to lie beside her and to be with her” (Genesis

39:10). “To lie beside her”—in this world, “and to be with her”—in the world to come.³⁰

The passage’s first half expresses the idea that one’s deeds or sins somehow lead them into the next world or to heavenly judgment—depending on their actions. This notion is not particularly rare in rabbinic, Second Temple, or early Christian literature. For one, the same idea is applied specifically to the giving of charity in Midrash Mishlei 14. More expansively, one can also refer to R. Yehoshu’a b. Levi’s statement that “all the precepts that Israel performs in this world will bear testimony for them in the world to come.”³¹

The early twentieth-century folklorist Ernst Böklen noted the similarity between these sources and the ancient Iranian concept of the Avestan *daēnā* (Pahlavi *dēn*)—a heavenly guide in the form of a female who leads the soul to judgment or reward and whose beauty or ugliness is determined by the righteousness of the soul’s thoughts, speech, and deeds.³² Böklen’s observation might be generally correct, but he problematically treats all cognate Judeo-Christian texts as more or less equally indebted to the Iranian idea. It is actually not incontrovertible that Second Temple and rabbinic descriptions of deeds preceding the deceased to the next world, or deeds acting as “attorneys” for the deceased, all necessarily derive from Iranian conceptions. On the other hand, there is reason to believe that the talmudic passage under discussion bears a particularly strong or, as we shall see, shocking resemblance to an Iranian idea.

As noted, one of the challenges in exploring the possibility of Zoroastrian influence on Jewish texts concerns matters of dating, as many of our Zoroastrian sources on the afterlife were redacted in Middle Persian during Sasanian or even post-Sasanian times. In the present case, no such problem exists. The physical characteristics and basic role of the *daēnā* are already outlined in both the *Videvdad* and the *Hadōxt nask* fragments—Avestan texts that probably date to the first half of the first millennium B.C.E. The classical account of the *daēnā* as it appears in the *Videvdad* is as follows:

Then she will come with her dogs, beautiful, firm, well shaped, with her brilliant crown, and her arts and talents. She drags the vile souls of the wicked into darkness. With the breath-souls of the sustainers of Order, she rises above tall Mount Harā, stretches them across the Ford of the Accountant, where those worthy of sacrifice in the world of thought cross over.³³

A more explicit—and sensual—description appears in the second chapter of the *Hadōxt nask*:

In that wind there seems to him to be coming forth his own *daēnā* in the body of a beautiful maiden, radiant, white-armed, strong, well-proportioned, straight, tall, high-breasted, able-bodied, noble, of splendid descent, fifteen years of appearance, with a body as beautiful as the most beautiful among creatures. Then the righteous man speaks to her, asking: Who are you, lady, whom I perceive to be the most beautiful of ladies that I have ever seen? Then his *daēnā* answers him: Well, I am, O youth of good thought, good speech, good deeds, and good *daēnā*, your own *daēnā* in your own body. Everybody has loved you for that greatness, goodness, beauty, sweet-scentedness, victoriousness, and your power to overcome enemies, just as you appear to me. You loved me, O youth of good thought, good speech, good deeds, good *daēnā* (me), your own *daēnā*, with that greatness, goodness, beauty, just as you appear to me. When you saw another performing burning (of the dead) . . . or destroying plants, then you sat down and recited the *Gāthās*, worshipping the good waters, propitiating the fire of Ahura Mazda and the righteous man, coming from near and from far. Then you made me more beloved than I was, more beautiful than I was, more praiseworthy than I was, and seated on a more excellent seat than I was before.³⁴

Given Zoroastrianism's generally dualistic framework it is not surprising that the text's description of "lieful" (i.e., possessed by the Lie and therefore the opposite of the righteous) souls reverses the beautiful vision of heaven just described. Indeed, such a wretched soul is greeted by a terrible stench and—in later accounts—a hideously ugly woman.³⁵

The concept of the *daēnā*, or *dēn* in its Middle Persian form, was well known in Sasanian times. Kerdīr's third-century inscriptional account of his heavenly journey retells the same passage from the oral tradition. He describes a beautiful woman arriving on a very bright road in the East. She is Kerdīr's double who escorts him past hell with its swarming noxious creatures, over a precipitously narrow bridge that widens and safely brings him to paradise. A number of Middle Persian texts describe the *dēn* similarly as a female manifestation of one's good or evil deeds. These ancient descriptions of female beauty influenced Persian artistic and literary creations, and it has been suggested that they may also have contributed to the Islamic idea of the *houris*—the now infamous seventy-two virgins available to pious Muslims for sexual gratification in heaven.³⁶ As Jean Kellens has pointed out, the sensual description of a physically attractive woman greeting a recently deceased man, as it already appears in the Avesta,

can productively be read sexually.³⁷ We seem to have in these ancient texts a kind of union between the masculine and feminine souls expressed in strikingly physical terms.

Returning to the talmudic passage, there is first a description of one's deeds accompanying or leading them into the next world. It is worth noting here that the prooftext from Job implies that unlike good deeds, which simply precede or lead the soul, sins actually cling (*melafef*) to the soul. This leads to the second half of the passage in which R. El'azar claims that the sin is somehow tied to the sinner like a dog. He proves this from a seemingly redundant couplet at the end of Genesis 39:10 where the Bible relates that Joseph neither "lay beside" Potiphar's wife nor was he "with her." This interesting rendition of "with her" is actually fairly established in early biblical interpretation.³⁸ The novelty in this passage is the placement of this exegesis in a section about deeds preceding the deceased in the world to come and alongside R. El'azar's observation that the sin is tied to the sinner like a dog.

The image of a dog tied to its owner is in and of itself somewhat strange. It is also not clear how or whether this image emerges from the classic exegesis of Genesis 39:10, which merely claims that had Joseph sinned he would have joined Potiphar's wife in Gehenna. Crucially, from a philological perspective there actually is good reason to render the verb "*qeshura*"—which R. El'azar uses to describe the connection between Joseph and Potiphar's wife—not as "tied" or "attached" with a leash, but as sexually joined.³⁹ As such, the statement should be rendered as follows: "[The sin] is sexually stuck to the sinner as in canine copulation. For we find that had Joseph slept with Potiphar's wife he would have entered the next world still sexually connected to her."⁴⁰ One might imagine that this would have constituted the ultimate shaming of Joseph, and of course shame is an integral ingredient in the rabbis' depiction of hell.⁴¹

When this statement is read together with the first half of the pericope, the passage can be seen as articulating a fascinating take on the Iranian *daēnā*. While R. Shmuel b. Naḥmani is vague about how good deeds or sins might lead the soul into the next world, at least in the case of sexual sins, R. El'azar proposes that one enters the judgment still sexually attached to the partner with whom the sin was committed. In other words, the illicit partner serves as the physical manifestation of sin. Recall how the Iranian texts hint at the sexual nature of the union between the righteous soul and his *daēnā*. On the other

hand, it is not clear what sexual role, if any, the wicked soul's undesirable *daēnā* plays. In the talmudic passage the Bavli seems to suggest a new idea in which the sinner copulates with his *daēnā*, which leads to postmortem shame. To my knowledge this twist on the idea of the *daēnā* does not appear anywhere in Iranian literature. It is a development of an originally Iranian notion, but one that apparently takes place entirely outside Zoroastrian literature.⁴²

These two examples drawn from the Bavli's adaptation of Zoroastrian visions of hell might initially be seen as exemplifying different aspects of an "influence-based" hermeneutic for reading the Talmud "in" Iran. In actuality, they problematize this framework and serve as a warning regarding its methodological pitfalls. For one, it is impossible to properly assess the validity of a potential Zoroastrian-rabbinic parallel without awareness of the protracted textual history of the sources. Had I not discovered the Palestinian midrashic roots of the Bavli's depiction of spies' punishment, it would have been easy to conceive of this source as an uncomplicated graft on Jewish beliefs about the afterlife from Iranian apocalyptic literature. At the same time, I suggested that the full effect of the talmudic description of the spies' punishment may be somewhat colored by the Iranian literary context. The case of Joseph and Potiphar's wife's would-be sexual union in the afterlife also testifies to complex forms of Talmudo-Iranic intersection wherein Zoroastrian ideas may have been further developed within the sphere of the Babylonian rabbinic corpus.

These examples are a small sample taken from a corner of rabbinic thinking. For the most part, they are best read by employing various models of religious adaptation, cultural negotiation, and the like. Further case studies are capable of multiplying and diversifying the data by looking at other sources, and at other kinds of sources, that evince different forms of interaction with Zoroastrianism. These include legal or ritual texts, and also cases in which the encounter with Zoroastrianism produced results *other* than influence or adaptation. As my research on the laws of menstrual impurity in the Bavli and Middle Persian literature suggests, sometimes Zoroastrian "influence" does not consist of rabbinic texts echoing Zoroastrian counterparts. Rather, encounters with Iranian traditions may have set off a chain of reactions that took rabbinic tradition in new directions, whatever they may have been. For instance, there is evidence that the presence of parallels between the Avestan and biblical systems of menstrual purity—even prior to the historical encounter of Jews and

Zoroastrians in the Near East—created a level of anxiety among the rabbis when they did encounter Zoroastrians, which in turn encouraged the rabbis to argue for the supremacy and antiquity of the Jewish system of menstrual purity.⁴³ Another form of “influence” is of the reactionary type, such as can be witnessed when the Bavli goes out of its way to emphasize that contemporarily, the laws governing the separation of menstruant women from their husbands should be concerned solely with avoiding sexual relations and not with matters of purity. As such, the Bavli explicitly excludes certain practices of distancing husbands from menstruating wives apparently then current among Jews who themselves seem to have been influenced by Zoroastrianism.⁴⁴

The catalog of forms of influence and interaction listed above offers one framework for building a research program that examines the Bavli in its Iranian context. Yet despite the variety of comparative options, such a project largely proceeds on a History of Religions axis, for which it employs tools taken from fields like anthropology, sociology, and intellectual history to think through the ways that cultures, ethno-religious communities, and religions may have intersected and developed in shared space. All these methods might still be seen as constituting a single set of approaches to reading the Talmud “in” Iran; one that views the Bavli and Middle Persian literature as windows into the cultural and religious phenomena that generated them, and whose ultimate goal lies primarily *beyond the text itself* in the realm of culture, religion, and other such objects.

This program is essentially the *modus operandi* of much comparative research in the humanities. As such, it bears both advantages and disadvantages. Some of the disadvantages have been noted previously. Perhaps most vexing of these is the nagging problem presented by texts as inward-focused as the Bavli and Middle Persian literature: If the two sets of texts that are to serve as reflections of cultural interactions seem to be, outside of a handful of admittedly succulent passages, so generally uninterested in each other, it is hard to claim that the distinct cultures that produced the textual corpora actually intersected in history. And as I noted above, texts with redactional histories and modes of construction as complex as the Bavli and Middle Persian literature really cannot serve as transparent windows into historical realities.

READING THE TALMUD IN (TERTEXTUALLY IN) IRAN

I would like to suggest a different strategy, in which scholars initially approach the reading of the Bavli and Middle Persian literature *qua* texts, and as a result look at the intersections between them first and foremost as *textual* intersections. By honing in on the very textuality of the parallels between the Bavli and Zoroastrian literature, it is possible to highlight examples of textual and literary interactions between these two corpora that can be considered apart from—and in the hermeneutical process “prior” to—the intermingling of flesh and blood rabbis and Zoroastrian priests. My intention here is not to flee to the cocoon of philological research, nor to ignore the agency of the people and communities that created the texts. Rather, my purpose is to construct an interpretative structure built on an alternative order of operations wherein the textual nature of the sources is acknowledged first, even when considering questions of cultural intersection. Subsequently, this textuality can inform comparative research.

In exploring the possible connections between rabbis and Zoroastrians in Chapter 2, I considered some of the different venues in which Zoroastrian texts may have reached the rabbis. I noted that the primary mode of study of both Sasanian Zoroastrian and rabbinic literature was oral, and this fact may have acted as an impediment or alternatively worked as a kind of facilitation for intercultural transmission. Since oral teachings are not confined to ink scratched on parchment that is stored away in archives but are rather retained and even embodied in human beings, it is possible to conceive how oral texts might slip from one cultural formation to another when physical humans from these cultures converge. The following two cases, which for convenience are based on texts already discussed above, serve to illustrate the interpenetration of Sasanian oral *texts* in the Bavli.

The first example emerges from a prior discussion of talmudic traditions concerning the *bei abeidan*. It was argued that these sources may reflect a Sasanian attempt to “recover” portions of the Zoroastrian tradition that were traditionally believed to have been scattered when Alexander the Great conquered Iran. I noted a very small and fascinating micro-link between a talmudic story about King Shapur II challenging Rava, and a Middle Persian text preserved in the fourth book of the *Dēnkard* that describes King Shapur II’s efforts

to orchestrate debates among his subjects. In the talmudic passage as it is preserved in the best witnesses, Ifra Hormiz warns her son, King Shapur II: “Do not have any dispute (*paykār*) with these Jews.” This is the only place in the Bavli where the Iranian loanword *paykār* appears, and it is virtually the same term used in the *Dēnkard* to also describe the very same King Shapur II’s efforts to engage his countrymen in dispute—*pahikārišn*. The importance of this seemingly minor parallel goes beyond a lone talmudic passage containing a literary trope then current in Middle Persian literature. I would like to argue that it is possible to see within the employment of the loanword *paykār* and the shared motif of King Shapur II engaging his subjects—as the Talmud would have it, *even* the Jews—in dispute (*paykār* / *pahikārišn*) as evidence of the penetration of a Middle Persian *text* into the poesis of talmudic storytellers.

The genesis and broader significance of this parallel may be described as follows. The Middle Persian passage appears in the *Dēnkard*, a work compiled and redacted only in the ninth and tenth centuries C.E. As noted earlier, there is evidence that the particular passage in question was actually first composed in the sixth century C.E. and emanated from King Khusrau I’s court. It is difficult to imagine how the rabbis could have accessed the *Dēnkard* even were it to somehow have existed in a Sasanian form. More likely is the possibility that this discreet passage was widely circulated as a kind of royal edict, apparently composed after King Khusrau I quashed the Mazdakite revolt.⁴⁵ Indeed, the Iranian text, or at least its close parallel, is cited by a number of Arabic historians in a related context, and there is reason to believe that the *Dēnkard* passage bears some relationship to the *Xwāday nāmag* (“Book of Kings”)—the epic-historical narrative of Iran that took shape in later Sasanian times.⁴⁶ As such, one may imagine that the talmudic storyteller had some level of access to either Khusrau I’s edict, the *Xwāday nāmag*, or a literary parallel of some sort. Judging from the ubiquity of this passage in its various forms across early medieval Arabic literature, such a possibility is not that far-fetched. When the rabbinic storyteller reworked the image of King Shapur II engaging his subjects in debate in a tale about Rava and the Sasanian royal court, he preserved some of the original language of the imperial text that he had initially come into contact with.⁴⁷

Another example can be observed in a parallel between a short talmudic dialogue discussed previously and a conversation preserved in a Middle Persian text.⁴⁸ The Bavli source is as follows:

A certain magus said to Amemar: From your waist upwards is of Hormiz. From your waist downwards is of Ahreman. [Amemar] said to [the magus]: [If so,] how does Ahreman let Hormiz pass urine through his land (*ar'ey*):⁴⁹

In this brief anecdote, Amemar combats a Zoroastrian view that maintains a dualistic, anatomical antagonism between the Iranian Good Spirit, Ohrmazd, and the Iranian Evil Spirit, Ahreman, that is mapped onto the human body. The upper half of the body is associated with Ohrmazd, while the lower half is considered the domain of Ahreman. This text is echoed in *Gizistag Abāliš*, a short Pahlavi treatise that describes a debate held in the presence of the Abbasid caliph, Abū Ja'far Abdullāh al-Ma'mūn (reigned 813–833), between Abāliš, a Muslim convert from Zoroastrianism, and Ādurfarnbag son of Farroxzād, a Zoroastrian religious leader and the first editor of the *Dēnkard*. *Gizistag* contains seven questions that Abāliš poses to Ādurfarnbag, and which Ādurfarnbag skillfully answers. The seventh and final question concerns the meaning of the *kustīg*, the Zoroastrian sacred girdle that was to be worn at all times and untied and retied at various occasions.⁵⁰

*haftom ēn pūrsīd kū kustīg bast čim čē agar pad kustīg bastan kerbag
bawēd ēg xarān ud uštarān ud aspān pēštar šawēnd ō wahišt kē šab
ud rōz haft bār ud tang pad aškamb bastag dārēnd*

*mowbed guft kū abēčīm tis nēst pad adānān ud dušāgāhān abēčīm
sahēd kē anāgāh hēnd kē čim ī tis nē dānēnd ud čim ī tis nēst ī rōšn
bē-t man rōšn kunam ud amāh ēdōn gōwēm kū čiyōn-imān wurrōyišn
pad dō buništaḡih u-t-imān pad ān ī xwēš tan bē paydāgēnīd estēd
bahr ī ohrmazd ast rōšnih ud garōdmān pad hangōšīdag ēdōn harw
čē azabar nēmag ī tan čiyōn āšnawišn ud hambōyišn gyāg ī xrad ud
gyān ud ox menišn ud ōš ud wīr ud āsn-xrad ud gōšōsrūd-xrad gyāg ī
yazdān ud amahrspandān...*

*ud azēr nēmag ast čiyōn gandagih ud rēmanih gyāg gōmēzdān ud
sargēn ud gandagih homānāg ud gilistag ī gyāg ī ahreman ud dēwān
ud agar kas āškārag dārēnd ā-š bunyād kunēnd ud pad xānag abar
*wirāyēnd ud kustīg sāmāngar ast tanān ēd rāy kustīg xwānēnd čē-š
tan pad dō kust bē paydāgēnīd estēd hamgōnag čiyōn ašmāh čiyōn
gyāg nišast az ān gōmēz paydāgēnīd ast ud ēn dēwār-ēw pad mayān
abar estēd*

The seventh question was this: “Why do you tie the *kustīg*? For, if there is merit in tying the *kustīg*, then asses, camels, and horses, who night and day have (a belt) tied seven times tightly around their bellies, will go to heaven before you.”

The Mowbed said, “It is not something we do for no reason. It only seems unreasonable to the unaware who know the wrong things,

to those who are unaware and do not know the reason for anything, and to whom the reason for nothing is clear. But I will make it clear: We say, as we believe in two origins, that this is made visible on our bodies. Ohrmazd's share is the light and paradise. In the same way, all that is in the upper half of the body, such as hearing and smell—the place of wisdom, the soul, the mind, thought, intelligence, perception, the inborn wisdom and that acquired through hearing—is the place of the gods and the Amahraspands.⁵¹ . . . The lower half is like a place of stench and pollution, the bladder and excrement. And the stench is like the lair and place of Ahreman and the demons. If one regards this as obvious, one makes it a foundation and builds it up as one would a house. The *kustīg* makes a boundary in the bodies, which is why it is called *kustīg*. For by it, it is shown that the body clearly has two sides (*kust*). In the same way, if you (plural) squat somewhere, from the urine it is shown. So this [*kustīg*] is, in fact, a dividing wall."⁵²

First and foremost, this passage demonstrates that the conversation depicted in the talmudic anecdote should not be dismissed as wholly removed from reality. Late antique Zoroastrians really did maintain that the upper half of the body is the domain of one spiritual force while the lower half is associated with another. What is more, attention to the contours of the arguments in both sources, and even their language, reveals a set of striking correspondences. Notice how in both texts urine and urination play crucial functions in the argument: In Ādurfarnbag's response the presence of the bladder and the role of urination⁵³ prove Ahreman's dominion over the body's lower half. Amemar seems to reverse this rather Zoroastrian conception of urination by upturning it. His response to the magus is that micturition requires the cooperation of both halves of the body, thus denying a fundamental anatomical division. Further, in both texts, the body is not simply divided between two powers, rather each force controls a particular world or district—*ar'a* in Aramaic and, crucially, *kust* (the main element in "*kustīg*"—the ritual belt) in Middle Persian.

It bears reemphasizing that there is little reason to assume that the Bavli's record of the conversation between Amemar and the magus actually took place as described. Critical scholarship on rabbinic literature has demonstrated that narratives such as this are not very reliable from a historical perspective—certainly when contrasted with directly attributed rabbinic statements.⁵⁴ Yet the parallels between the two texts in content and language are quite clear, and they seem to testify to a *textual* relationship between the Amemar-Magus

anecdote and *Gizistag Abāliš*. Any direct relationship of transmission between this post-Sasanian Pahlavi work and the Bavli is clearly out of the question. And unlike the previous example, there is no reason to assume that the Middle Persian text in question enjoyed imperial backing or was especially defused across the Empire. Nevertheless, since Pahlavi literature—even as it is has come down to us in a written form first put down on parchment in the ninth century—generally reflects protracted processes of oral production and transmission in which older phrases are recycled and reapplied to new contexts, it is likely that some elements found in *Gizistag Abāliš* recall earlier formulations.

To conceive of these forms of textual interactions, one might imagine a kind of late antique (and early medieval) “text-scape” across Iranian lands that included, among other groups, Aramaic-speaking rabbis and Persian-speaking Zoroastrians. Using the notion of “text-scape” may help account for related articulations appearing in different textual and cultural formations. It also implies that these phenomena might even represent a type of textual interaction. In a sense, the current attempt to read the Bavli and Middle Persian literature together by placing them in conversation with one another is not an entirely unreasonable exercise, as it can be seen as parallel to the original textual work of late antique Jews and Zoroastrians.

Recent research by Reuven Kiperwasser and Dan Shapira, which examines more extensive textual intersections,⁵⁵ holds even greater potential in this direction. Among other observations, Kiperwasser and Shapira have pointed to a startling textual relationship between the twenty-fourth chapter of the *Bundahišn*, which catalogs a series of ancient Iranian mythological creatures, and the Rabba bar Bar Ḥana story cycle.⁵⁶ As the amora, Rabba bar Bar Ḥana, makes his way through a vividly imagined landscape, one finds virtually the same list of creatures in nearly the identical order as in the *Bundahišn*. This level of correspondence implies a very close textual relationship; a type of textual encounter between the fully developed taxonomy in the *Bundahišn* and the lengthy talmudic story cycle. Whether or not further surviving textual intersections of this extent will be uncovered in the future is beside the point. That example alone demonstrates that the rabbis could have had access to extensive Iranian texts in some form or another.

The approach that I am outlining focuses on moments when texts from one tradition directly intersect with those of another. In its

barest, most minimal sense, it is possible to conceive of this phenomenon as constituting a kind of intertextuality—a term “underdetermined in meaning and overdetermined in figuration,”⁵⁷ which since the late 1960s has occupied an important place in critical theory. In his taxonomy of different forms of intertextuality,⁵⁸ the French literary theorist Gérard Genette describes this bare-bones intertextuality as follows: “For my part I define it, no doubt in a more restrictive sense, as a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts: that is to say, eidetically and typically as the actual presence of one text within another.”⁵⁹ Genette places within this primitive form of intertextuality quotation, plagiarism, and various types of allusion.⁶⁰ For our purposes, we might more loosely ascribe to this category instances in which explicit traces and even entire passages of imperial, cosmological, and polemical Middle Persian literature appear in the Bavli in the form of parallel taxonomies, loanwords, and calques of specific terminologies.

By using the term intertextuality here—itsself a kind of citation—my intention is to introduce critical language to help conceptualize the processes of reading the Talmud “in” Iran. Of course it is important to remember that the architecture of much of rabbinic literature itself is explicitly intertextual. The Bavli in particular can be seen as essentially a string of quotations that are often carefully marked by precise citation conventions. And to begin with, the Bavli is a commentarial literature invested in the interpretation and transposition of biblical and earlier rabbinic texts. Yet what about texts beyond the Bavli’s immediate textual heritage? Here it must be acknowledged that the nature of the relationship between the Babylonian Talmud and Middle Persian literature does not normally lend itself to Genette’s first order, “primitive” intertextuality. Not incidentally, many scholars do not even consider Genette’s initial category as an expression of intertextuality to begin with. They construe the term as inherently opposed to the traditional academic quest of sources and traditions.⁶¹ When Julia Kristeva coined the term intertextuality in 1967, she was specifically pointing to a much broader and far more complex phenomenon in which every text, regardless of whether or not it contains fragments of explicit quotations of earlier or contemporary textual peers, can be read intertextually. As she famously put it: “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.”⁶² This more sophisticated approach to the intersection of texts can actually serve as a crucial

tool for understanding the textual relationship between the Bavli and Middle Persian literature.⁶³

Irrespective of whether one realizes it, as an expression of language all texts are intertextual. Informed and profound readings of texts are undertaken with an awareness of the complex relationships held between the particular work being analyzed and its textual peers, which represent other “options” that, while not chosen, should still be seen as intersecting and giving cause to the particular text under analysis. This becomes crucial when considering the relationship between two literary artifacts that emerged from one larger “linguistic” system, which, as we saw in our survey of Jewish-Zoroastrian encounters, is arguably the case in regard to the Bavli and Middle Persian literature in as much as they represent the textual products of two scholastically oriented Sasanian Iranian religious communities. Each work constitutes a choice related to other possibilities that emerge from the same system. Comparing the Bavli and Middle Persian literature means in part tracing the limitless webs of relation between two sets of signifiers, and examining the way they relate to a loosely shared signified. Those moments when one can directly perceive the textual interpenetration of Iranian literature into the Bavli concretize a larger, ever-present phenomenon in which the linguistic utterances of Babylonian rabbis are necessarily intertwined with that of their Zoroastrian “compatriots.”⁶⁴

What complicates matters greatly, which in turn makes Talmudo-Iranica such a rich field of inquiry, is the fact that both Zoroastrian and talmudic literature already function within their own highly intricate intertextual systems, that is, prior to their intersection in the “text-scape” of the Sasanian Empire. As in the above discussion where I discussed reading within a more traditional History of Religions framework, here too a fruitful and rigorous approach requires one to simultaneously read diachronically within rabbinic or Zoroastrian literature, and synchronically—or intertextually—between them.

SPLIT BETWEEN EAST AND WEST: THE BAVLI’S SHIFTING DUALISMS

How might such a two-pronged intertextual approach appear in practice? To demonstrate this, let me return to the Amemar-Magus anecdote referred to in the previous discussion, though now with an added focus on its immediate literary context. The story appears in a lengthy

passage interested in the refutation of heresy.⁶⁵ Following a series of curious amoraic statements that declare Adam either a heretic (*min*), non-believer (*kofer ba-iqar*), or someone who “reversed” his circumcision, the Bavli quotes the *mishna* “Be diligent to learn that which you should respond⁶⁶ to the ‘Epicurean.’”⁶⁷ A gloss cited in the name of the third-century C.E. amora R. Yoḥanan⁶⁸ limits the scope of the *mishna* to learning in order to respond to non-Jewish heretics. Jewish heretics, on the other hand, are deemed too dangerous to debate. Subsequently, the redactor of the passage collects sources that deal with heretical beliefs, claims, and biblical interpretations. Some of the most interesting sources attribute to heretics non-contextual, “hyper-literal” reading methods that result in dualistic and polytheistic interpretations.⁶⁹ While these heretical interpretations are to some extent exaggerated for effect, it is essential to note that many of them correspond to debates regarding the “Monotheism” of the Hebrew Bible that took place between Jews, Christians, and the so-called Gnostic groups that flourished in late antiquity.

One such passage appears at the end of a collection of stories that claim to depict conversations between the Jewish patriarch Rabban Gamliel and an unnamed Roman emperor.⁷⁰

אמר ליה קיסר לרבן גמליאל מי שברא הרים לא ברא רוח ומי שברא רוח לא ברא הרים
דכת' כי הנה יוצר הרים וברא רוח אלא מעתה גבי אדם דכת' וייצר הכי נמי מי שברא
זה לא ברא זה ומי שברא זה לא ברא זה טפה על טפה יש בו באדם ושני נקבים יש בו באדם
מי שברא זה לא ברא זה ומי שברא זה לא ברא זה דכת' הנושע און הלא ישמע אם יוצר עין
הלא יבט מי שברא און לא ברא עין אמ' ליה אין⁷¹ ושעת מיתה כולם נפוסו⁷²

The emperor said to Rabban Gamliel: [The God] who created mountains did not create wind, and [the God] who created wind did not create mountains, as it is written, “Behold, He who formed (*yāzar*) the mountains, and created (*u-vara*) the wind” (Amos 4:13). But now, it is written regarding Adam: “And He created (*va-yivra*)” (Genesis 1:27); “And He fashioned (*va-yīzar*)” (Genesis 2:7). Here too, [the God] who created this did not create that, and [the God] who created that did not create this? There is a handbreadth by a handbreadth [of space] in the human [body] in which there are two cavities. [The God] who created this did not create that, and [the God] who created that did not create this—for it says, “Shall He who implants (*ba-note’a*) the ear not hear; He who forms (*yozer*) the eye not see” (Psalms 94:9)? [The God] who created the ear did not create the eye? [The emperor] said, “Yes!” And⁷³ at the time of death they are appeased?⁷⁴

The passage begins with the emperor’s incredible claim that the Bible contains evidence against monotheism since two different verbs are

used to describe the creation of the world—"creating" (from the root BR') and "forming" (YZR). Regardless of how one chooses to chart the rest of the dialogue,⁷⁵ there is no question that the debate can be profitably read in light of those rabbinic sources that attempt to deflect certain biblical verses that lend themselves to Christianizing, "Gnosticizing," and "paganizing" readings.⁷⁶ The potential non-rabbinic interpretations of the three verses are all connected in the way they relate to a particular component of a debate concerning dualism and creation. According to the dominant rabbinic conception, the One God was the sole creator of the world even if he may have "taken counsel" with the heavenly legion, the works of heaven and the earth, "architects" and "blueprints."⁷⁷ On the other hand, some Christians, "Gnostics," and pagans counted on certain biblical verses for support of their dualistic, trinitarian, and polytheistic cosmological views. Significantly, many of these non-rabbinic approaches have roots in ancient biblical exegesis.⁷⁸ To be more specific, the verse cited in Amos 4:13 might have been seen by "Gnostics," Neo-Platonists, and even some Christian interpreters as a source for a cosmological matter-spirit divide that assigns the creation of mountains (i.e., Matter) to one power and the creation of wind (Spirit) to another. It is not too difficult to find the background of the Bavli's citation here regarding Genesis 1:27 and 2:7. Philo of Alexandria, for example, reads the descriptions of Man's creation in 1:27 and 2:7 as two separate accounts—the first that of the ideational, perfect, and immutable human, the second of "body and soul."⁷⁹ And these ideas were not unique to Philo. They surface elsewhere in antiquity, such as when some Christians see the Father's creation of the perfect Son in the "ideational" account of Genesis 1:27. Further, some believed that Genesis 1:26 ("Let *us* make man") reflected two partners in creations; God and Wisdom, Logos, or other related hypostasized concepts. It would appear that the use of these two verses in the Rabban Gamliel-emperor account is to counter some of these ideas, and perhaps especially those beliefs that would have attributed the first spiritual creation to a perfect supreme god and the second, "earthly" man to the demiurge(s).⁸⁰

With this in mind, one might wonder about the function of the third verse (Psalms 94:9) in the dialogue. The proposed "heretical" reading of this verse is different from the "heretical" interpretations of Amos 4:13 or certainly the Genesis verses, in that to my knowledge they do not correspond to any known dualistic interpretations

or beliefs. Certainly, “Gnostics,” Christians, and some Hellenistic Jews⁸¹ were willing, to varying degrees, to emphasize a body-and-soul split that was connected to two types of creative forces. One even finds a strikingly parallel echo of the rabbinic retort “and at the time of death they are appeased?” in Augustine’s response to Faustus in reference to the Manichaeans:

Since they say that every living being has two souls, one of the race of light, the other of the race of darkness, is it the case that the good soul leaves at death, while the bad soul remains? (*Contra Faustum* VI.8; ed. J. Zycha, 297–98)⁸²

More to the point, unlike the other verses and interpretations cited in the passage, the claim that one god created the ear and another the eye would seem to paint a caricature of the dualistic conception of biblical cosmology.

On closer examination, the Amemar-magus anecdote that immediately follows the Rabban Gamliel–emperor dialogue is clearly related to this anatomical caricature of dualism. Both non-rabbinic claims and the rabbinic responses in each story mirror each other. The non-rabbinic view posits an association between parts of the body—the eye and ear, or the upper and lower halves of the body—and different divine forces. On the other hand, the rabbinic approach claims that the need for cooperation—in death or in urination—disproves the presence of two separate forces in the human body.

The close resemblance of the final claim in the Rabban Gamliel–emperor anecdote and the magus’s argument about the division of the body is the moment where as interpreters we might productively turn our gaze from reading within the intertextual environment of rabbinic literature and acknowledging its development out of Palestinian rabbinic literature and related contexts, toward the Bavli’s local environment, what I am calling the “text-scape” of Sasanian Babylonia. From this perspective, the Rabban Gamliel source itself can be seen as split between two textual “forces.” On the one hand, the first two-thirds of the dialogue tap into earlier and well-established Palestinian rabbinic polemics regarding the involvement of different powers in the creation of the world and of the first man. At the same time, based on what we saw in the *Gizistag Abāliš* passage cited above, the final line in the dialogue turns on a kind of physiological dualism known to have existed particularly in the discursive milieu of the Zoroastrian East—that is, beyond the geographic orbit of “dualism/polytheism

in the Bible” debates.⁸³ Let me be clear about what I am not arguing; namely, that the passage from *Gizistag Abāliš* should be treated as a literary source for the final claim in the Rabban Gamliel–emperor dialogue. Instead, the Middle Persian text—despite its surviving ninth-century articulation—should be taken to signify a contemporaneous form of polemics and engagement between monotheists and Zoroastrian dualists that co-existed within the same textual space as the talmudic anecdote, even while it was altered and transformed in both corpora into something new.

INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ideally, invoking the term “intertextuality” injects a layer of methodological awareness and sophistication into the process of reading the Talmud “in” Iran. It also highlights some of the problems inherent to this approach. Clearly, the texts themselves do not possess agency and are not actually interacting with each other. Rather, the group of people who produced one text must have had some form of contact—even if by the second, third, or fourth degrees—with the creators of the corresponding text. This critique may just as easily have been directed at accounts of religious interaction and influence that use abstractions like “Judaism” and “Zoroastrianism”—essentially secondary conventions that only derivatively reflect real flesh and blood human beings. Regardless, if such a caveat is deemed necessary, what is gained by focusing on literary intersections and intertextuality, where texts instead of people or religions are placed at the center of the inquiry?

As I have stressed throughout this book, both the Bavli and Middle Persian literature are first and foremost textual phenomena with tenuous and difficult-to-determine connections to historical realities. When we focus on textual intersections while still acknowledging the fact that both corpora are products of a particular time and place, we take care not to stray too far from the nature of the evidence itself. Indeed, aside from cases of conversion and intermarriage, the interactions between real live Jews and Zoroastrians most worthy of study represent not an intermingling of bodies, but an interfacing of thought and related cultural practices that took place through the medium of discourse. When we look at these textual “intersections,” in a sense we are actually honing in on the heart of the matter—the

language in which flows the current of even more abstract interactions between cultures and religions.

Aside from this point, it is worth noting that one may also find within the pre-Kristevan precursors of intertextual theory a space in which the focus on textuality can more happily interact with agency. Kristeva's development of "intertextuality" was connected to her discovery of the now influential Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin and his work on dialogism. For the current discussion, consideration of Bakhtin as he was—and not as he came to be known in Kristeva's hands—may function as an important corrective for the loss of agency that resulted from the Saussurian "linguistic turn" that heralded this critical movement in the first place.⁸⁴ As frequently noted, Saussurian thought led to, and indeed ultimately became synonymous with, the "death of the author" and a general lack of interest in the specific, individual literary formulations referred to in English-language scholarship as "utterances." In its most strident version, Structuralism, one of the major theoretical movements to have emerged from Saussurian semiotics, can be criticized for reducing all forms of human communications to certain structural principles that are ultimately supposed to comprise a kind of universal human truth. In structural analysis, the human being who composed a particular poem under analysis dissipates, as does the poem itself, since it too can be reduced to a set of well-ordered signs. In a purely intertextual framework of this persuasion, innovation and evolution are impossible. All that remains is an incessant, ceaseless assembling of "quotations" from the larger preexisting linguistic system. Although Kristeva was, if anything, a post-structuralist opposed to some of the basic tenets of structuralism, much of her foundational work on intertextuality is so exceedingly textual that despite claims to the contrary, the human utterance simply dissipates.⁸⁵

All that said, it is possible to discern a line of thought in Bakhtin's research that responds to scholars who abstract literature and all human communication to a mere system of signs, thereby ignoring the central moment in the linguistic drama—the particular communicative "utterance" that occurs within a specific historical, cultural, and social context.⁸⁶ These utterances can be studied as particular expressions of the larger linguistic system, as Saussurian linguistics itself set out to do. But after shifting the scholarly gaze to the system, it must then range back to its ultimate goal—the utterance and the meaning it achieves in its immediate context. Bakhtin insists that as

an expression of language, utterances exist neither in cultural nor historical isolation. They are inherently responsive, or “dialogical,” in the way their meaning is realized in contrast from and in relation to other utterances—both prior *and present*. In this way the utterance is perceived intertextuality.

One of the effects of this orientation is that it becomes essential to uncover the various intended addressee(s) of each utterance in order to understand its significance. As such, a “thick” context of utterances looms large for analysis of this sort. Even when there remain no direct signs that the context has invaded the space of a particular utterance, that utterance can still only be fully and profoundly read when taking its context into account. To use an extreme example, in the aftermath of major historical events, utterances cannot escape the need to be understood dialogically against the background of the particular historical moment.⁸⁷ As a millennial, it is difficult in this discussion not to be reminded of the raw fabric of life in the weeks following September 11, 2001, which serve as a good example as any of an event that colored virtually every utterance made in its immediate wake. Future scholars trying to understand even normative banal communication in New York City in mid-September 2001 will have to keep the attacks in view, to say nothing of literary scholars working on artistic creations produced during this period. Few would argue against the importance of reading Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* alongside other “evidence” from the terrorist attacks. But even a work of literature, like a love poem, composed during this period that does not slavishly “quote”—that is, makes no clear reference to—terrorism or human-inflicted suffering, when read within its originaive context can be thought to resonate differently from how it would have resonated had it been written during a less charged historical moment. More radically, even the reading of certain texts in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, that were composed prior to it yet somehow refer to its landmarks—one thinks especially of Michel De Certeau’s eerily prophetic essay “Walking in the City”⁸⁸—can take on new meanings and resonances. A deep appreciation of the love poem’s poetics, or the resonance of De Certeau’s essay, must be able to consider the way it interacts, dialogically, with the setting in which it was uttered, and also within the present moment in which it is read.

While reading the long talmudic passage about heresy, as well as the Bavli’s broader discourse of dualism, or “two powers in heaven,” one must carefully consider how the *re-utterance* of rabbinic texts

may have resonated within the intertextual space of Sasanian Babylonia, despite the fact that many of the sources in the passage originally stem from a Palestinian rabbinic context. After all, the Bavli was originally an oral text, and hence its discrete parts and, later, redacted whole were literally *uttered* by the talmudic reciters known as tannaim. From this perspective, the Bavli's reference to "two powers in heaven" and other similar references to dualistic beliefs—even when they originally derive from Palestine—must be reexamined against the "text-scape" of Sasanian Iran and the various choices and challenges it presented. The Amemar-magus anecdote and its *visible* effects on the Rabban Gamliel-emperor story should thus concretize the notion that despite its ostensible reference to a Roman Palestinian debate that was at some remove from the Bavli's geo-local context, the Bavli was taking part, at times explicitly and at others silently, in distinctively Sasanian forms of discourse.

Thinking of the Bavli and its production of text within an intertextual framework clearly has implications for the way scholars can appreciate the Talmud's literary nature. I would also argue that considering the way transmitted sources were collected and how they may have resonated in Babylonia has significance for the study of Jewish history as well. This is because the method forces one to focus on how *and why* the Bavli's editors chose to collect certain texts that originally derive from Palestinian rabbinic literature, and to utter them in a new milieu. Since this Bakhtinian form of intertextuality illuminates the interaction between the utterance and its social context, it leads to a nuanced understanding of even the historical meaning and realization of that utterance.

An example can be adduced by continuing my discussion of sources concerning Palestinian "heresies" transmitted in the Bavli. In order to articulate the present view it is helpful to distinguish it from the methodological approach outlined by the late Alan Segal, who states in his important study, *Two Powers in Heaven*:⁸⁹

The conclusion about Persian thought relevant to our study can thus be summarized in the following way: Although Zoroastrianism can be pinpointed with some probability in Isaiah's writings and although Isaiah's writing serves as the basis of the rabbinic polemic, it is not necessarily true that Zoroastrians were the heretics who believe in "two powers in heaven." Another piece of evidence that argues against the identification of Zoroastrians with "two powers" heretics is the fact that many rabbinic writings do not hesitate to identify Zoroastrians by name and to name their gods. . . . [Segal then quotes

the Amemar-magus story.] The magi are openly defeated. There is no reason for the rabbis to use more obscure terms.

In *Two Powers*, Segal is interested in identifying actual dualistic groups by closely studying the Rabbinic Hebrew terminology for describing dualism. Segal's interest is historical and, accordingly, his approach is to read the texts as a reflection of the historical information that he ultimately seeks. Yet if talmudic literature represents a complex, exegetical web of quoted, recited, and reprocessed texts, then such a program of research becomes extremely difficult to execute.

In the second part of the quoted paragraph, Segal argues that were Zoroastrians truly the target of "two powers" sources, they would have been named and reckoned with directly. Anything else would assume a kind of rabbinic cover-up. In light of the previous discussion, this claim is highly problematic. While I have discussed in this book numerous talmudic sources that describe Babylonia and directly refer to Zoroastrians, a good deal of the Bavli derives from and even purports to describe rabbinic Roman Palestine. And yet, those sources that explicitly refer to times past and places distant are not devoid of meaning in the present; rather, that meaning must be realized intertextually against the backdrop of a Sasanian Iranian "text-scape." Functionally speaking—although to be sure there is much more to the phenomenon than functionality—the Bavli cites and reprocesses material stemming from Roman Palestine that treats "two powers" and dualism in order to explore and articulate its own approach to the issue, now shaped by an Iranian context and by encounters with Iranian dualisms. The fact that Zoroastrianism is not named in the majority of sources that discuss dualism is not because of an attempt to obscure references to it; rather, it is because of the nature of the Bavli as a type of intellectual commentarial literature that constantly refers to its own insular and inherited textual world even while it addresses present realities. Despite the heavy weight of the myriad of traditions collected in the Talmud, meaning is still manifested in real time.

Over the past fifteen years, Richard Kalmin has gradually built the case that Babylonian rabbis were far more isolated from non-rabbis than their Palestinian counterparts.⁹⁰ Regarding interaction with heretics (*minim*), Kalmin writes:

Rabbinic accounts of disputes between rabbis and *Minim*, despite reservations about their historicity which will be discussed later, support our claim regarding Palestinian rabbinic contact and Babylonian rabbinic lack of contact, with *Minim*. To be specific, Palestinian

sources record numerous disputes between rabbis and *Minim* whereas disputes of this kind are very rare in Babylonian sources.⁹¹

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is little solid evidence that Babylonian rabbis were closed off from the rest of society—neither from non-Jews *nor* from non-rabbis. At the same time, the fact remains that the majority of *minim* stories—surely a significant data pool with which to gauge Babylonian rabbinic relationships to “Others”—are about Palestinian rabbis. By the same token, Kalmin goes on to acknowledge a serious difficulty with his claim:

I refer to the fact that disputes between rabbis and *Minim* are virtually non-existent in Palestinian documents such as the Yerushalmi but are relatively common in the Bavli. The Bavli records many disputes between heretics and Palestinian rabbis, but Palestinian compilations record fewer than a handful of such disputes. Why does the Bavli depict Palestinian rabbis as frequent debaters with heretics but Palestinian compilations do not?⁹²

None of Kalmin’s answers to this question really admit that perhaps the high ratio of these disputes in the Bavli—even if they do concern Palestinian rabbis—may indicate that indeed the Babylonian rabbis were not insular at all, but were engaged in conversations with non-rabbis and non-Jews. Instead, he seems to be of the opinion that even if Babylonian rabbis interacted with non-Jewish Persian officials and highly acculturated “Persianized” Jews, they rarely interacted with typical non-rabbinic Jews.⁹³ On the other hand, I have referred to the research that collects sources concerning rabbinic interaction with non-rabbinic Jews, and it is considerable. Furthermore, in my discussion of the *bei abeidan* sources I pointed to evidence that an inter- and intrareligious debate was taking place in Sasanian Iran, perhaps even with royal backing. It would thus seem that the high incidence of *rabbi-min* stories that appear in the Bavli—even if they overwhelmingly depict events set in Palestine—should be read in light of this reality.⁹⁴ Older, Palestinian rabbinic texts were *uttered* in Sasanian Babylonia, often with little or no changes. And yet, the realization of those utterances should be sought within the rich context of Sasanian Iran. As scholars, we read the Talmud “in” Iran by observing the Talmud reading *itself*—that is, its sources—in Sasanian Iran. In tandem, we can read Sasanian Zoroastrian literature by paying close attention to the way the Zoroastrian priests of Middle Persian texts rearticulate the ancient Zoroastrian literature available to them.

So much for the brief reflections on the study of the *history* of Babylonian Jewry in its context—a worthy subject that despite the

greatest exertions of scholars will always lie just beyond sight—in Hartley’s “foreign country.” On the other hand, the vast talmudic sea which I described at the beginning of this book, and which constitutes the ultimate object of study of Talmudists, covers the distant land of Jewish Babylonia under its breakers. Miraculously, that vast ocean remains more or less accessible to scholars today even if its choppy waters do not serve as a clear and transparent window into the sea floor that lies below. I should add that the traditional image of the “Sea of Talmud” may be understood in a sense to include all of classical rabbinic literature, not just the Bavli. In that way it comprises the very materials from which the pinnacle of classical rabbinic literature, the Bavli, was composed.

In light of my attempt to appreciate the Talmud by following some of the influential critical developments of the twentieth century, it is tempting to locate the medieval metaphor of the “Sea of Talmud” in the realm of another modern phenomenon—Wallace Stevens’s famous poem “The Idea of Order at Key West.”⁹⁵ In the poem, Stevens sits on a beach listening to a woman singing a song that channels the poetic cadences of the sea. In dense verse, Stevens puzzles over concepts related to some of the same theoretical preoccupations that I just considered. The inspiration that the sea provides the woman at first seems so overpowering that it is difficult to discern where the sea ends and the song begins. But Stevens soon realizes that the vast and powerful sea is itself nothing but “deep air,” and it is the woman, although she merely sings a song of the sea, who actually marshals her whole being—poured into her voice—to produce the very experience of the sea that the poet witnesses. The Bavli too, is not really comparable to the Sea of Talmud, but more like the woman who sings beside it. And like that anonymous woman, it is the Bavli that paradoxically produces the sea through its song.

The *terra firma* on which the creators of the Bavli sang their song was not in Key West but alongside two great rivers in Sasanian Mesopotamia. None the matter. Just as Stevens can at first scarcely demarcate the singer from the sea about which she sings, we also must not uproot the Bavli from its immediate context. Ours is to trace the relentless motion between sea, song, singer, and dry land. And also to remember that as contemporary scholars, “with a maker’s rage to order words of the sea,” subsequent generations will in turn read us as merely the most recent utterances in an endless chain of learning.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

In this book I have attempted to encourage, ground, and theorize the study of the Bavli in its Sasanian Iranian context. I began by introducing Talmudists to previously ignored, extra-talmudic evidence that I believe is indispensable for producing historically informed readings of the Bavli. In that first chapter, I drew attention to a serious challenge presented by our sources. Like many religious works, the Bavli, Middle Persian texts, and other Sasanian confessional literatures appear to function within their own discursive universes. These different traditions are built out of distinctive textual heritages and religious languages. I deferred this issue to the final chapter of the book, and proceeded to survey some potential sites of historical interaction between Babylonian rabbis and Sasanian Zoroastrians. I focused on those Sasanian cultural institutions that may have fostered interreligious intersections and influenced the pattern of intellectual exchanges between different communities in late antiquity. Next, I conducted a series of close readings of talmudic and Middle Persian texts concerning the Jewish/Persian “Other.” I discovered a pair of conflicting discourses in which rabbis and Zoroastrians imagined each other as wholly demonic and yet (at least in the Jewish texts) surprisingly familiar. I suggested that the very existence of this discursive contradiction, as well as the textual “disturbances” noticed in the fabric of the original talmudic passages and in their subsequent transmission and interpretation, testify to some of the complex cultural dynamics that Babylonian rabbinic society was experiencing in its encounter with the neighboring Persian community.

In a sense, my interpretation of the evidence was already informed by the final, theoretically focused chapter of the book. There, I presented examples of Talmudo-Iranic research that can be divided into two basic approaches. As I described it, the standard “History of Religions” strategy is to read textual parallels functionally as if they merely reflect “real” encounters that took place between Jews and Persians, or Judaism and Zoroastrianism. This common method of research is frequently confounded by the apparently insular nature of the separate textual traditions, which stand in the way of reaching the cultural or religious objects for comparative analysis. I suggested an alternative approach that actually focuses on textual “intersections” whenever they present themselves. Such intersections concretize the ongoing cultural processes of late antique groups like the Sasanian Jews and Zoroastrians, whose textual corpora were closely tied up with the very communities that produced them. Since we know the Jews and Persians to have been physically proximate and discursively engaged with one another, it is possible to study their texts in tandem using theories of intertextuality. This means that despite the fact that they possessed separate textual heritages, both the Bavli and Middle Persian literature produced meaning in the same discursive space and across the shared “text-scape” of Sasanian Iran. The practical result is that even at its most insular, the Bavli can and should be read contextually “in” Iran alongside Middle Persian literature.

This book was preoccupied with preliminaries. What are the texts that Talmudists need to familiarize themselves with in order to conduct Talmudo-Iranic research? What types of encounters did Babylonian rabbis have with their Persian neighbors? How did rabbis conceive of Zoroastrians and vice-versa? And what is it that scholars are doing when attempting to read the Bavli in its Iranian context? For that reason, this book does not really merit its own conclusion. Instead, I hope this will be realized in future studies by scholars working on Talmudo-Iranica. That said, I also hope this book has conveyed a strong sense of scholarly purpose. Talmudists have ignored the Bavli’s Iranian context for all too long. The time has arrived to devote ourselves to this research and catch up to the better established, parallel attempt to read rabbinic texts in light of Greco-Roman literature.

There is also some urgency in this endeavor. As I have emphasized throughout the book, because of the Bavli’s privileged place in the Jewish canon, a newfound appreciation of it as a product of Sasanian Iran has the potential to revolutionize the way Judaism is understood

in its later stages as well. The significance of Judaism's Hellenistic component has rightly been emphasized by scholars for some time now. As Talmudo-Iranic research evolves, the point will come to similarly consider whether Judaism—even as it is practiced today—is profoundly indebted to the great cultures and traditions of Iran.

I was privileged to have written the majority of this book in the holy city of Jerusalem, during what has unfortunately been a tense time in the relationship between the State of Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran. At one particularly low point, even the Talmud was dragged into the conflict. In a widely reported rambling speech given at a 2012 international drug conference held in Iran, the vice president of the Islamic Republic blamed Iran's narcotics problems on the Babylonian Talmud. It is not worth dwelling on the confused racism and ignorance of that speech, except to point out an irony. The Talmud is not a foreign, insidious, anarchist's cookbook used as a weapon against Iran, as was supposed. Instead, it is a document that actually reflects a world in which Persians, Jews, and other minorities intersected within a vibrant Iranian milieu. I cannot help but wonder how things might be if the citizens of both countries realized that they are far more connected than they ever dared to imagine. Might the Talmud even play a small role in that process?

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. H. N. Bialik, "Before the Book Closet," in *Songs from Bialik: Selected Poems of Hayim Nahman Bialik* (trans. Atar Hadari; Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 26.

2. See Yaakov Elman, "Middle Persian Culture and Babylonian Sages: Accommodation and Resistance in the Shaping of Rabbinic Legal Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 165–97.

3. B. Qiddushin 70a–b.

4. B. Qiddushin 70a, "mi sani."

5. Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* (5 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1965–70), 3:65–67.

6. On *atrunga*, see Yisrael Ben-David, "Etrog, etrogim, u-ke-yoze bo she-mot min ha-ḥalomim," *Leshonenu* 46:1 (1982): 76–79; on *anbaga*, see Shaul Shaked, "Between Iranian and Aramaic: Iranian Words Concerning Food in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, with Some Notes on the Aramaic Heterograms in Iranian," in *Irano-Judaica V* (ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2003), 120–37, 128.

7. Yaakov Elman, "He in His Cloak and She in Her Cloak: Conflicting Images of Sexuality in Sasanian Mesopotamia," in *Discussing Cultural Influences: Text, Context and Non-Text in Rabbinic Judaism* (ed. Rivka Ulmer; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2007), 129–63.

8. According to the manuscripts and printed editions, the name appears as דִּנָּג. However, in light of Iranian prosopography, the slightly emended דִּנָּג (Dēnag) seems more plausible. See Philippe Gignoux, *Mitteliranische Personennamen: Noms Propres Sassanides En Moyen-Perse Épigraphique* (fasc. 2; Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1986), 78. Cf. Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity: The Eastern Diaspora* (vol. 4; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 414–15.

9. Yaakov Elman, "Returnable Gifts in Rabbinic and Sasanian Law," in *Irano-Judaica VI* (ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2008), 139–84.

10. For more detailed treatment of this source, see Shai Secunda, "Talmud Text and Iranian Context: On the Development of Two Talmudic Narratives," *Association of Jewish Studies Review* 33:1 (2009): 45–69.

11. B. Nidda 20b. The Hebrew text is reproduced from ed. Soncino 1489.

12. B. Nidda 20b, "Ifra Hormiz."

13. Jacob Neusner, *History of the Jews*, 4:37; Albert de Jong, "Zoroastrian Religious Polemics and Their Contexts: Interconfessional Relations in the Sasanian Empire," in *Religious Polemics in Context: Papers Presented to the Second International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions* (ed. T. L. Hettema and A. van der Kooij; Assen: Royal van Gorcum, 2004), 48–63. See also Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 260–61n36.

14. I hope to treat this more fully in a forthcoming monograph. For the time being, see Samuel Israel (Shai) Secunda, "*Dashtana—Ki derekh nashim li*: A Study of the Babylonian Rabbinic Laws of Menstruation in Relation to Corresponding Zoroastrian Texts" (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 2007).

CHAPTER 1

1. Isaac Aboab's influential circa 1300 work *Menorat ha-Meor* includes one of the earliest references to this term.

2. B. Sanhedrin 24a.

3. B. Qiddushin 30a. See Tosafot ad loc., "*la zrikha*."

4. In addition to the survey provided here, see also Yaakov Elman, "Up to the Ears' in Horses' Necks (B.M. 108a): On Sasanian Agricultural Policy and Private 'Eminent Domain,'" *Jewish Studies—Internet Journal* 3 (2004): 95–149; and Geoffrey Herman, "Table Etiquette and Persian Culture in the Babylonian Talmud," *Zion* 77 (2012): 149–88, 125–50 (Hebrew).

5. It is also worth noting that Talmudists who mastered Greco-Roman culture and literature were better equipped to integrate themselves into the European and North American academic sphere. See Peter Schäfer, "Introduction," in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture* (vol. 1; ed. Peter Schäfer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 1–26, 2–9.

6. See Isaiah Gafni, "Talmudic Research in Modern Times: Between Scholarship and Ideology," in *Jüdische Geschichte in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit* (ed. Aharon Oppenheimer; Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999), 133–48.

7. After Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press and University Press of New England, 1994).

8. "Zwei neue Hilfsmittel für das Hebräische," *Literaturblatt des Orients* 1 (1840): 267–68. See Ezra Spicehandler, "בי דואר ודיני מגיסתא: Notes on Gentile Courts in Talmudic Babylonia," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 26 (1955): 333–54, 336n9. For even earlier phases in the history of research,

see Eliezer Shimshon Rosenthal, "For the Talmudic Dictionary—Talmudica Iranica," in *Irano-Judaica* (Hebrew; ed. Shaul Shaked; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1982), 38–134 (Hebrew numbering), 42–43.

9. Jacob Levy, *Neuhebräisches und chaldäisches Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim*, 4 vols. (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1876–89).

10. Alexander Kohut, *Aruch completum*, 8 vols. (Hebrew; Vienna, 1878–92).

11. For an important critique, see Wilhelm Bacher, "Kohut's Aruch completum," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländische Gesellschaft* 47 (1893): 487–514.

12. *Über die jüdische Angelologie und Dämonologie in ihrer Abhängigkeit vom Parsismus* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1866); "Was hat die talmudische Eschatologie aus dem Parsismus aufgenommen," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 21 (1867): 522–91; "Die talmudische-midrassische Adamssage in ihrer Rückbeziehung auf die persische Yima- und Meshiasage," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 25 (1871): 231–50; "Les fêtes persanes et babyloniennes mentionnées dans les Talmuds de Babylone et de Jérusalem," *Revue des Études Juives* 24 (1892): 256–71; cf. *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 14 (1897–98): 183–94. See also Spicehandler, "דגניסמא," 336n10.

13. See his "Paras ve-Yehuda," *Kokhvei Yizḥaq* 34 (1867): 40–50, which was later expanded and republished under the same title four decades later in Cracow. In particular, see Rubin's introduction to the latter edition, which lays out his vision of Jewish reform that he contrasts with Schorr's. For a fascinating example of his approach, see Herman, "Table Etiquette," 151n7.

14. See especially the studies collected in *He-Ḥaluz* 7 (1865): 1–88; 8 (1869): 1–120. *He-Ḥaluz* was a "breakaway" journal from the more theologically cautious *Kerem ḥemed*, and afforded Schorr a mouthpiece for his theologically and intellectually radical views. Regarding Schorr's anti-traditionalism and his Irano-Judaic research, see Ezra Spicehandler, "Joshua Heschel Schorr: Maskil and Reformist," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 31 (1960): 181–222; Spicehandler, "Joshua Heschel Schorr—The Mature Years," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 40–41 (1969–70): 503–28.

15. A well-known example is Voltaire's "Essai sur les Mœurs et l'Esprit des Nations." Of course Schorr, Rubin, and their colleagues had the benefit of significant advances in Zoroastrian studies during the intervening years, which further emboldened their work. For a history of Western scholarship on Zoroastrianism and its effects on Western culture and thought, see Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *The Western Response to Zoroaster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), and now Michael Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathustra: Zoroaster und die europäische Religionsgeschichte der frühen Neuzeit* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998).

16. Vienna, 1871–91. Weiss's main treatment of the subject can be found in volume 2, 10–19, with further material in volume 3, 29–42. His discussion relies heavily on the research of Rubin and Schorr, and interestingly enough is sometimes even less cautious in attributing Persian origin to certain Jewish

practices and beliefs. At the same time, Weiss argues that since the rabbis themselves were cognizant of Persian influence, in some instances they established practices as a means of precluding "Persianisms" that they deemed totally incompatible with Judaism. Weiss's contributions should be evaluated alongside other historians of the time. The most significant of these is Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart* (10 vols.; Leipzig: O. Leiner, 1853–76). An important popular account of Babylonian Jewish history can be found in Naḥman Zvi Gezow, *Al naharot bavel* (Warsaw: M. Levinski, 1877).

17. See for example Nachman Krochmal's magnum opus, *Moreh nevukhei ha-zeman* (Lemberg: Y. Shnayder, 1851). On the topic of Orientalism and Krochmal, see Jay Harris, *Nachman Krochmal: Guiding the Perplexed of the Modern Age* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 118.

18. See Isaiah Gafni, "Talmudic Research in Modern Times," in *Jüdische Geschichte in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit* (ed. Aharon Oppenheimer; Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999), 133–48, 144–48.

19. Salomon Funk, *Die Juden in Babylonien, 200–500* (Berlin: M. Poppe-lauer, 1902).

20. *Die altpersische Religion und das Judentum. Unterschiede, Übereinstimmungen und gegenseitige Beeinflussungen* (Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1920).

21. "Zu den iranischen Lehnwörtern im Aramäischen," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 37 (1930): 195–203; "Mittelpersische Wörter und Sachen," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 42 (1935): 114–28. Geiger's most important and lasting contributions on the subject can be found in Samuel Krauss, ed., *Additamenta a librum Aruch completum Alexandri Kohut* (Hebrew; Vienna: Qeren le-zikhron Aleksander Kohut, 1937). As for Krauss, during this period another work was published posthumously from his notes. See his *Paras veromi ba-talmud u-va-midrashim* (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-rav Kook, 1948). The most important work on the lexicography and phonology of Iranian loanwords in Babylonian Aramaic remains Zsigmond Telegdi, "Essai sur la phonétique des emprunts iraniens en araméen talmudique," *Journal Asiatique* 226 (1935): 177–256, which is a translation from a 1933 Hungarian article.

22. For an early study of some lasting influence, see Erik Stave, *Einfluss des Parsismus auf das Judentum* (Haarlem: F. Bohn, 1898). Lawrence H. Mills, *Zarathustra, Philo, the Achaemenids, and Israel* (F. A. Brockhaus, Leipzig, 1903–6), is a provocative though outdated scholarly tour de force. George Williams Carter, *Zoroastrianism and Judaism* (Boston: R. G. Badger, 1918), was a relatively popular title on the subject. For a review of the latter and related works, see Jacob Hoschander, "Survey of Recent Biblical Literature: V. Archaeology," *Jewish Quarterly Review (New Series)* 17 (1926): 199–231, 220–31. See also T. K. Cheyne, "Possible Zoroastrian Influences on the Religion of Israel," *Expository Times* 2 (1891): 202–8, 224–28, and 248–53; Cheyne, *Jewish Religious Life after the Exile* (New York: G. P. Putman's Sons, 1898). Cf. Nathan Söderblom, *La Vie future*

d'après le mazdéisme à la lumière des croyances parallèles dans les autres religions: Étude d'eschatologie comparée (Paris: E. Leroux, 1901), who was much more skeptical in these matters.

23. Jonas C. Greenfield, "רַטְיִן מְגוּשָׁא," in *Joshua Finkel Festschrift* (ed. Sydney B. Hoenig and Leon D. Stitskin; New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1974), 63–69; Spicehandler, "דינא דמגיסתא."

24. For his collected articles, see *Al Kanfei Yonah: Collected Studies of Jonas C. Greenfield on Semitic Philology* (ed. Shalom Paul, Michael E. Stone, and Avital Pinnick; Leiden: Brill, 2001).

25. Spicehandler also authored a relevant unpublished dissertation, "The Local Community in Talmudic Babylonia: Its Institutions, Leaders and Ministrants" (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew Union College, 1951). Despite its relatively compact size, this work is rather ambitious and bears the characteristics of an opening statement by a scholar who intended to devote his career to the questions outlined there (see especially from 71ff.). In this regard, Spicehandler's recent comments at Hunter College's Anne Bass Schneider Lecture bear mentioning: "During my five years as a rookie teacher in New York [1950–55] I managed to complete my doctorate and then to broaden my knowledge of Pahlavi, the Middle Persian language of the Sassanid dynasty, whose empire included Babylonia and Iran during what was in Jewish history the talmudic era. My ambition was to study the interrelationship of Jewish and Persian law. Eventually I did publish an article on that subject and several on Judeo-Persian literature ("My Life of Jewish Learning and My Faith in the Jewish Renaissance," [Occasional Papers in Jewish History and Thought 15; New York: Hunter College of the City University of New York, 2002], 7). Spicehandler later served as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Tehran in 1962–63, where he continued his research on the mediaeval and modern history of Iranian Jews and lectured on ancient Iranian history. Some of this research was published as *Contemporary Iranian Jewry* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1970).

26. One thinks especially of the works of Harold Walter Bailey, Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, and Walter Bruno Henning.

27. This was not entirely the case for scholars who researched the Greco-Roman context of Palestinian rabbinic literature. Before the war the prominent twentieth-century Talmudist Saul Lieberman immigrated to Jerusalem. In addition to his talmudic studies Lieberman also worked on Greek at the Hebrew University. He soon emigrated to the United States, where outside of the war's reach his work encouraged scholars to explore Hellenism and Greek in Roman Palestine.

28. These include the works of Hanoch Albeck, Nehemia Brüll, Jacob Nahum Epstein, Julius Kaplin, Isaac Lewy, and Saul Lieberman. For a review of their approaches, see Jacob Neusner (ed.), *The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud* (Leiden: Brill, 1970); and Mordechai Tenenblatt, *The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1972).

29. Klein's research was later collected in "Gemara" and "Sebara" in *Bava Mezia 60b–64a* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1978).

30. For a summary of Weiss's method, which he developed in nine books devoted to talmudic source criticism, see M. S. Feldblum, "Professor Abraham Weiss—His Approach and Contribution to Talmudic Scholarship," in *The Abraham Weiss Jubilee Volume* (New York: Abraham Weiss Jubilee Committee, 1964), 7–80.

31. For an assessment of Weiss-Halivni and Friedman's lasting impact, see Stephen G. Wald, "Talmud, Babylonian," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (2nd ed.; ed. Fred Skolnick and Michael Berenbaum; Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 19:470–81, 481; and Adiel Schremer, "Stammaitic Historiography," in *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammait) to the Aggada* (ed. Jeffrey Rubenstein; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 219–36.

32. It is also possible that at least in Israel, Zionism played a role in the neglect of the Bavli, as Israeli scholarship focused primarily on rabbinic works produced in the Land of Israel. In North America, disinterest in Talmudo-Iranica may have been encouraged by the influential American Talmudist Jacob Neusner. Early in his career, Neusner attempted to assess the value of Iranian studies for scholarship on the Bavli. He soon concluded that the Iranian material was mostly devoid of benefit for Talmudists. See for example Jacob Neusner, "How Much Iranian in Jewish Babylonia," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975): 184–90.

33. Rosenthal, "For the Talmudic Dictionary."

34. *Ibid.*, 23. These remarks should be compared with an earlier foray into Talmudo-Iranica. In an article Rosenthal published a decade earlier he painstakingly identifies a Middle Persian legal term in the Bavli, yet leaves the work of determining its full legal import to "expert Iranists." See Eliezer Shimshon Rosenthal, "A Contribution to the Talmudic Lexicon: Elucidation of Words Based on Textual Variants," *Tarbiz* 40 (1971): 178–200 (Hebrew), 192.

35. Shaked's initial research on Irano-Judaica took the form of linguistic studies on Judeo-Persian and research that examined the interaction between Aramaic and Iranian. See for example Shaul Shaked, "Judaean-Persian Notes," *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1971): 178–82; and Jonas C. Greenfield and Shaul Shaked, "Three Iranian Words in the Targum of Job from Qumran," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 122 (1972): 37–45. Shaked also published an early, groundbreaking article on the possibility of Iranian influence at Qumran. See his "Qumran and Iran: Further Considerations," *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972): 433–46. For a more general examination of Iranian influence on Judaism, see his "Iranian Influence on Judaism: First Century BCE to Second Century CE," in *Cambridge History of Judaism: Introduction, the Persian period* (vol. 1; ed. W. D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein; vol. 1; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 308–442.

36. See especially Moshe Beer, *The Babylonian Amoraim: Aspects of Economic Life* (Hebrew; Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1974).

37. See especially Isaiah M. Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia in the Talmudic Era: A Social and Cultural History* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1990).

38. Of course Rosenthal's article is itself an important contribution to the field, one that is pursued from a strictly philological approach. In addition, see also Daniel Sperber, "On the Unfortunate Adventures of Rav Kahana: A Passage of Saboraic Polemic from Sasanian Persia," in *Irano-Judaica* (ed. Shaul Shaked; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1982), 83–100, and Sperber, "Bab Nahara," *Iranica Antiqua* 8 (1968): 70. A number of Hebrew University theses written by scholars with training in rabbinic literature explored various aspects of the Iranian context of Babylonian Jewry. Noticeably, these were all completed in the university's department of Jewish history. See Eliyahu Ahdut, "Ha-yahasim ha-hevratyiyim ve-ha-kalkaliyim bein yehudim lenokhrim be-bavel ba-tequmat ha-talmud" (master's thesis; Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1990); Ahdut, "The Status of the Jewish Woman in Babylonia in the Talmudic Era" (Hebrew; Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1999); Mauricio Bubis, "The Jewish People between Persian and Roman Rule" (Hebrew; Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1990); Adiel Schremer, "Jewish Marriage in Talmudic Babylonia" (Hebrew; Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1996), later published as *Male and Female He Created Them: Jewish Marriage in Late Second Temple, Mishna and Talmud Periods* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2003). Geoffrey Herman authored a groundbreaking dissertation entitled "The Exilarchate in the Sasanian Era" (Hebrew; Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2005).

39. Yaakov Elman, "Marriage and Marital Property in Rabbinic and Sasanian Law," in *Rabbinic Law in Its Roman and Near Eastern Context* (ed. Catherine Hezser; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 227–76; Elman, "Acculturation to Elite Persian Norms in the Babylonian Jewish Community of Late Antiquity," in *Neti'ot le-David: Jubilee Volume for David Weiss Halivni* (ed. Ephraim Bezael Halivni, Zvi Arie Steinfeld, and Yaakov Elman; Jerusalem: Orhot, 2004), 31–56; Elman, "Up to the Ears"; Elman, "The Babylonian Talmud in Its Historical Context," in *The Printing of the Talmud: From Bomberg to Schottenstein* (ed. Sharon Liberman Mintz and Gabriel M. Goldstein; New York: Yeshiva University Museum, 2005), 19–28; Elman, "Yeshivot bavliyyot ke-vatei din," in *Yeshivot and Battei Midrash* (Hebrew; ed. Emanuel Etkes; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2006), 31–55; Elman, "Rav Yosef in a Time of Anger," *Bar Ilan Annual* 30–31 (2006): 93–104 (Hebrew); Elman, "Middle Persian Culture and Babylonian Sages: Accommodation and Resistance in the Shaping of Rabbinic Legal Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 165–97; Elman, "He in His Cloak and She in Her Cloak: Conflicting Images of Sexuality in Sasanian Mesopotamia," in *Discussing Cultural Influences: Text, Context, and Non-Text in Rabbinic Judaism* (ed. Rivka Ulmer; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2007), 129–64; Elman, "The Socioeconomics of Babylonian Heresy," *Jewish Law Association Studies* 17 (2007): 80–126; Elman, "Who Were the Kings of East and West in Ber 7a?: Roman Religion, Syrian Gods and Zoroastrianism in the Babylonian Talmud," in *Studies in Josephus and the Varieties of*

Ancient Judaism: Louis H. Feldman Jubilee Volume (ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen and Joshua Schwartz; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 43–80; and Elman, “Returnable Gifts in Rabbinic and Sasanian Law,” in *Irano-Judaica VI* (ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2008), 150–95.

40. See for example Geoffrey Herman, “Ahasuerus, the Former Stablemaster of Belshazzar and the Wicked Alexander of Macedon: Two Parallels between the Babylonian Talmud and Persian Sources,” *Association of Jewish Studies Review* 29 (2005): 283–97; Herman, “The Story of Rav Kahana (BT Baba Qamma 117a–b) in Light of Armeno-Persian Sources,” in *Irano-Judaica VI*, edited by Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2008), 53–86; Herman, “Bury My Coffin Deep: Zoroastrian Exhumation in Jewish and Christian Sources,” in *Tiferet leYisrael: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Israel Francus* (ed. Joel Roth, Menahem Schmelzer, and Yaacov Francus; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2010), 31–59; Herman, “Persia in Light of the Babylonian Talmud: Echoes of Contemporary Society and Politics: *Hargbed* and *bidaxš*,” in *The Talmud in Its Iranian Context* (ed. Carol Bakhos and M. Rahim Shayegan; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 61–84; Herman, “‘One Day David Went out for the Hunt of the Falconers’: Persian Themes in the Babylonian Talmud,” in *Shoshannat Yaakov: Jewish and Iranian Studies in Honor of Yaakov Elman* (ed. Shai Secunda and Steven Fine; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 111–36; Elman, “Table Etiquette.” It is important to note that Herman was trained as a historian and initially began this direction of research independently. Examples of Talmudo-Iranic research by a new generation of Talmudists include Yishai Kiel, “Redesigning ‘Tzitzit’ in the Babylonian Talmud in Light of Literary Depictions of the Zoroastrian ‘kustig,’” in *Shoshannat Yaakov*, 185–202; Reuven Kiperwasser and Dan Shapira, “Irano-Talmudica I: The Three-legged Ass and ‘Ridyā’ in B. Ta’anith: Some Observations about Mythic Hydrology in the Review Babylonian Talmud and in Ancient Iran,” *Association of Jewish Studies Review* 32 (2008): 101–16, and “Irano-Talmudica II: Leviathan, Behemoth and the ‘Domestication’ of Iranian Mythological Creatures in Eschatological Narratives of the Babylonian Talmud,” in *Shoshannat Yaakov*, 203–35; Jason Sion Mokhtarian, “Empire and Authority in Sasanian Babylonia: The Rabbis and King Shapur in Dialogue,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 19 (2012): 148–80; Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, “Talmudic Astrology: Bavli Šabbat 156a–b,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 78 (2007): 109–48; Shai Secunda, “Talmudic Text and Iranian Context: On the Development of Two Talmudic Narratives,” *Association of Jewish Studies Review* 33 (2008): 45–69; Secunda, “Studying with a Magus / Like Giving a Tongue to the Wolf,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 19 (2005; published 2009): 151–57; Secunda, “Reading the Bavli in Iran,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 (2010): 310–42; Secunda, “The Sasanian ‘Stam’: Orality and the Composition of Babylonian Rabbinic and Zoroastrian Legal Literature,” in *The Talmud in Its Iranian Context*, 140–60; Secunda, “The Talmudic ‘bei abedan’ and the Sasanian Attempt to ‘Recover’ the Lost Avesta,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 18 (2011): 343–66; Secunda, “Parva—a Magus,” in *Shoshannat Yaakov*, 391–402; Secunda, “The Construction, Composition and Idealization of the Female Body in

Rabbinic Literature and Parallel Iranian Texts: Three Excursuses,” *Nashim* 23 (2012): 60–86.

41. For extensive treatment of the methodological challenges in using this material, See Isaiah Gafni, “On the Talmudic Chronology in *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon*,” *Zion* 52 (1987): 1–24 (Hebrew), and Gafni, “On Talmudic Historiography in the Epistle of Rav Sherira Gaon: Between Tradition and Historiography,” *Zion* 73 (2008): 271–96 (Hebrew).

42. David Brodsky, *A Bride without a Blessing* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006). See, however, the critique of Yachin Epstein, “Studies in Massekhet Kalla Rabbati—Text, Redaction and Period” (Hebrew; Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2009).

43. See Reuven Kiperwasser, “Structure and Form in Kohelet Rabbah as Evidence of Its Redaction,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 58 (2007): 283–302.

44. See Menahem Kister, *Studies in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan: Text, Redaction, and Interpretation* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1993).

45. It goes without saying that this approach is also methodologically treacherous and should be employed with the utmost caution. Otherwise, we risk reversing the conclusions of textual taxonomies that have served the field well for many decades.

46. Shaul Shaked, “Jewish Sasanian Sigillography,” in *Au Carrefour des Religions: Melanges offerts a Philippe Gignoux* (ed. Rika Gyselen; Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l'étude de la civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 1995), 239–56, includes the seals from his two previous articles. See now Daniel M. Friedenberg, *Sasanian Jewry and Its Culture: A Lexicon of Jewish and Related Seals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), which essentially reproduces the same seals yet does add a few more artifacts.

47. See Shaked, “Jewish Sasanian Sigillography,” 240. These include Yizhaq b. Ada, Yehuda b. Abba, Yosef b. Natan (=Asi b. Natan?), Abaye, and perhaps even Huna b. Natan. See also Moshe Beer, “Three Seals of Babylonian Jews and Their Date,” *Tarbiz* 52 (1983): 435–45 (Hebrew).

48. Some of the seals contain well-known Jewish symbols from Palestine, like the palm frond and citron, while others depict astrological, and perhaps even Zoroastrian, motifs. See for example seal number 11 in Shaked, “Jewish Sasanian Sigillography.” On the other hand, on seal number 3 the image of a fire altar seems to have been deliberately rubbed out, perhaps for religious reasons, before the Hebrew text was inscribed. See also seal number 7, owned by a certain Yosef bar Nata: “The figure shown is that of a man standing in an attitude of worship with a dangling girdle at his back. There are two half-closed crosses on both sides of the figure” (Shaked, “Jewish Sasanian Sigillography,” 242). It should be noted that aside from their art historical value, the seals also provide a context in which scholars might better understand talmudic sources that discuss seals and rabbinic methods of signing and authorizing documents. See for example b. Bava Batra 161b (= b. Gittin 36a, 87b): “Rav would sign a fish, R. Hanina a palm, Rav H̄isda a *samekh*, R. Hosh'aya an *'ayin*, Rabba b. Rav Huna a small boat.”

49. For basic orientation, see Michael Morony, “Religion and the Aramaic Incantation Bowls,” *Religion Compass* 1 (2007): 414–42.

50. See for example Jacob Neusner, "Archaeology and the Bavli," in *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century* (ed. James A. Sanders; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 321–47.

51. A magical formula cited by the fifth-generation Babylonian amora Amemar at b. Pesahim 110a appears in some incantation bowls, while some of the bowls reproduce rabbinic texts. The early rabbinic figure Yehoshu'a ben Peraḥya appears in a number of bowls, and he is frequently depicted issuing divorce documents to demons. Furthermore, the obscure figure Rav Yosef the demon—mentioned twice in the Talmud—also appears in the corpus of the bowls. Finally and most suggestively, a number of clients in the bowls are identified as rabbis. See Shaul Shaked, "Form and Purpose in Aramaic Spells: Some Jewish Themes," in *Officina Magica: Essays on the Practice of Magic in Antiquity* (ed. Shaul Shaked; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1–30. For an example of a particularly "rabbinic" bowl, see James Nathan Ford and Alon Ten-Ami, "An Incantation Bowl for Rav Mešaršia son of Qaqay," *Tarbiz* 80 (2012): 219–30 (Hebrew). Also worthy of special mention is promising research on the *halakhic* terminology of the bowls. See Avigail Bamberger (Manekin), "Parallels between Aramaic Incantation Bowls and Rabbinic Texts" (Hebrew; master's thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2012).

52. On demographics and family structure, see Michael Morony, "Magic and Society in Late Antique Iraq," in *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World* (ed. Scott Noegel, Joel Walker, and Brannon Wheeler; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 83–107; and Shaul Shaked, "Jews, Christians and Pagans in the Aramaic Incantation Bowls of the Sasanian Period," *Religions and Cultures: First International Conference of Mediterraneum* (ed. Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 61–90. Regarding the art of the Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowls, see Naama Viložny, "Figure and Image in Magic and Popular Art: Between Babylonia and Palestine during the Roman and Byzantine Periods" (Hebrew; Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2010).

53. Both Michael Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984; reprint, Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2005), and Josef Wieshöfer, *Ancient Persia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), include helpful bibliographical essays regarding Sasanian material and textual remains.

54. Most of the archaeological finds and relevant literary references for Talmudists have been collected in Aharon Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica in the Talmudic Period* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1983). For an up-to-date survey of Sasanian archaeology, see Ali Mousavi and Touraj Daryaei, "The Sasanian Empire: An Archaeological Survey, c.220–AD 640," in *A Companion to the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East* (ed. D. T. Potts; Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 2:1076–94. The interested reader should also consult the relevant articles on specific Sasanian Mesopotamian locales in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, now available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org>.

55. Thus, a working knowledge of Sasanian Mesopotamian architecture might help explain some of the differences between the Bavli's treatment of this subject and that of the Yerushalmi. See for example the divergences discussed in Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "The Political Symbolism of the Eruv," *Jewish Social Studies* 11 (2005): 9–35.

56. For other religious communities at this time and in this region, the material remains are problematic and sometimes even non-existent. Regarding Manichaeism, for example, our sources are overwhelmingly textual. As for Mandaean and "pagan" remains, see Morony, *Iraq*, 384–430.

57. Much has been written about the response of Palestinian rabbis to contemporaneous visual art (for a history of the research, see Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005]). However, little attention has been devoted to the situation in Babylonia. It may be notable in this regard that while there are talmudic accounts of pious Palestinian rabbis refusing to look at the images on coins due to a perceived prohibition, one source in the Bavli (b. Nidda 20b) actually depicts the Babylonian sages, R. Zeira and Rabba, attempting to carefully examine "Babylonian" coinage. For a discussion of the related issue of idolatry and pagan iconography in rabbinic Babylonia, see Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 103–20.

58. On Kerdīr and his inscriptions, see Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "Kartīr," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (ed. Ehsan Yarshater; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982–), 15:608–28, available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kartir>.

59. The Middle Persian text is from D. N. MacKenzie, "Kerdīr's Inscription," in *The Sasanian Rock Reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam: Naqsh-e Rostam 6, The Triumph of Shapur I* 35–72 (ed. Georgina Herrmann; Berlin: D. Reimer, 1989), 35–72, 54, with some changes; the translation is very loosely based on p. 58 there and adjusted in light of Skjærvø, "Kartīr," and Skjærvø, "Verbal Ideograms and the Imperfect in Middle Persian and Parthian," in *Études irano-aryennes offertes à Gilbert Lazard* (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iranniennes, 1989), 333–54.

60. For this understanding, see Sebastian P. Brock, "Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties," *Religion and National Identity* (ed. Stuart Mews; Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 1–19. For a more recent and extensive discussion of these two terms, see Christelle Jullien and Florence Jullien, "Aux frontières de l'Iranite: 'Nāsrāyē' et 'Kṛistyonē' des inscriptions du Mobad Kerdīr: Enquête littéraire et historique," *Numen* 49 (2002): 282–335.

61. For a discussion of less attested religious groups, see Shaked, *Dualism*, 71–98.

62. These include "the (false) belief of Ahreman and the demons" (*kēš ī ahreman ud dēwān*; MacKenzie, "Kerdīr's Inscription," 54, §11, and *kēš ī dēwān* again in §17), "heretics" (*ablomōy*; 55, §16); "people who were unbelievers" (*mardōm ī anastawān*; 55, §17).

63. Actually, given Kerdīr's tendency to boast and the lack of corroborating evidence, some scholars have suggested that the religious persecution that Kerdīr describes may be exaggerated. See for example Albert de Jong, "Zoroastrian Religious Polemics and Their Contexts: Interconfessional Relations in the Sasanian Empire," in *Religious Polemics in Context: Papers Presented to the Second International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions* (ed. T. L. Hettema and A. van der Kooij; Assen: Royal van Gorcum, 2004), 48–63, 51. Regarding the Jewish context, see Robert Brody, "Judaism in the Sasanian Empire: A Case Study in Religious Coexistence," in *Irano-Judaica II* (ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1990), 52–61, 60. For further discussion of the lack of talmudic evidence for persecutions, see Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 121–47; and Geoffrey Herman, *A Prince without a Kingdom: The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 40–49. On the other hand, there is no reason to assume that Kerdīr fabricated the religious diversity of the Sasanian Empire. For that we do have corroborating evidence from other textual sources that testify to the existence and flourishing of these communities.

64. MacKenzie, "Kerdīr's Inscription," 59, §17.

65. Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina, "Enumerating the *Dēn*: Textual Taxonomies, *Cosmological Deixis*, and Numerological Speculations in Zoroastrianism," *History of Religions* 50 (2010): 111–43.

66. On simultaneously valid interpretations of the Avesta and other relevant reflections on Zoroastrian hermeneutics, see Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina, "Scripture Versus Contemporary (Interpretive) Needs: Towards a Mapping of the Hermeneutic Contours of Zoroastrianism," in *Shoshannat Yaakov*, 465–84.

67. Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "Kirdīr's Vision: Translation and Analysis," *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 16 (1983; published 1985): 269–306, 287.

68. It is worth noting that Kerdīr's use of the verb "*nimūdan* (to show)" in this context corresponds to citation terminology preserved in Zoroastrian exegetical and legal literature—most immediately forms like *andar dēn ōwōn nimūd estēd* "it is shown in the Tradition as such), and also "*pad/laz abestāg paydāg*" (it is clear in/from the Avesta) and the verbal form "*az ān gyāg paydāgēnīd*" (from that place it was made clear).

69. Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), devotes three separate chapters to discussing Babylonian rabbinic elitism, discursiveness, and the late Sasanian rise of the academy. Rubenstein attributes these features to the composition of the Bavli's audience. Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 8–10 and 12–15, discusses the Bavli's insularity, yet he attributes this to what he sees as the general social atmosphere of Jewish Babylonia.

70. For an outline of the general scholastic environment of East Syriac Christianity in which Ephrem flourished, see Adam Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 9–17. For a comparison of Eastern Christian and Babylonian rabbinic "scholasticism," see Isaiah Gafni, "Nestorian Literature as

a Source for the History of the Babylonian *Yeshivot*,” *Tarbiz* 51 (1982): 567–76 (Hebrew).

71. Although Mani apparently sought to spread his teachings to as large an audience as possible, the strictly hierarchical nature of the religion and the intricate cosmology contained in many Manichaean texts seems to reflect a situation of a limited “democratization” of knowledge that was actually largely for an educated audience.

72. Here I am not referring to esotericism, which constitutes a related but different area of interest. On this topic in Zoroastrianism, see Shaul Shaked’s enduring study “Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism,” *Proceedings of the Israeli Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 3 (1969): 175–221.

73. In the case of the Bavli and the scholastic writings of the Eastern Church, see Adam Becker, “The Comparative Study of ‘Scholasticism’ in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians,” *Association of Jewish Studies Review* 34 (2010): 91–113.

74. On these religious communities and their geographic distribution in relation to Babylonian Jewry, see the discussion at the beginning of Chapter 2, below.

75. See for example Ephraim E. Urbach, “The Repentance of the People of Nineveh and the Discussions between Jews and Christians,” *Tarbiz* 20 (1949): 118–22 (Hebrew).

76. For a convenient guide to Syriac literature, see Sebastian Brock, *An Introduction to Syriac Studies* (rev. 2nd ed.; Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2006).

77. For some of the most recent writing on Aphrahat and Babylonian Jewry along with bibliographical references to previous scholarship on the topic, see Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). On the related issue of Syriac Christian texts about celibacy and the Bavli, see Shlomo Naeh’s brilliant article “Freedom and Celibacy: A Talmudic Variation on Tales of Temptation and Fall in Genesis and Its Syrian Background,” in *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation* (ed. Judith Frishman and Lucas van Rompay; Louvain: Peeters, 1997), 73–89.

78. See for example Yifat Monnickendam, “The Kiss and the Earnest: Early Roman Influences on Syriac Matrimonial Law,” *Le Muséon* 125 (2012): 307–34.

79. Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, “Shared Worlds: Rabbinic and Monastic Literature,” *Harvard Theological Review* 105 (2012): 423–56, and Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

80. For a convenient introduction to this material, see Sebastian P. Brock, *The History of the Holy Mar Ma’in with a Guide to the Persian Martyr Acts* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2008).

81. See Alyssa Gray, “A Contribution to the Study of Martyrdom and Identity in the Palestinian Talmud,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 54 (2003): 242–72, 268.

82. For a recent discussion of some of the issues, see Guy G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (trans. Susan Emanuel; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 36–42.

83. See for example Guy G. Stroumsa, “The Scriptural Movement of Late Antiquity and Christian Monasticism,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16 (2008): 61–77.

84. Elman, “Middle Persian Culture,” 38–43.

85. Jason David BeDuhn, *The Manichaean Body: In Discipline and Ritual* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

86. See for example John C. Reeves, *Jewish Lore in Manichaean Cosmogony* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1992).

87. While Mani’s early Elchasaite roots might partially account for his access to Jewish tradition, it is also possible that the sect’s anti-Jewish sentiments explain the noteworthy *absence* of explicit Jewish ideas and symbols in Mani’s religious system. On this, see Bruno W. W. Dombrowski, “Mani, Manichees and the Jews—A Reassessment,” *Folia Orientalia* 38 (2002): 65–102.

88. On the Mandaean, the pioneering work of Lady E. S. Drower, including *Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran: Their Cults, Customs, Magic, Legends, and Folklore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), is still indispensable. Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), is a more updated and particularly readable guide.

89. For a convenient collection of some of these texts, see Edmondo Lupieri, *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics* (trans. Charles Hindley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 203–23; and Dan D. Y. Shapira, “Manichaeans (*Marmanaiia*), Zoroastrians (*Iazuqaiia*), Jews, Christians and Other Heretics: A study in the Redaction of Mandaic Texts,” *Le Muséon* 117 (2004): 243–64.

90. See Buckley, *The Mandaeans*. Cf. Lupieri, *The Mandaeans*, 3–60.

91. One of the fathers of modern critical Talmud study, Jacob Nahum Epstein, produced pioneering work on this topic. See the relevant articles in his *Studies in Talmudic Literature and Semitic Languages* (Hebrew; 3 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983–91).

92. See for example Nathaniel Deutsch, “Dangerous Ascents: Rabbi Akiba’s Water Warning and Late Antique Cosmological Traditions,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1998): 1–12; Shaul Shaked, “Healing as an Act of Transformation,” in *Self and Self-Transformation in the History of Religions* (ed. David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 121–30; and Dan D. Y. Shapira, “אין מול לישראל: Celestial Race, the Jews,” in *Kabbalah* 5 (2000): 111–27.

93. Recent comprehensive guides to Pahlavi literature include Carlo G. Cereti, *La Letteratura Pahlavi: Introduzione ai testi con riferimenti alla storia degli studi e alla tradizione manoscritta* (Milan: Mimesis, 2001); and Maria Macuch, “Pahlavi Literature,” in *The Literature of Pre-Islamic Iran: Companion Volume I to A History of Persian Literature* (ed. Ronald E. Emmerick and Maria Macuch; London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 116–90. Since

Pahlavi literature is the focus of the comparative approach advanced in this monograph, the following discussion is somewhat more detailed than the preceding.

94. See Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "The Antiquity of Old Avestan," *Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān: The International Journal of Ancient Iranian Studies* 3 (2003-4): 15-41.

95. See Alberto Cantera, *Studien zur Pahlavi-Übersetzung des Avesta* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), 1-14.

96. See Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "The *Videvdad*: Its Ritual-Mythical Significance," in *The Age of the Parthians* (ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Cutris and Sarah Stewart; London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 105-62.

97. For bibliography and editions, see Cereti, *La Letteratura Pahlavi*; and Macuch, "Pahlavi Literature."

98. Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina has produced a number of important studies on this material. See for example his "Relentless Allusion: Intertextuality and the Reading of Zoroastrian Interpretive Literature," in *The Talmud in Its Iranian Context* (ed. Carol Bakhos and M. Rahim Shayegan; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 208-34.

99. On the oral nature of Middle Persian literature, see Harold W. Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 149-76; Philip Huyse, "Late Sasanian Society between Orality and Literacy," in *The Sasanian Era* (ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Steward; London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 140-53; Philip Kreyenbroek, "The Zoroastrian Tradition from an Oralist's Point of View," in *K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 2nd International Congress Proceedings* (ed. H. J. M. Desai and H. N. Modi; Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1996), 221-37; Shai Secunda, "The Sasanian 'Stam': Orality and the Composition of Babylonian Rabbinic and Zoroastrian Legal Literature," *The Talmud in its Iranian Context*, 140-60; Michael Stausberg, "The Invention of a Canon: The Case of Zoroastrianism," in *Canonization and Decanonization* (ed. A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 257-78.

100. It should be noted that during late antiquity there was a flourishing Middle Iranian minstrel and epic tradition. Surviving works of this type include the epic history *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* ("The Book of Deeds of Ardašīr son of Pābag") and the courtly text *Xusrōy ī Kawādān ud rēdag-ēw* ("Khusrau son of Kavad and a Lad").

101. The most exhaustive treatment of the dating of the Zand is Alberto Cantera, *Studien*, 164-239. For an important attempt at relative, cross-cultural dating, see Yaakov Elman, "The Other in the Mirror: Questions of Identity, Conversion, and Exogamy in the Fifth-Century Iranian Empire—Part Two," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 20 (2006; published 2010): 25-46. Regarding research into the historical period of the named authorities of the Zand, see Shai Secunda, "On the Age of Zoroastrian Authorities of the Zand," *Iranica Antiqua* 46 (2012): 317-49.

102. It is important to note in this regard that the Zand's Pahlavi rendition of the Avesta was not the first attempt at translating the Avesta. There is evidence from Achaemenid inscriptions that it may have derived from Old

Persian exemplars. See Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "Avestan Quotations in Old Persian?," in *Irano-Judaica IV* (ed. Shaul Shaked Amnon Netzer; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1999), 1–64.

103. Another example would be "mixed" legal and theological works, such as the Pahlavi *Rivāyat* accompanying the *Dādestān ī dēnīg* (a collection of Middle Persian responsa transmitted in the manuscripts alongside the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*—"Rulings of the Tradition").

104. It should be acknowledged that some Pahlavi works are indeed traditionally associated with a particular time and place. There is for instance the case of the Middle Persian *andarz* ("wisdom") literature, which includes a number of texts attributed to known historical personalities like the sixth-century Sasanian king Khusrau I (r. 531–579), and the fourth-century Zoroastrian priest Ādurbād ī Māhrspandān. On the *andarz*, see Shaul Shaked, "Andarz (precept, instruction, advice), i. Andarz and andarz literature in pre-Islamic Iran," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (ed. Ehsan Yarshater; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982–), 3:111–16, now available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org>.

105. See Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina, "Studies in Zoroastrian Exegesis and Hermeneutics with a Critical Edition of the 'Sūdgar Nask' of Dēnkard Book 9" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2007), xvi–xviii.

106. For discussion of some of the Zoroastrian exegetical schools, see Alberto Cantera and M. A. Andres-Toledo, "The Transmission of the Pahlavi Videvdat in India after 1700 (I): Jamasp's Visit from Iran and the Rise of a New Exegetical Movement in Surat," *Journal of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute* 68 (2008): 81–142.

107. For the classic account, see Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991). For a more general introduction, see Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2000).

108. See Vevaina, "Relentless Allusion," which discusses some of these issues.

109. There is no lack of general introductions to the Talmud. The most recent and comprehensive is Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* (9th ed.; Munich: Beck, 2011), 211–47. For an English translation of an earlier edition of Stemberger's book, see his *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (trans. Markus Bockmuehl; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 109–224. Here my purpose is to articulate a working definition of the Bavli specifically geared toward comparative research.

110. For a schematic history of scholarship on the Bavli and its layers, see Schremer, "Stammaitic Historiography."

111. Jacob Neusner, *Development of a Legend: Studies on the Traditions Concerning Yohanan ben Zakkai* (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

112. On the latter issue in regard to general rabbinic literature, see Chaim Milikowsky, "The 'Status Quaestionis' of Research in Rabbinic Literature," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 39 (1988): 201–11; and Peter Schäfer, "Once Again the 'Status Quaestionis' of Research in Rabbinic Literature," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 40 (1989): 89–94.

113. For a summary of his research, see Richard Kalmin, "The Formation and Character of the Babylonian Talmud," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period* (vol. 4; ed. Steven T. Katz; Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 840–76.

114. See Barak S. Cohen, *The Legal Methodology of Late Nehardean Sages in Sasanian Babylonia* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); and Yaakov Elman, "How Should a Talmudic Intellectual History Be Written? A Response to David Kraemer's Responses," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 89 (1999): 361–86.

115. Jacob Neusner, *The Bavli's One Voice: Types and Forms of Analytical Discourse and Their Fixed Order of Appearance* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991).

116. Halivni's position is outlined in English in his *Midrash, Mishnah, and Gemara: The Jewish Predilection for Justified Law* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986); and applied (and constantly updated) in his *Sources and Traditions* (Hebrew; 8 vols.; Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik and Magnes Press, 1968–). Friedman articulated his view in his "Pereq ha-isha rabba ba-bavli ba-ziruf mevo klali al derekh heqer ha-sugya," in *Studies and Traditions* (Hebrew; vol. 1; ed. H. Dimitrovski; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1977).

117. Martin Jaffee, "Rabbinic Authorship as a Collective Enterprise," in *Cambridge Companion to the Talmud*, 17–37, 21.

118. On this topic, see Moulie Vidas, "Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2009).

119. This was pointed out in a survey of scholarship on Jewish thought by Jacob Neusner, "From Moore to Urbach and Sanders: Fifty Years of 'Judaism.' The End of the Line for a Depleted Category," *Religious Studies and Theology* 6 (1986): 7–26; and in Daniel Boyarin's application of New Historicism to rabbinic literature. See for example Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), especially 18–23.

120. The most influential approach of this cast was first articulated by Boyarin in *Carnal Israel*. An assessment of the contribution of *Carnal Israel* to the study of rabbinics can be found in Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "On 'Carnal Israel' and the Consequences: Talmudic Studies since Foucault," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95 (2005): 462–69. Recent work influenced by Boyarin's application of these methods includes Fonrobert's own *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000); Sergey Dolgopolski, *What Is Talmud? The Art of Disagreement* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009); Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *The Rite That Was Not: Temple, Midrash and Gender in Tractate Sotah* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2008); and Barry Scott Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

121. Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 13.

122. Ibid., 15.

123. See most recently his *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

CHAPTER 2

1. This formula appears on a number of incantation bowls that have survived from late antiquity. The text quoted here is a translation of British Museum #91713, which appears as bowl 001A in J. B. Segal, *Catalogue of the Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 2000), 43. My rendition is based on the notes to a related bowl discussed in Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998), 134–45.

2. See for example Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1993), 115.

3. This bowl is published as text no. 49 in Charles D. Isbell, *Corpus of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls* (Missoula, Mont.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1975). My translation follows Shaul Shaked, “Jews, Christians, and Pagans in the Aramaic Incantation Bowls of the Sasanian Period,” in *Religions and Cultures: First International Conference of Mediterraneum* (ed. Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce; Binghamton, N.Y.: Global Publications, 2002), 61–89, 73.

4. Examples of Jewish majorities include Pumbedita (see b. Bava Mezia 24b and b. Avoda Zara 70a) and Pumnahara (see b. Hullin 95b and b. Yevamot 16b). See Aharon Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica in the Talmudic Period* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1983), 366, 372. Ammianus Marcellinus refers to the abandonment of an unnamed town by its “Jewish inhabitants” after conquering Pirisabora (Peroz Shapur) and before Julian’s army reached a city called Maiozamalcha—probably Maḥoza-Be Ardashir. Based on these references some scholars assume that the unnamed Jewish town was Nehardea. See Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica*, 290. B. Yoma 11a (following Rashi ad loc.) may imply that there was a Jewish majority in Maḥoza, although it is also possible to derive the very opposite conclusion from that source. According to the seventh-century Syriac “Chronicle of Ḥuzistan” (which appears in Ignatius Guidi, *Chronica Minora* [Paris: E. Typographeo Reipublicae 1903], 32), Mata Meḥasya was a town that was “all Jewish.” Mata Meḥasya appears in connection with a number of fifth-century amoraim. According to Rav Ashi’s testimony, the town actually had a population of non-Jews who were uninterested in conversion (b. Berakhot 17b). Nevertheless, by the seventh century when the Chronicle of Ḥuzistan was composed, the town evidently had a reputation for a heavy Jewish presence—perhaps because of the *yeshiua* there. See Geoffrey Herman, “Holy Space and Jewish-Christian Polemic: On the Discovery of the Grace of Hananya and his Companions in Mata Meḥasya” (Hebrew; paper presented at the Israel Historical Society Conference “Space and Identity,” Open University, Ra’anana, Israel, April 2010).

5. B. Qiddushin 71b–72b.

6. For an important discussion of the boundaries, see Aharon Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica*.

7. Here I am pantomiming Gherardo Gnoli's work on the "idea" of Iran. For preliminary thinking in this direction regarding Jewish Babylonia, see Isaiah Gafni, "Talmudic Babylonia and the Land of Israel: Between Subservience and Assertiveness," *Te'uda* 12 (1996): 97–109.

8. Actual population estimates are impossible to come by. For one attempt, see Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* (5 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1965–70), 2:246–49.

9. The most complete synthesis of this material is again Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica*.

10. See for example Segal, *Catalogue*, 45, 54–60, for bowls discovered in Babylon, Kuta, and Sippar.

11. See Michael Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984; reprint, Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2005), 280.

12. See Stefan R. Hauser, "Christliche Archäologie im Sasanidenreich: Grundlagen der Interpretation und Bestandsaufnahme der Evidenz," in *Inkulturation des Christentums im Sasanidenreich* (ed. Arafa Mustafa and Jürgen Tubach; Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2007), 93–136. Regarding Kokhe and the Christian community there, see Marcia Cassis, "Kokhe, Cradle of the Church of the East: An Archaeological and Comparative Survey," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 2 (2002): 62–78.

13. One of these bowls was composed in the Eastern Christian script, Estrangelo, while the other was written in "Proto-Manichaean." However, as Shaul Shaked has pointed out, the latter was actually not the exclusive script of Manichaeans and was used by non-Manichaean Aramaic speakers as well. See Shaked and Navon, *Amulets*, 180–87.

14. On the whole, there is very little data regarding where the Mandaean residents during Sasanian times, although evidence points to southern Iraq and Ḥuzistan. For some new data emerging from an important study of Mandaic colophons, see Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *The Great Stem of Souls: Reconstructing Mandaean History* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2006), 7–8.

15. See Segal, *Catalogue*, 103–18. A cache of thirty-one Mandaic bowls was unearthed in Khuabir about seven miles south of Baghdad—though not on the Tigris but on the Euphrates River.

16. See Segal, *Catalogue*, 57–59. Incidentally, all the incantation bowls listed here contain a variety of Iranian and Semitic names. This further testifies to an ethnically mixed population.

17. Areas with possible Manichaean connections that were in proximity to Jewish areas include Bei Lapat, Babylon, Be Dura, Dast-kart, and Ctesiphon—where Mani at one point enjoyed the protection of the king but was later martyred. See *Tübingen Atlas des Vorderen Orient*, Map B VI 3, "The Sasanian Empire" (Tübingen: Reichert, 1993); and Iain Gardner and Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

18. Evidence for Zoroastrian clerical posts in proximity to "Jewish" areas includes Babylon (Bavel), Hira (Nahar Panya); Khusrau-shad-Kawad / Weh Kawad (Maḥoza), Peroz Shapur (Pumbedita), and Bei Lapat. See

Morony, *Iraq*, 282, and *Tübingen Atlas*. While their administrative positions are not named, as we shall see the Bavli does refer to local Zoroastrian priests.

19. It should be pointed out that there is literary evidence for fire temples in Ctesiphon and near Baghdad, and there were numerous fire temples, including major ones, north and east of Jewish Babylonia. See Morony, *Iraq*, 283.

20. For example, Pahlavi *Videvdad* 4.10 cites a certain Kay-Ādur-Bōzēd of Kerman. It is unclear whether Kerman was where the frequently cited Zoroastrian sage of that name lived, or whether another figure named Kay-Ādur-Bōzēd is being mentioned. A text related to the Pahlavi *Videvdad* known as *Zand ī fragard ī jud-dēw-dād* (MS TD2, folio 541) describes a question sent to a certain Wehšāpūr of Sistan concerning ritual practice in that town. Again, it is not clear whether the well-known sixth-century sage Wehšāpūr was from Sistan and is merely identified as such in this passage, or whether this is a different Wehšāpūr.

21. However, note a fascinating passage at *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* 2 that lists a number of Zoroastrian scholars who, apparently in the wake of the Mazdakite revolt, were called to a meeting with King Khusrau I and told to teach religious texts only to worthy parties. One of the authorities was the *dastwar* of Azerbaijan. In a much later retelling of this council by the Andalusian scholar, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), we are told that the sages were instructed to teach only in Ardashir-Khurra and Fasa in the district of Darabjird. Previously, they had been limited to Istakhr. Ibn Ḥazm's description of King Khusrau's meeting may reflect a tradition that in the sixth century C.E. Zoroastrian learning began to flourish in Fars. See Shaul Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1994), 79–80; and Shlomo Pines, "A Parallel between Two Iranian and Jewish Themes," in *Irano-Judaica II* (ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1990), 41–51, 43. For more comprehensive treatment of the provenance of the Zoroastrian authorities of the Zand, see Shai Secunda, "On the Age of the Zoroastrian Authorities of the Zand," *Iranica Antiqua* 46 (2012): 317–49.

22. Paul Bedjan, *Histoire de Mar-Jabalaha: De trois autres Patriarches, d'un prêtre et de deux laïques, Nestoriens* (Paris: Harrassowitz, 1895), 252.

23. This account appears in the Pethion-Ādurhormizd-Ānāhid cycle, which is collected in Paul Bedjan, *Acts of Martyrs and Saints* (reprint; 7 vols.; Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2007), 2:559–631. For a brief discussion of the Zoroastrian schools, see François Nau, "Étude historique sur la transmission de l'Avesta et sur l'époque probable de sa dernière rédaction," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 95 (1927): 149–99, 190–92.

24. Although Jews and Christians did at times bear Persian names, there is reason to assume that the majority of the Persian-named clients of the bowls were Zoroastrian.

25. These include most of the historical works cited in Chapter 1. For a particularly useful article on the topic, see Isaiah Gafni, "The Political, Social, and Economic History of Babylonian Jewry, 224–638 CE," in *The*

Cambridge History of Judaism: Vol. 4. The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period (ed. Steven T. Katz; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 840–76. An oft-overlooked but helpful resource that collects the relevant talmudic sources is Eliyahu Ahdut, “Ha-Yaḥasim ha-ḥevratiyim ve-ha-kalkaliyim bein yehudim le-nokhrim be-bavel ba-tequfat ha-talmud” (master’s thesis; Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1990).

26. It is important to note in this regard that it is not always clear what the different ethnic and religious identities were of the non-Jews referred to in the talmudic anecdotes. Sometimes the rabbinic sources use markers like “Aramaean” or “Persian,” while at other times they mention identifiably non-Jewish names, such as Wahman. At times, the Bavli simply employs loose terms for “non-Jew” (“*nokhri*” or “*goy*”), or “heretic” (“*min*”/“*mina*”).

27. For a related account concerning Syriac and Middle Persian (with some references to Babylonian Jewish Aramaic), see Claudia A. Ciancaglini, *Iranian Loanwords in Syriac* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2008), 13–21.

28. There are still further linguistic divisions that could be made across talmudic strata and tractates. However, these can frequently be attributed to chronological differences instead of dialectal factors. For a recent survey of the state of the field of Jewish Aramaic (Palestinian and Babylonian) in late antiquity, see Yochanan Breuer, “Aramaic in Late Antiquity,” in Katz, *Cambridge History of Judaism*, 457–91. There has been some debate concerning the relationship between the Aramaic of the incantation bowls and that of the Bavli. On this matter see especially Hannu Juusola, *Linguistic Peculiarities in the Aramaic Magic Bowl Texts* (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 1999).

29. Presumably, many Mesopotamian Manichaeans and adherents to Ancient Babylonian “pagan” religious traditions also spoke Aramaic. On the other hand, Greek seems to have constituted a third major language in the region due to the presence of Greek speakers who had been transferred from the West during wars with the Roman Empire.

30. For a brief list of the relevant sources, see Yaakov Elman, “The Babylonian Talmud in Its Historical Context,” in *The Printing of the Talmud: From Bomberg to Schottenstein* (ed. Sharon Liberman Mintz and Gabriel M. Goldstein; New York: Yeshiva University Museum, 2005), 19–28, 26. On the question of whether such an ability constituted “bilingualism,” see David G. K. Taylor, “Bilingualism and Diglossia in Syria and Mesopotamia,” in *Bilingualism in Ancient Society* (ed. J. N. Adams, Mark Janse, and Simon Swain; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 298–331, 300–303.

31. B. Gittin 19b.

32. Jacob Neusner, “How Much Iranian in Jewish Babylonia,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975): 184–90, 185.

33. In the Middle Ages it was even claimed that Pahlavi was intended as a form of cryptography. See Shaul Shaked, “Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism,” *Proceedings of the Israeli Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 3 (1969): 175–221, 191–92; and Sven Hartman, “Secrets for Muslims in Parsi Scriptures,” in *Islam and Its Cultural Divergence: Studies in Honor of Gustave E. von Grunebaum* (ed. Girdhari L. Tikku; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 63–75, 71–73.

34. Notably, Rava repeatedly uses Persian as an exegetical tool. First, he relates a Persian culinary term, *abar nēm* (“half-cooked”), to the biblical prohibition to consume the Pascal lamb raw (*na’a*) (b. Pesahim 41a following all manuscripts except Munich 95 and Vatican 134, which along with the printed edition record “Rav” instead). Rava also refers to Persian counting conventions in order to explain an otherwise problematic text (b. Bekhorot 60a). At b. Avoda Zara 24b, Rava suggests a biblical pseudo-etymological root for the Persian word for scribe (*dibīr*).

35. This is indeed the conclusion of the Bavli’s anonymous voice: “But [the witnesses] do not know how to *read* [Pahlavi]? Where they *know* [how to read Pahlavi; emphasis added].” Note the transition from an initial assumption that Jewish witnesses would not know how to read Pahlavi to a conclusion that it was indeed conceivable for Jews to be literate in the language.

36. Y. Yoma 1:6 (39b). See Eliezer Shimson Rosenthal, “For the Talmudic Dictionary—Talmudica Iranica,” in *Irano-Judaica* (Hebrew; ed. Shaul Shaked; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1982), 38–134 (Hebrew numbering), 48–50. Regarding a text that I will discuss in the next chapter, Yaakov Elman has suggested that the third-generation Babylonian amora Rav Yosef puns on the word for bear (*dov*) in a description of the Persians as restless, hairy, and gluttonous to hint at the Middle Persian word for demon (probably pronounced *dēw* by late antique Persians, but later pronounced *dēv/div*). Although the Persian word *dēw* does not appear in the Bavli, the Aramaic incantation bowls make it clear that this word was indeed absorbed into Babylonian Jewish Aramaic. See Yaakov Elman, “Middle Persian Culture and Babylonian Sages: Accommodation and Resistance in the Shaping of Rabbinic Legal Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 165–97, 193. In the next chapter I also discuss Rav Yosef’s association of the *mishnaic* term “*parva*” with the Zoroastrian priestly bureaucracy. Finally, at b. Bava Me’zia 83a Rav Yosef echoes the third-century patriarch Rabbi Yehuda’s disparaging comments regarding Aramaic in the land of Israel (“either Hebrew or Greek!”) by rhetorically asking: “Why the Aramaic language in Babylonia? Either Hebrew or Persian!”

37. B. Sanhedrin 98a, according to the relatively trustworthy Yemenite manuscript Yad Harav Herzog 1. Even if the anecdote is completely ahistorical, the Talmud’s assumption that Babylonian rabbis could use Persian phrases remains significant for understanding the perceived linguistic environment of Jewish Babylonia.

38. See Shaul Shaked, “Aramaic, iii. Iranian loanwords in Middle Aramaic,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica* 2 (London, 1986) 259–61, now available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org>. Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), counts approximately 340 Persian loanwords. Scholars continue to discover previously unrecognized Middle Persian loanwords in the Bavli due in part to greater access to Eastern talmudic manuscripts and *geniza* fragments that often preserve more foreign words than the

printed editions and Ashkenazi manuscripts. However, it is unlikely that the numbers will increase dramatically in the coming years.

39. It should be pointed out here that some elements were absorbed into earlier stages of Aramaic. On this issue, see Shaked, “Aramaic.”

40. For example, the word for “on”—*abar*. See Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Babylonian*, 76, “אבר.”

41. Rava seems to calque a Middle Persian maxim attributed to the fourth-century Zoroastrian priest Ādurbād ī Māhrspandān at b. Mo’ed Qatan 28a. See Yaakov Elman, “Acculturation to Elite Persian Norms in the Babylonian Jewish Community of Late Antiquity,” in *Neti’ot le-David: Jubilee Volume for David Weiss Halivni* (ed. Ephraim Bezalet Halivni, Zvi Arie Steinfeld, and Yaakov Elman; Jerusalem: Orhot, 2004), 31–56, 43–52.

42. See b. ‘Eruvin 63b. The reading “Wahman” appears in the Munich 95 and Vatican 109 manuscripts, and the *geniza* fragment Cambridge T-S F2 (2) 65. Printed editions have “Laḥman” and some medieval witnesses record “Haman.”

43. See for example the amalgam *dashtana analhi* (I am/she is a menstruant) found at b. Shabbat 110a, b. Ta’anit 22a, and b. Avoda Zara 18a.

44. For brief discussion, see Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 160.

45. See *ibid.*, and Christine Elizabeth Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 98–102. Still, in the Christian East in later Sasanian times there was some consideration of the possibilities of marriage between Christians and non-Christians. See Richard E. Payne, “Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity, ca. 500–700 CE” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2010), 161.

46. A Pahlavi geographical work named *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*—which was apparently composed sometime around the eighth century C.E. but which in certain respects reflects late Sasanian times—notes that the fifth-century Sasanian king Yazdgird I was married to a Jewish woman named Šišīnduxt, who was the daughter of the Jewish exilarch. See Touraj Daryaei, *Šahrestānīhā-ī Ērānšahr: A Middle Persian Text on Late Antique Geography, Epic, and History* (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers, 2002), 15–16 (text), 20 (translation). Scholars have seriously doubted the historicity of this work, including this particular passage. See Geoffrey Herman, *A Prince Without a Kingdom: The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 60–61. Nevertheless, the circulation of such a tradition—apparently among Jews—may still be significant for understanding their cultural assumptions.

47. The term is somewhat of a misnomer here, since according to the legal opinion that declares the child of an intermarried couple a *mamzer*—meaning a child born from a couple prohibited from having sex—the marriage itself is not legally recognized.

48. B. Yevamot, 44b–45b. See Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, 158–59; and Adiel Schremer, *Male and Female He Created Them: Jewish Marriage in the Late Second Temple, Mishnah and Talmud Periods* (Hebrew; Jerusalem:

Zalman Shazar Center, 2003), 157. Both Satlow and Schremer suggest that given the possibility of widespread intermarriage, this view may have been a tactic to encourage the non-Jewish partner to convert and thus accelerate the integration of the child into the Jewish community. Schremer also points to b. Qiddushin 70b and its discussion of the lineage of Babylonia as evidence for how intermingled if not intermarried Jewish families were—even just beyond the geographical limits of the so-called region of “pure lineage” of Jewish Babylonia.

49. B. Avoda Zara 31b and 35a.

50. Note that it is only the Bavli’s anonymous layer that attributes these views to the amoraim. See Yaakov Elman, “Acculturation and Intermarriage: The Case of Fourth-century Mahoza” (paper presented at the Association of Jewish Studies Conference, Washington, D.C., December 2008).

51. Rav Mesharshiya explains Shmuel’s ruling against *gittin* (rabbinic divorce documents) that non-Jews forced Jews to issue, as motivated by the concern that Jewish women might “attach themselves to non-Jewish men” who will then force their Jewish husbands to divorce them (b. Gittin 48a and 88b). A talmudic story describes the amora, Rav Shila’s use of corporal punishment against a Jew who had sex with a non-Jewish woman (according to the manuscripts; some printed editions record “an Egyptian,” presumably because of the censor). See b. Berakhot 58a. It is worth noting a tradition that appears in the printed editions of b. Ta’anit 24b, which describes Rava beating up a Jew for having sex with a non-Jewish woman. Strangely, all the manuscripts, apart from the margin of the Yemenite manuscript Yad Harav Herzog 1, omit this. It is possible that the tradition derives from b. Berakhot 58a, which like b. Ta’anit 24b also deals with alleged Sasanian concerns about rabbinic judicial power.

Michael Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, 158, points out that the Bavli’s discussion of m. Sanhedrin 9:6—the *mishna* that sees in Phineas’s zealotry a legal precedent (“zealots may attack a man who has sex with a non-Jewess”)—is particularly long and contains an extensive condemnatory section against sex with non-Jews. Nevertheless, as Christine Hayes has pointed out, it is significant that the Bavli takes particular care to render the legal principle entirely moot. See Hayes, *Gentile Impurities*, 154ff. and notes.

52. B. Yevamot 90a. See Hayes, *Gentile Impurities*, 183–84.

53. B. Avodah Zarah 36b. See Hayes *Gentile Impurities*, 183–84.

54. Shaul Shaked, “Popular Religion in Sasanian Babylonia,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 21 (1997): 103–17, 109. See also Michael Morony, “Magic and Society in Late Antique Iraq,” in *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World* (ed. Scott Noegel, Joel Walker, and Brannon Wheeler; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 83–107.

55. B. Gittin 11a.

56. See Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 166–88; and Samuel Israel (Shai) Secunda, “Dashtana—‘Ki derekh nashim li’: A Study of the Babylonian Rabbinic Laws

of Menstruation in Relation to Corresponding Zoroastrian Texts” (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 2008), 264–66.

57. B. Nidda 13b. Cf. Kalla Rabbati 2:4. See also b. Yevamot 47b (parallel to b. Yevamot 109b; b. Qiddushin 70b; and b. Nidda 13b), which, punning on Isaiah 14:1, compares converts to *tzara’at*, the ritually impure skin disease discussed in Leviticus 13–14.

58. One need only compare the lack of quantitative studies of the talmudic material with Richard Bulliet’s classic *Conversion to Islam: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

59. Isaiah Gafni, “Converts and Conversion in Sassanian Babylonia,” in *Nation and History: Studies in the History of the Jewish People* (Hebrew; ed. Menahem Stern; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1983), 197–209. The article was updated in Isaiah Gafni, *Jews of Babylonia in the Talmudic Era* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1990), 137–48; See also Yaakov Elman, “The Other in the Mirror: Questions of Identity, Conversion, and Exogamy in the Fifth-Century Iranian Empire—Part One,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 19 (2005; published 2009): 15–25, and “The Other in the Mirror: Questions of Identity, Conversion, and Exogamy in the Fifth-Century Iranian Empire—Part Two,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 20 (2006; published 2010): 25–46.

60. For example, Issur the convert (b. Bava Batra 149a and elsewhere) and an unnamed female convert (b. Qiddushin 76b) were both associated with Rava. Rav Adda b. Ahava, a student of Rava, lived in the house of a convert (b. Ta’anit 8a). In one passage (Qiddushin 73a) Rava describes Maḥoza as being full of converts.

61. B. Berakhot 17b, which is parallel to b. Qiddushin 70b. Even in that source, two amoraim, Rav Ashi and, depending on the manuscript, Rav Yosef (MSS Oxford and Florence) or Abaye (MSS Paris and Munich—the latter added after “Rav Yosef” was erased), seem to *expect* conversion to Judaism and complain that it does not occur often enough. On the other hand, we find critical statements about converts, e.g., R. Helbo’s comparison of converts to impure skin disease at b. Yevamot 47b. On this, see now Moshe Lavee, “Proselytes Are as Hard to Israel as a Scab Is to the Skin: A Babylonian Talmudic Concept,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 63 (2012): 22–48.

62. See Payne, “Christianity,” 39–43.

63. See Elman, “The Other . . . Part One” and “The Other . . . Part Two.”

64. The fluidity and variety of conversion in late antiquity cannot be overemphasized. Scholars have identified a number of conversion-related criteria that need *not* be completely fulfilled in order for the “converts” and their former and current communities to think that they had crossed a particular ethno-religious divide. These criteria should actually be read as a spectrum of gradations and possibilities. See Shaye J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). The fluidity can coexist with and may even be reflected in various *halakhic* attempts to legally define conversion that are preserved in rabbinic literature.

65. See my discussion of rabbinic and Zoroastrian orality in Chapter 1.

66. As discussed in Chapter 1 in regard to Manichaeism, some Sasanian communities thought deeply about the implications of the oral versus the written transmission of sacred texts. One aspect of oral transmission that was highlighted in late antiquity concerned the way it limited access to outsiders. Indeed, the oral nature of Mishna—as opposed to the written state of the Hebrew Bible that was incorporated in the Christian Bible—was understood by some late antique Jews as intentionally barring Christians from intruding on God’s special relationship with the Jews. See Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE–400 CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 145–46.

67. See Ahmad Tafazzoli, “Dabir i. In the Pre-Islamic Period,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (ed. Ehsan Yarshater; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 6:540–41, now available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org>.

68. The writing down of the Avesta during the Sasanian era was perhaps the most important such endeavor, although there is much debate about when exactly this occurred. A fair number of scholars have been suggesting a late Sasanian date. For a review of the research as well as a new theory, see Jean Kellens, “Considération sur l’histoire de l’Avesta,” *Journal Asiatique* 286 (1998): 451–519. Cf. Philip Huyse, “Late Sasanian Society between Orality and Literacy,” in *The Sasanian Era* (ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart; London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 140–55. Unnamed written Zoroastrian texts are mentioned in the *Kephalaia*, a Manichaean work containing chapters (*kephalai*) on various doctrinal issues, somewhat comparable to the *Dēnkard*. See Iain Gardner, *The Kephalaia of the Teacher: The Edited Coptic Manichaean Texts in Translation With Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 13. For further discussion and references, see Kevin Thomas Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 41n7.

69. See Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998), 34–52; Van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 30–63, and the discussion below.

70. See Shaul Shaked, “Bible iv. Middle Persian Translations of the Bible,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (ed. Ehsan Yarshater; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 4:206–7, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org>; and Dan D. Y. Shapira, “On Biblical Quotations in Pahlavi,” *Henoch* 23 (2001): 175–83.

71. For a text perhaps deriving from one such public discussion conducted in Middle Persian during the sixth century and then translated first into Greek and subsequently into Latin, see Victoria Erhart, “Priscianus of Lydia at the Sasanian Court: Solutionum ad Chosroem,” *Falsafeh* 37 (2009): 21–31. Paul the Persian apparently composed his philosophical tracts in Middle Persian and some of them were translated into Syriac in the seventh century. See Dimitri Gutas, “Paul the Persian on the Classification of the Parts of Aristotle’s Philosophy: A Milestone between Alexandria and Baghdad,” *Der Islam* 60 (1983): 231–67; and Byard Bennet, “Paul the Persian” *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*, available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org>.

72. On the topic of possible rabbinic access to Eastern Christian writings, see Adam H. Becker, “The Comparative Study of ‘Scholasticism’ in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians,” *Association of Jewish*

Studies Review 34 (2010): 91–113; and Becker, “Positing a ‘Cultural Relationship’ between Plato and the Babylonian Talmud,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101 (2010): 255–69.

73. For an expanded discussion of this issue, see Shai Secunda, “Studying with a Magus/Like Giving a Tongue to a Wolf,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 19 (2005; published 2009): 151–57.

74. B. Shabbat 75a according to the Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 manuscript.

75. The earliest source for this interpretation of the Deuteronomic verse can be found in the third-century Palestinian rabbinic *halakhic* Midrash, Sifre Deuteronomy §170:9.

76. It should be stressed here that the Stam’s efforts to associate unattributed rabbinic teachings with attributed ones—as it does with Rav’s warning here—is typical of its hermeneutics. Nevertheless, there is no reason for critical scholars to automatically accept the redactors’ conclusions as historically accurate. As we shall see, Rav may indeed have been warning Jews against studying with the magi for magical (sorcerous) purposes, and not because he considered such learning blasphemous, as the Stam suggests.

77. See B. M. Lewin, *Ozar ha-Geonim: Teshuvot geone Bavel u-ferusbeihem ‘al pi seder ha-Talmud* (13 vols.; Haifa and Jerusalem: 1928–43), 2:34 (“commentaries”). Cf. Alexander Kohut, *Aruch completum* (Hebrew; 8 vols.; Vienna, 1878–92), 1:247–48. For a convenient discussion of the Zoroastrian practice of not talking during mealtime with reference to comparable rabbinic material, see Shaul Shaked, “‘No Talking during a Meal’: Zoroastrian Themes in the Babylonian Talmud,” in *The Talmud in Its Iranian Context* (ed. Carol Bakhos and M. Rahim Shayegan; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 208–34.

78. Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 356–86.

79. This is based on the fact that one of the names Babylonian Jews used for Zoroastrian priests was *habara*—apparently derived from the verse in Deuteronomy. See Rosenthal, “Talmudic Dictionary,” 71–72.

80. It should still be noted that some Babylonian rabbis continued to read Deuteronomy 18:11 as actually referring to non-Zoroastrian practices. See b. Sanhedrin 65b.

81. B. Avoda Zara 18a.

82. Y. Yoma 3:8 (40d) and Ecclesiastes Rabba 3:3. Another possibility, suggested to me by Reuven Kiperwasser, is that the story may have been generated on account of an aural similarity between the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton and the most important Avestan sacred utterance, the *Yaθa ahū vaīryō*. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that other talmudic sources cannot even imagine how non-Jews might know the Jewish divine name. See b. Sanhedrin 60a and cf. y. Mo‘ed Qattan 3:7 (83b). Perhaps this development evinces a shift in perception?

83. This trend is already apparent in earlier Palestinian texts. See for example t. Sanhedrin 11:5 (and parallels): “Said R. Akiva: R. Eli‘ezer expounded three hundred laws concerning ‘Suffer not a witch to live,’” continuing in b. Sanhedrin 67b: “The laws of magic are like the laws of Shabbat. . . .”

84. B. Pesahim 110a and, for example, a bowl discussed in Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic*, 183.

85. See also b. 'Eruvin 43a. According to Shaul Shaked, "Form and Purpose in Aramaic Spells: Some Jewish Themes," in *Officina Magica: Essays on the Practice of Magic in Antiquity* (ed. Shaul Shaked; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1–30, 20, "Yosef the demon" also shows up in an Aramaic incantation bowl presently in the Schøyen collection.

86. B. Shabbat 129a and 156b.

87. Markham Judah Geller, "An Akkadian Vademecum in the Babylonian Talmud," in *From Athens to Jerusalem: Medicine in Hellenized Jewish Lore and in Early Christian Literature* (ed. Samuel Kottek et al.; Rotterdam: Erasmus, 2000), 13–31.

88. See the discussion in Chapter 3, below.

89. M. Sanhedrin 7:5. The crime is often described in rabbinic literature euphemistically as "blessing" the divine name.

90. See especially the third-century C.E. Palestinian rabbinic *halakhic* Midrash on Leviticus, Sifra Emor, *parsha* 14, *peraq* 19, and b. Sanhedrin 56a.

91. *Hērbedestān* 19.1. The text and translation of this and the following selection is based on Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "OL' News: ODs and Ends" in *Exegisti Monumenta: Festschrift in Honour of Nicholas Sims-Williams* (ed. Francois de Blois, Almut Hintze, and Werner Sunderman; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 479–95, 484–91, with minor changes. See there for technical notes on the readings. Cf. Firoze M. Kotwal and Philip G. Kreyenbroek, *The Hērbedestān and Nērangestān* (vol. 1; Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études Iraniennes, 1992), 78–81, and Helmut Humbach *Ērbēdestān: An Avestan-Pahlavi Text* (Munich: Kitzinger, 1990), 118–23. The direct Middle Persian translation of the Avesta is placed in quotation marks, while glosses are indicated with a dash. Angle brackets indicate where text needs to be added. An asterisk indicates a reconstructed form.

92. See *Hērbedestān* 19.2–5. *Hērbedestān* 19.7–8 consists of the Zand's summary and further analysis of these Avestan rules.

93. *Hērbedestān* 19.6.

94. See Skjærvø, "OL' News," 484n28.

95. See Shaul Shaked, "Religion in the Late Sasanian Period: Eran, Aneran, and Other Religious Designations," in *The Sasanian Era* (ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Cutis and Sarah Stewart; London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 103–18; and Touraj Daryaei, "The Idea of Ērānšahr: Jewish, Christian, and Manichaean Views in Late Antiquity," in *Iranian Identity in the Course of History* (ed. Carlo G Cereti; Rome: Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 2010), 91–108. Next chapter, I take up the matter from another angle.

96. Cf. Skjærvø, "OL' News," 487n45.

97. For a recent account of how this process worked, see Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "The Zoroastrian Oral Tradition as Reflected in the Texts," in *The Transmission of the Avesta* (ed. Alberto Cantera; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 3–48.

98. See for example *Yasna* 18.3.

99. The extent of this stringency depends on how *Hērbedestān* 19.8 is interpreted. See Skjærvø, 489–90. Regardless, *Hērbedestān* 19.9 unquestionably constitutes a more stringent approach.

100. It is also worth noting in this regard that the previous chapter of the *Hērbedestān* (18) discusses whether a Zoroastrian may learn (Avestan: *pairi aiβiiānhaī*, Pahlavi: *ōšmurēd*) texts from an “Other.” Significantly, the situation appears to be one in which this “Other” possesses religious texts worth learning. As in chapter 19, it is easier to locate this scenario in Avestan times when different kinds of religious acolytes skilled in the recitation of poetic ritual texts were willing to teach aspiring ritual poets for a fee. It is unclear which texts might have been learned from non-“Orthodox” or non-Iranian teachers during the Sasanian period. Possibilities include Manichaean texts which at least in the Near East may have taken a form that was similar to Zoroastrian scriptures. Indeed, already as early as Kerdīr’s inscriptions Manichaeans were referred to as *zandīgs*—“one who has his own Zand” and hence has a voice/tongue. Alternatively, perhaps the problem with “Other” teachers may have been taken to refer to interpretations by the controversial figure Mazdak. On material relevant for this possibility, see Dan D. Y. Shapira, “On the Scriptural Sources of Mazdak’s Teachings,” *Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān* 5 (2005–6): 63–82. Regardless, what is clear is that the *Hērbedestān* is strict about this pedagogical arrangement and declares that even if no one else is around to teach, it is forbidden to learn from a non-Iranian or an Iranian sinner. At the same time, b. Sanhedrin 59a discusses the opposite scenario in more general terms. It establishes that a non-Jew would be permitted to study Torah only if he studies the laws that pertain to non-Jews. Indeed, the second-century C.E. tanna R. Meir is cited as saying that a non-Jew learned in these areas is considered as great as a Jewish high priest, while regarding other parts of Torah, “a non-Jew who studies Torah is worthy of death.”

101. See for example y. Shabbat 3:4 (6a), which depicts the non-Jewish Babylonian sage, Ablat, in dialogue with Levi b. Sarisa (on this name, see Saul Lieberman, *Ha-Yerushalmi ki-feshuto* [Jerusalem: Darom, 1934], 84; cf. Reuven Margalioṭ, *Le-Heqer shemot ve-kinuyim ba-talmud* [Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1960], 7). Alternatively, it attributes the conversation to a dialogue between a certain “philosopher” and R. Tarfon. Note that the anecdote follows a pattern of conversations between tannaim and “Others” conducted in the presence of the rabbi’s students. Another source, y. Berakhot 6:2 (10b), describes a non-learned “Persian” asking Rav about the status of the blessing he makes over bread. In the Bavli parallel, one finds the question attributed to a certain “Benjamin the shepherd.” As such, it seems that the Yerushalmi refers to Babylonian non-rabbinic Jews as “Persians” imprecisely. Indeed, the same appears to be the case at y. Qiddushin 3:8 (64b).

102. See b. Avoda Zara 30a and 76b. Also see the discussion in the final chapter.

103. B. Sanhedrin 46b. On the Bavli’s description of difficulties relating to burial in light of Sasanian policies, see Geoffrey Herman, “Bury My Coffin Deep: Zoroastrian Exhumation in Jewish and Christian Sources,” in *Tiferet*

leYisrael: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Israel Francus (ed. Joel Roth, Menahem Schmelzer, and Yaakov Francus; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2010), 31–59.

104. B. Sanhedrin 88a.

105. B. Sanhedrin 39a. I discuss the source in greater depth in the following two chapters.

106. B. Bava Mezia 24a. See Eliyahu Ahdut, “Ha-Yahasim,” 46. Still, this source might merely reflect the fact that during talmudic times study halls were not specially designated buildings.

107. See the discussion in Chapter 4.

108. See Elman, “The Other . . . Part One,” 18.

109. For a related and more extensive treatment, see Shai Secunda, “The Talmudic *Bei Abeidan* and the Sasanian Attempt to ‘Recover’ the Lost Avesta,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 18 (2011): 343–66.

110. A geonic lexicon preserved in a *geniza* fragment (Cambridge T-S G2.20) describes the *bei abeidan* as the “open area (*shuq*) of an idolatrous temple (*beit avoda zara*).” R. Hananel b. Hushiel of Kairouan (b. Avoda Zara 17b) maintains that the *bei abeidan* was a room (*lishka*) in an idolatrous temple. Rashi ad loc somewhat strangely explains that the *bei abeidan* was “a structure (*bayit*) in which they eat and drink in honor of the ‘idol’ [literally, “star worship”], fertilize the ‘idol’ (*u-mezavlim zivul le-avodat kokhavim*), inquire into its affairs to know what it needs, and make vows.” On the other hand, some explanations maintain that the *bei abeidan* was a place of religious disputation. R. Hananel adds this idea to his comment at b. Avoda Zara 17b and assumes it at b. Shabbat 116a. Nathan b. Yeḥiel of Rome’s formulation in his classical talmudic dictionary, the *Arukh*, seems to derive from R. Hananel’s explanation. Elsewhere (b. Shabbat 116a and 152a), Rashi describes the *bei abeidan* as simply a place of religious disputation without claiming that it was an idolatrous temple. Note that the Tosafot (b. Avoda Zara 17a “*harheq*”) try to argue on purely *halakhic* grounds that the *bei abeidan* could not have been an idolatrous temple.

111. Suggested etymological derivations have included Aramaic, Greek, Persian, and even Sanskrit. Shaul Shaked collected most of the important bibliographical references in his “A Persian House of Study, A King’s Secretary: Irano-Aramaic Notes,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 48 (1995): 171–86.

112. For the full argument see Shaked, “Persian House.”

113. Bagdana/Bugdana is an important deity who appears in a number of magical texts and seems to have received his name via association with a temple, again Middle Iranian *baydān*. See Shaul Shaked, “Bagdāna King of the Demons and Other Iranian Terms in Babylonian Aramaic,” *Acta Iranica* 25 (1985): 511–25.

114. The following types of scrolls are discussed: Translated or transcribed Scriptures (t. Shabbat 13:2–3; y. Shabbat 15:1 [15b–c]; b. Shabbat 115a–b), “blessings” (probably incantations) and amulets that contain God’s name (t. Shabbat 13:4; y. Shabbat 15:1 [15c]; b. Shabbat 115b), scrolls written with ritually unacceptable ink (t. Shabbat 23:4; b. Shabbat 115b), and

the Gospels (*gilyonim*; see the discussion in the following note) and “scrolls of heretics” (t. Shabbat 13:5; y. Shabbat 15:1 [15c]; b. Shabbat 115b). Careful analysis of the Bavli *sugya* as a whole, compared and contrasted with the Tosefta and Yerushalmi, suggests that the Bavli was composed in at least two stages. First, a collection of *baraitot* (tannaitic textual units) more or less framed the debate. Then, later material was filled in, questions were reformulated, and discussions were taken in new directions. The apparent similarity of most of the material in the Tosefta, Yerushalmi, and Bavli is significant for contrasting the *lack* of discussion about the *bei abeidan* in either the Tosefta or Yerushalmi.

115. The *baraita* is first cited for its supposed contribution to the Bavli's discussion about the status of the blank margins of sacred scrolls, known as “*gilyonim*” in the *baraita*. However, even the Bavli (in uncensored versions) preserves an understanding that the *baraita*'s term “*gilyonim*” probably refers to the Christian Gospels and not to blank margins of scrolls. Cf. Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta ke-fshuta* (10 sections; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1955–88), 3:206–7n16; and Shlomo Pines, “He'arot al taqbollet ha-qayamet bein munaḥim surim u-bein munaḥim shel lashon ḥazal,” in *Sefer zikaron le-Ya'aqov Fridman* (ed. Shlomo Pines; Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1974), 205–13, 205–9. Although Pines refuses to take a final position in the debate as to what *gilyonim* means in this *baraita*, the parallel evidence from Syriac strongly suggests that it indeed refers to the Gospels. That said, it is unclear what the difference would be between the “scrolls of heretics” and the Gospels.

116. B. Shabbat 116a, according to the Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 manuscript with changes and variants that may affect the discussion, listed in the footnotes. The Toseftan parallel can be found at t. Shabbat 13:5.

117. [שהללו מכירין וכופרין והללו אין מכירין וכופרין] This reading appears in the Munich 95 and Vatican 487.8 manuscripts and the Soncino edition. Note that the Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 manuscript records: שהללו מכירין וכופרין ויודעין והללו אין מכירין ואינן יודעין אעפ״ שיהם כופרין (“for these recognize, deny and know, whereas those do not recognize and do not know although they do deny”); while both British Library *geniza* fragment Or. 5558 A/14 and the Austrian bookbinding fragment, Klosterneuburg-Augustiner Chorherrenstift 129–30 have: שהללו מכירין וכופרין והללו אין מכירין (“for these recognize and deny and those do not recognize”).

118. [בינינו] Thus MS Oxford. This word is not recorded in any of the other manuscripts.

119. [האיבדן] Thus MS Oxford. MSS Vatican 487.8 and Munich 95, the British Library *geniza* fragment and the Soncino edition all have המאבדן. MS Vatican 108 has שמאבדן, while the Klosterneuburg fragment has שמאבדן.

120. A parallel appears in the third-century C.E. Palestinian Midrash, Sifre Numbers §16, without reference to the Sabbath laws. This suggests that the *baraita* under discussion transferred sections “B” through “D” from elsewhere.

121. The reasoning here is somewhat obscure. It seems that R. Tarfon's main point is that heretics know God yet deny him. The brief discussion

regarding permitted places of refuge merely bolsters his central claim about heretics. See the textual variants collected in 1117, above.

122. [חבושמה] This is the reading found in MS Vatican 108. Compare MS Vatican 487.8: חבושמיא and a geonic tradition that has חבי שמה (Lewin, *Ozar*, 2:102 “responsa section”). Note that MSS Oxford and Munich 95 record חמא while the Soncino edition read חנין.

123. [נצרפי] Thus MSS Munich 95 and Vatican 487.8 and the Soncino edition. The British Library fragment reads נצרפאי. MS Vatican 108 records נצרפו and MS Oxford has ניצרפו. Note that Klosterneuburg reads נצרפי? and ניצרפי.

124. [לרב] This is the reading of all the manuscripts. Note that the printed editions record לרבא.

125. [דוכתיה] This reading is found in MSS Vatican 487.8 and 108, the Klosterneuburg fragment, and the Soncino edition. Note that MS Oxford records דוכתיה נמי (“also that which is similar to it”!) and MS Munich 95 has ד(ג)כ(ח)ת(י)ה.

126. [קשיא לי] This reading is found in MSS Vatican 487.8 and Munich 95. MS Vatican 108; the Klosterneuburg fragment and Soncino edition have קשי לי. MS Oxford has קשו להו.

127. [מר בריה דרב יוסף] This is the reading of MSS Oxford Vatican 108 and the Klosterneuburg fragment. MS Vatican 487.8 and the Soncino edition record מר בר יוסף. MS Munich 95 records רב יוסף.

128. MS Oxford records the word ופירש (“and he distanced himself”) here. The Klosterneuburg fragment adds פירש to the text.

129. Unfortunately, R. Yosef b. Ḥavushma’s provenance is unknown, aside from the fact that he interacts with R. Abbahu here and at b. Yoma 87a.

130. Compare Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Babylonian*, 1091, “רפי” and Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period* (2nd ed.; Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 528, “רפי.” Note that the three uses of “‘Yes’ and ‘no’, and it [i.e., the answer] was weak in his hand”; all are associated with Babylonian amoraim.

131. As in the *baraita*, the actual scenario assumed in R. Yosef b. Ḥavushma’s question is not entirely clear. Is he asking about scrolls that were written and stored by non-rabbinic Jews, or where the scrolls were written by rabbinic Jews and merely kept in a non-rabbinic facility? There is a relevant legal discussion in Tractate Gittin, although it cannot be used to conclusively determine the meaning of the present text:

אמ' רב נחמן נקישין ספר תורה שכתבו מין ישרף כתבו גוי יגנו נמצא ביד מין יגנו נמצ' ביד
גוי אמרי לה יגנו ואמרי לה קורין בו ספר תור' שכתבו גוי תני חדא ישרף ותני חדא יגנו
ותניא קורין בו

R. Nahman said: We maintain [this as a tradition]: A Torah scroll which was written by a heretic should be burned, one written by a non-Jew should be stored away, and one that is found in the possession of a heretic should be stored away. [Regarding one that is] found in the possession of a non-Jew some say that it should be stored away and some say that it may be read. [With regard to] a Torah scroll that was written by a non-Jew, one taught that it should

be burned, another taught that it should be stored away, and it was [also] taught [in a *baraita*] that they may read it. (b. Gittin 45b according to the Vatican 130 manuscript)

132. Shaked, “Persian House,” 174. Interestingly, “*ih*”—the Pahlavi abstract ending parallel to Parthian *ift*—is used to indicate “community of. . .” For examples from the Pahlavi Psalter, see Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “Case in Inscriptional Middle Persian, Inscriptional Parthian and the Pahlavi Psalter (2),” *Studia Iranica* 12 (1983): 151–81, 164.

133. The meaning of this designation in the Sasanian Empire has been most recently analyzed by Christelle Jullien and Florence Jullien, “Aux frontières de l’Iranite: ‘Nāsrāyē’ et ‘Kṛistyonē’ des inscriptions du Mobad Kerdīr: Enquete litteraire et historique,” *Numen* 49 (2002): 282–335.

134. It is not immediately clear why a Parthian term would be used here. In addition, Shaked himself admits that the spelling of *nizrafay* (see n. 123, above, for variants) would at best approximate the reconstructed Parthian abstract noun, **nāsrāyift*.

135. See b. Avoda Zara 48a.

136. Yaakov Elman has suggested that MS Munich’s reading “Rav Yosef” should be followed here in light of comments attributed to Rav Yosef in other talmudic passages. Notably, it is Rav Yosef who complains of a lack of converts coming from Guba (b. Berakhot 17b). See Elman, “Middle Persian Culture,” 197n50. Indeed, Rav Yosef’s observation that there has not been a convert “*from them*” (*menaihu*) is perhaps a distant textual echo of the comments in the present text. That said, the majority of manuscripts (and the better manuscripts, at that) record “Mar the son of Rav Yosef,” and MS Munich’s omission of “Mar” can be explained on account of the preceding word, “*amar*,” and the relative uncommonness of the name “Mar son of Rav Yosef.” An even less likely but tantalizing possibility, again following MS Munich, is that the Rav Yosef at the end of the passage is identical with the Yosef b. Ḥavushma at the beginning who posed the question about the scrolls of the *bei abeidan*. Interestingly, the patronymic “*havu shma*” means “they hid his name.” Tal Ilan has noted that nicknames are sometimes phrased as “son of,” which would mean that Rav Yosef himself was seen as problematic. See Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity* (4 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002–12), 1:46.

137. B. Shabbat 152a according to the Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 manuscript, aside from one significant emendation marked in the footnotes.

138. אדלא אבידנא בחישנא] This reading follows the Munich 95 manuscript. See also the Vatican 108 manuscript: דלא אבידנא בחישנא. MS Oxford has על דלא אדל' אבידנ' כחישנא while the Soncino edition records אדל' אבידנ' כחישנא.

139. The meaning of the parable is rather unclear. According to Rashi ad loc “a mountain is covered with snow” refers to R. Yehoshu’a b. Ḥananiya’s white hair crowning his head; “its surroundings are ice” refers to the whitening of his beard and mustache; and “its dogs do not bark” means that his voice is weak. Apparently, “its grinders do not grind” is simply a reference to dental problems.

140. See David Goodblatt, *Rabbinic Instruction in Sasanian Babylonia* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 125.

141. See b. Berakhot 10a according to some witnesses; b. 'Eruvin 101a, and b. Hagiga 5b. Notably, “emperors” and “heretics” are interchangeable in some traditions about rabbis and “Others.” See Christine Elizabeth Hayes, “Displaced Self-Perceptions: The Deployment of Minim and Romans in b. Sanhedrin 90b–91a,” in *Religious and Ethnic Communities in Later Roman Palestine* (ed. Hayim Lapin; Bethesda, Md.: University Press of Maryland, 1998), 249–89.

142. See Geoffrey Herman, “Table Etiquette and Persian Culture in the Babylonian Talmud,” *Zion* 77 (2012): 149–88, 175–79 (Hebrew); and Shaul Shaked, “No Talking.”

143. The literature on this story is considerable. See most recently Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 41–51; Cf. the classic treatment by Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 97–101, with references to previous scholarship.

144. B. Avoda Zara 17b according to the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) 15 manuscript.

145. אמרו ליה. This reading appears in the main text of the Paris 1337 manuscript. It appears as a scribal addition in MS JTS 15. The Munich 95 manuscript, Schocken Institute fragment 3654, and the Pesaro edition omit it.

146. Note how R. El'azar employs the second person in his response (“you will trample me with *your* legs”). This too may be seen as highlighting the “otherliness” of the attendees at the *bei abeidan*.

147. See b. Berakhot 7a and 28b and b. Yoma 88a. Cf. b. Nedarim 81a.

148. See for example Rashi ad loc “*a-de-la*.”

149. Of course this is grammatically incorrect since *baḥishna* (בחיִשְׁנָא) has the *subjective* pronoun *ana* as a prefix. Nevertheless, the fact that the saying begins with the word *avedna* (אֲבִידְנָא) could have led to this “mistake” for reasons of symmetry. In any case, a slight emendation to *baḥasheina* (בִּחְשִׁינָא) would solve this problem.

150. Indeed, on further reflection it is possible that a similar pun lurks behind the placement of the *bei abeidan* discussion immediately after the *baraita* at Shabbat 116a. Again, the last line of that text states that it is not only fire that may destroy these problematic scrolls, but also a collapse, water, or “*kol davar ha-ebdan*—כל דבר האיִבְדָן”—“anything that destroyed them” (see n. 119 for variants). This is immediately followed by the question about the scrolls of the *bei abeidan*. If this is correct, then there are three factors that link the *bei abeidan* discussion to the *baraita* that precedes it: (1) The *baraita*’s discussion of the books of heretics and the temple of heretics on the one hand, and Rav Yosef’s question about the books of the *bei abeidan* on the other; (2) R. Tarfon’s assertion that even in an emergency he avoided the temples of heretics but not pagan temples, and the description of Shmuel going to the *bei abeidan* but not the *bei nizrafei*; and (3) the audible link between “*kol davar ha-ebdan*” and “*bei abeidan*.”

151. For an extensive discussion, see Joel Thomas Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 164–205.

152. Pines, “A Parallel.” The trope has now been collected and studied at length in Van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 30–63.

153. See Van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 33n44.

154. *Dēnkard* 4:15–21 (Dhanjishah Meherjibhai Madan, ed., *The Complete Text of the Pahlavi Dinkard* [Bombay: Society for the Promotion of Researches into the Zoroastrian Religion, 1911], 412–13; M. J. Dresden, ed., *Dēnkart. A Pahlavi Text* [Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1966], 321–22). The transcription is based on an electronic edition prepared by Prods Oktor Skjærvø and the translation is based on Skjærvø, *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011), 41–42, with minor changes. Cf. Carlo G. Cereti, *La Letteratura Pahlavi* (Milan: Mimesis, 2001), 59–61; and Alberto Cantera, *Studien zur Pahlavi-Übersetzung des Avesta* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 106–13.

155. There have been numerous proposals for emending the term. See Van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 38n77, and Cantera, *Studien*, 108n12.

156. Literally, “those with different ways.”

157. References are collected in Mansor Shaki, “The Denkart Account of the History of the Zoroastrian Scriptures,” *Archiv Orientalni* 49 (1981): 114–25.

158. See Chapter 1, note 99.

159. This motif also appears throughout Zoroastrian literature. Van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 33–35, collects the references. For further discussion about the relationship between this negative image of Alexander and one that appears in the Bavli, see Geoffrey Herman, “Ahasuerus the Former Stable-Master of Belshazzar, and the Wicked Alexander of Macedon: Two Parallels between the Babylonian Talmud and Persian Sources,” *Association of Jewish Studies Review* 29 (2005): 283–98.

160. Cf. *Dēnkard* 4:99–103 (ed. Dresden 334–36), which describes some of the different writings that were “brought back.”

*kāla kōšāg ī hindūg ud magistīg ī hrōmāy ud abārīg ī az ān šōn
abāg bun nibēg ī pad ganj ī *šasabīgān ōh handāxtan čē andar-išān
wirāyišn abāg čim ō xwāstārān ī ham-āgāhīb ōh nimūd
nibēg-išān ī wirōmandān nōg ārāst-ē čē az bē kišwar āwurd-ē (ud)
nigerid-ē*

He compared the “Kāla Kōšāg” of the Indians, the “Magistīg” of the Greeks (lit. Romans), and others of that sort, with the fundamental book that was in the gubernatorial treasury. Whatever within them that was compatible with reason was presented to the seekers of knowledge. He revised doubtful writings, and examined whatever came from the countryside.

For discussion, see Harold W. Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 85–86; Shaki, “Denkart

Account”; and Carlo G. Cereti, “Prolegomena allo studio del quarto libro del Denkard,” *Studi Oriental e Linguistici* 5 (1994–95): 107–29.

161. Cf. *Dēnkard* 4:98 (ed. Dresden, 334:20–23):

pad-išān pahikārān ī abar dēn kadāmagān-iz kas dādestān hēnd kardān tā ērangih paydāgēnēd ahlomōg-iz ī nask ōšmurd pādīfrāh kardān nē framūd.

Unless heresy is manifest, those people (capable of) rendering decisions conduct disputations with them about the religion. Punishing the “*nask*-studying heretics” is not authorized.

162. See for example the paragraph after the one cited in the body of the book:

rāstih ī dēn mazdēsān bē dānist ōšyārān pad uskārīšn ōstīgihā tuwān bē pad gētīy dīd ud abartar abzōnīg ud . . . būd mādayān nē pad uskār bē pad abēzagih menišn gōwišn ud kunišn ud web-mēnōy-wāzišnīh mānsrīg abēzagihā ēzišn ī yazdān šāyēd

Those endowed with intelligence can know firmly the truth of the Mazdayasnian Tradition by examination. But, it is not principally by examination that it is seen in this world to be superior, to make things grow, and [. . .]; rather, it is possible by purity of thought, speech, and action and by sacrificing to the gods while uttering well, in pure fashion, the sacred word as it was spoken in the other world.

An important parallel appears in the *Book of Deeds of Khusrau ī Anōšarwān* partially preserved in Arabic in Ibn Miskawayh’s *Tajārib al-umam*. For an English translation and brief comments, see Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 265.

163. Following Skjærvø’s translation of the phrase “*ābān āhōg*.” Interestingly enough, rabbinic tradition also refers to heresy as “bad” or “turbid waters.” See m. Avot 1:11 and Sifre Deuteronomy *pisqa* 48, “*ki*.” This motif derives from the notion that the Torah is compared to water—an idea that incidentally developed into the motif of the “Sea of Talmud.”

164. The story appears at b. Nidda 20b. See Shai Secunda, “Talmudic Text and Iranian Context: On the Development of Two Talmudic Narratives,” *Association of Jewish Studies Review* 33 (2009): 45–69.

165. This is the version found in the Yemenite manuscript Yad Harav Herzog 1 and the *Arukh*’s reading of the text. See Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Babylonian*, 903, “פיקר, פיקר.”

166. This point is not insurmountable. As Galit Hasan-Rokem reminded me, the difference between a governmental treasury and a temple that houses books may not have been so important in a world where little separated state and religious institutions. Furthermore, there are various traditions regarding the place where the Avesta was (anachronistically) thought to have been deposited. See Daryaei, *Šahrestānīhā*, 43–44. Note also that in a related account preserved in the fifth book of the *Dēnkard*, the Avesta is deposited in the *ganj ī xwadāyān*—“treasury of the lords.” While not quite squaring

with the present interpretation of *abeidan* as a “pagan” place of gathering, there does seem to be some correlation between a “treasury of the lords (*xwadāyān*)” and a “temple of the lord (*bay*).”

167. See n. 70, above.

168. See the discussion in the following chapter.

169. Recent evidence has been assembled to support at least Shapur I's role in this process. See Van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 41–47.

170. Van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, attempts to explain why such a myth would be necessary in the first place and relates it to the circulation of pseudo-Zoroastrian works in the West.

CHAPTER 3

1. דאָהרמין] This reading follows the Florence II-I-9 manuscript. The Yad Harav Herzog 1 manuscript and the printed editions have דאָהרמין. The Munich 95 manuscript has הורמין.

2. אָהרמין] This reading follows MS Florence. MS Herzog and the printed editions have אָהרמין. MS Munich has הורמין.

3. B. Sanhedrin 39a according to the Yemenite manuscript Yad Harav Herzog 1. For an in-depth philological discussion of the passage, see Shai Secunda, “Reading the Bavli in Iran,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 (2010): 310–42. For further discussion, see also Chapter 5.

4. That is, the way urination was understood by the rabbis. See Julius Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine* (trans. Fred Rosner; Northvale, N.J.: Ktav, 1993), 108.

5. “Dualism,” in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/58113?redirectedFrom=dualism>, accessed January 30, 2013).

6. For an important treatment of the topic, see Shaul Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1994).

7. The b. Sanhedrin 39a debate is not the only rabbinic response to Zoroastrian dualism. One finds, for example, engagement with the issue at b. Berakhot 11b. The Hebrew Bible also seems to respond to Iranian dualism, as scholars have suggested regarding sections of Deutero-Isaiah. For an extensive discussion of the role dualism played in Jewish-Zoroastrian encounters, see Yaakov Elman and Shai Secunda, “Jewish and Zoroastrian Intersections,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Study of Zoroastrianism* (ed. Michael Stausberg and Yuhan S. D. Vevaina; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming).

8. Ishay Rosen-Zvi and Adi Ophir, “Goy: Toward a Genealogy,” *Diné Israel* 28 (2012): 69–122.

9. B. Berakhot 8b. The text is from the Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 manuscript.

10. See Moshe Benovitz, *BT Berakhot Chapter 1* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Society for the Interpretation of the Talmud, 2006), 335.

11. For a summary of rabbinic and other ancient Jewish approaches to the root *QDŠ* and its cognates primarily in the realm of sexual ethics, see Naomi

Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

12. In its current form, the following *baraita* refers to the Medes:

It has been taught [in a *baraita*]: R. Akiva said: For three things I like the Medes. When they cut meat they cut it only on the table; when they kiss, they kiss only on the hand; and when they hold council, they do so only in the field.

Note however that Benovitz, *BT Berakhot*, 331–34, has recently suggested that R. Akiva's alleged reference to the Medes derives from the mis-transmission of a Palestinian source—of which the better reading is “the Easterners (*bnei mizrah*).” See for example the Palestinian amoraic Midrash, Genesis Rabba 74:2 according to the Vatican 30 and 60 manuscripts.

13. On Classical orientalism regarding Zoroastrians, see Albert de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997). Crucially, de Jong argues that the primary value of the Greek and Latin sources about the magi should not be sought in their contribution to reconstructing ancient Zoroastrianism, rather in the way they reflect Greek prejudices and aspirations played out in the process of viewing the Oriental ‘Other.’ Interestingly, Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Hellenism in Unexpected Places,” in *Hellenism in the Land of Israel* (ed. John J. Collins and Gregory E. Sterling; Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 2001), 216–43, suggests that this form of discourse may be classified as a kind of Hellenism; see 231–35 for a similar understanding of these passages.

14. The texts are collected in de Jong, *Traditions*, 417–19. On a related note, Rava describes the technologically advanced Persian bathrooms, which “even when they contain feces are considered covered [for ritual purposes in rabbinic law]” (b. *Berakhot* 26a). It should also be noted here that Rabba b. Shmuel recommends sitting during urination (b. *Berakhot* 40b), a piece of advice that may reflect Zoroastrian influence.

15. See the sources cited in de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 419. The problematic nature of nudity during sex in Iranian culture is perhaps alluded to at *Hērbedestān* 6:6 (ed. Kotwal and Kreyenbroek, 44–45). For these and related issues, see Yaakov Elman, “‘He in His Cloak and She in Her Cloak’: Conflicting Images of Sexuality in Sasanian Mesopotamia,” in *Discussing Cultural Influences: Text, Context, and Non-Text in Rabbinic Judaism* (ed. Rivka Ulmer; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2007), 129–64, 139–48. Regarding Persian modesty during meals, see also b. *Berakhot* 46b, where the exilarch praises Persian table etiquette. It is possible that modesty during eating has to do with the Zoroastrian ritual of silence during the meal. See Geoffrey Herman's masterful “Table Etiquette and Persian Culture in the Babylonian Talmud,” *Zion* 77 (2012): 149–88 (Hebrew), which also adduces the relevant classical sources.

16. B. *Ketubot* 48a: שלא ינהג בה מנהג פרסיים שמשמשין מטותיהן בלבושיהן.

17. B. *Qiddushin* 72a according to the Vatican 111 manuscript.

18. See Jay Braverman, *Jerome's Commentary on Daniel: A Study of Comparative Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Hebrew Bible* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1978).

19. *Patrologia Latina*, 25:529 quoted in Braverman, *Jerome's Commentary on Daniel*, 84.

20. See *Demonstrations*, V (on Wars) § 17.

21. Contrast this, for example, with Theodoret's association of the second beast with the Persians based on the savagery of bears. See Braverman, *Jerome's Commentary on Daniel*, 89.

22. See *ibid.*, 88.

23. Note that this is essentially in opposition to Rabban Gamliel's depiction of Persian refinement. As I suggested regarding matters of sexual modesty, it may even be possible that Rav Yosef is actually responding to Rabban Gamliel's appreciation of Persian refinement in eating when he states that they "eat and drink like a bear." As noted in the last chapter (n. 36), Yaakov Elman has suggested that Rav Yosef is playing here on the words *dov* (bear) and Middle Persian *dēw* (demon). If this is correct, Rav Yosef is creating a kind of double subversion by shifting an originally positive association and then claiming that Zoroastrians, who are normally committed to the eradication of demons, are in fact demons themselves.

24. B. Rosh Hashana 3b.

25. B. Megilla 12a according to MS Columbia. For critical notes, see Eliezer Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary* (3 vols.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 3:186–90.

26. Cf. Lisbeth S. Fried, "Cyrus the Messiah? The Historical Background to Isaiah 45:1," *Harvard Theological Review* 95 (2002): 373–93.

27. Interestingly, this exegesis operates according to a dynamic similar to the rabbinic "over-reading" of the root *QDŠ* at Isaiah 13:3, which above I suggested constituted a misinterpretation of a biblical term of designation to imply a highly positive divine assessment of the Persians.

28. Cf. Jason Mokhtarian, "Rabbinic Depictions of Cyrus the Great," in *The Talmud in Its Iranian Context* (ed. Carol Bakhos and M. Rahim Shayegan; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 112–39.

29. Another source connected to this pattern is b. Gittin 17a, where one finds that earlier approval of Persian rule is interpreted by the anonymous layer of the Talmud to have given way to despair: "This was said before the magi came to Babylonia. That took place after the magi came to Babylonia."

A related but more complicated example appears at b. Yoma 10a, which preserves a Palestinian exegetical tradition that declares "in the future the Romans will fall into the hands of the Persians." Later in the passage, the first-generation amora Rav reverses the order and states, "In the future the Persians will fall into the hands of the Romans." The textual history of b. Yoma 10a is quite complex, and it has recently undergone extensive analysis in Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 122–29. Crucially, Kalmin shows that the second reason attributed to Rav for why the Persians will fall into

the hands of the Romans (“they also destroy synagogues”) is a later interpolation. Kalmin also argues that Rav’s statement has been overinterpreted by historians as reflecting a negative view of the Sasanian dynasty. Instead, Kalmin claims that Rav’s view is more or less a closed exegetical endeavor. As much as I agree that scholars need to be careful about attributing a broader political context to rabbinic statements, in the current passage where we are dealing with as sensitive an issue as who will ultimately win the ongoing wars between Rome and Persia in late antiquity, it is difficult to think that the exegetical debate could operate entirely within a vacuum. This need not mean that Rav is using biblical exegesis as a soapbox with which to express his political opinions (though this is also possible—witness Aphrahat’s fifth demonstration, “On Wars”). Readers of Rav cannot fully assess his hermeneutical stance without considering the political situation in which it was formulated. For further discussion of methods of reading the Bavli contextually, see the final chapter of this book.

30. See for example the discussion in the previous chapter regarding the ethno-religious Pahlavi terms “*ērān*” and “*an-ērān*.”

31. The scholarly literature on the topic is vast. For an important treatment of rabbinic Judaism as opposing the conventional category of “religion,” see especially Daniel Boyarin’s *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), which has been particularly helpful for the present discussion.

32. Scholars of religion have shown that the very term “religion” as used in modern parlance (academic and otherwise) is of relatively recent vintage. For a classic treatment, Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (ed. Mark C. Taylor; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–84. For an important discussion of the genealogy of “religion,” taking into account the differences between East and West, see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). In regards to late antique Jews, Christians, and their respective genealogies of religion, again see Boyarin, *Border Lines*. Finally, for a recent reassessment of the issue, see Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013).

33. B. Shabbat 75a. Original text according to MS Oxford 366. For the original and further notes, see the previous chapter.

34. See Albert de Jong, “The Contribution of the Magi,” in *Birth of the Persian Empire* (ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart; London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 85–99. The root *MGŠ* and its different permutations seem to have been borrowed into Aramaic fairly early on. A cognate of *amgushta* shows up in Syriac as well. See Claudia A. Ciancaglini, *Iranian Loanwords in Syriac* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2008), 201–2.

35. Technically—but rather implausibly—the term could also be interpreted as the plural of “*amgusha/magosha*—magus.” Perhaps also of significance is the fact that in Middle Persian, the suffix “-ih,” which is normally used to form nouns, can also give the meaning of “community”—as we find in the Middle Persian Psalter. See Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “Case in

Inscriptional Middle Persian, Inscriptional Parthian and the Pahlavi Psalter (2),” *Studia Iranica* 12 (1983): 151–81, 164.

36. Although the meaning of *dēn*, like Avestan *daēnā*, is varied in Middle Persian literature, in this case the reference does seem to be to the Zoroastrian tradition/community, which is opposed to a bad *dēn*, or religious tradition/community. On the *dēn* in this sense, see Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “The Zoroastrian Oral Tradition as Reflected in the Texts,” in *The Transmission of the Avesta* (ed. Alberto Cantera; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 3–48.

37. See *Dēnkard* 3.333 (ed. Madan, 326; ed. Dresden, 249): *ōh-iz web-dēn bun . . . u-š paydāgih pad ōšmurišn warzišn*.

38. The question of the original context of the debate was also raised by medieval talmudic commentators. See Rashi ad loc, Nathan b. Yehiel, *Sefer ha-Arukh*, “magosh,” and Tosafot ad loc, “*amgusha*.” For a defense of the Arukh’s position, see Solomon Judah Leib Rappaport, *Sefer Erekh Milin* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Makor, 1969), 1:201–3, “*amgush*.”

39. See de Jong, *Traditions*, 400–401 and references.

40. See m. Sanhedrin 7:4–5, 11.

41. B. Soṭa 22a. Interestingly, a Syriac text also employs the verb “*tanna*” to describe a Zoroastrian reciting the Avesta. See Paul Bedjan, *Histoire de Mar-Jabalaha: de trois autres Patriarches, d’un prêtre et de deux laïques, Nestoriens* (Paris: Harrassowitz, 1895), 436, 1.13; Jonas C. Greenfield, “*רשין מגושא*,” in *Joshua Finkel Festschrift* (ed. Sydney B. Hoenig and Leon D. Stitskin; New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1974), 66n10; Carl Brockelmann, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin* (ed. and trans. Michael Sokoloff; Winona Lake, Ind., and Piscataway, N.J.: Eisenbrauns and Gorgias Press, 2009).

42. The subject was first treated at some length by Jonas Greenfield, “*רשין מגושא*.” See now Moulie Vidas, “Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2009).

43. Bedjan, *Histoire de Mar-Jabalaha*, 240–41. For a translation and further examples see Greenfield, “*רשין מגושא*,” 67. See also Jean-Baptiste Chabot, “Histoire de Jésus-Sabran, écrite par Jésus-yab d’Adiabène,” *Nouvelles archives des missions scientifiques et littéraires* 7 (1897): 485–585, 525; and Greenfield, “*רשין מגושא*,” 6–9. See also Adam Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 205–6.

44. See for example *Hērbedestān* 7.5, 8.5, 13, and chap. 16.

45. See Ernest G. Clarke, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Deuteronomy* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1998), 52. A similar rendition also appears in Targum Neofiti and the fragmentary Targums ad loc.

46. Eliezer Shimson Rosenthal, “For the Talmudic Dictionary—Talmudica Iranica,” in *Irano-Judaica* (Hebrew; ed. Shaul Shaked; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1982), 38–134 (Hebrew numbering), 71–72.

47. B. Sanhedrin 65b.

48. Y. Yoma 3:8 (40d) has a father cursing. Ecclesiastes Rabba 3:3 has a mother cursing.

49. Famously, the Tetragrammaton appears in Greek texts, as well as non-Jewish Aramaic incantation bowls. It has been frequently noted that the “traffic” in magical traditions flows across communal boundaries with relative ease. See Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

50. While this meaning for *davar* is relatively uncommon, it can be confirmed in certain passages. See Mordecai Mishor, “*Davar, Teyvah, Milah,*” *Leshonenu* 53 (1989): 132–34, which includes an example where the phrase “*ha-lomed . . . davar*” refers to studying even a single word. See also the manuscripts and witnesses to m. Avot 6:3.

51. Based on Numbers 15:30. See the third-century C.E. Palestinian legal midrash Sifre Numbers §112; y. Sanhedrin 7:9 (25b); b. Karaitot 7b; b. Pesahim 93b. Furthermore, see t. Megilla 3:41, where someone who adds to the translation of the Torah is called a *megadef*.

52. For a similar use of the singular form, *gidufa*, see b. Bava Qamma 38a.

53. See for example the Bavli’s discussion of Isaiah 45:7 (a verse that itself may have originally responded to Iranian dualism) at b. Berakhot 11b.

54. One other passage that may be relevant to the rabbinic view on the status of Zoroastrian tradition should also be mentioned here:

הני דרומאי דפרסאי מאי מוסדרי וטרסיסקי מוהרקי ומחרוזי הני דפרסאי ודרומאי דבבלאי מאי
מוהרקי ואקניא[תא] בנוני בעשרין באדר

These [non-Jewish holidays listed in the *mishna* on which it is forbidden to transact with non-Jews] are those of the Romans. What [are the holidays] of the Persians? מוסדרי וטרסיסקי מוהרקי ומחרוזי. [So] these are of the Persians and Romans. What [are the holidays] of the Babylonians? מוהרקי ואקניא[תא] בנוני on the twentieth of Adar. (b. Avoda Zara 11b; the text follows MS Paris 1337; cf. the other manuscripts for significant differences)

Unfortunately, the current state of the text makes it nearly impossible to reconstruct the holidays referred to in this passage. Jacob Neusner, “How Much Iranian in Jewish Babylonia,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975): 184–90, takes the textual confusion regarding the holidays’ names as evidence of the rabbis’ lack of information about the basics of Iranian religion. Neusner’s student Baruch Micah Bokser, “Talmudic Names of the Iranian Festivals,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975): 261–62, proposed some better readings (and some rather problematic ones as well), but in the final line of the article he too largely supports his teacher’s general assessment. While further work needs to be done on this text, in the current context it is possible to say that the Bavli preserves an attempt to classify some Iranian religious holidays as days on which it is forbidden to transact with these non-Jews—presumably Zoroastrians. It is also true that the passage evinces relatively little engagement with the realities of these holidays. Indeed, it is even possible that the Bavli’s text simply represents a later version of the Palestinian parallel at y. Avoda Zara 1:1 (39c), in which R. [Ab]ba cites the first-generation Babylonian amora Rav. Finally, it might

be noted in this regard that scholars have observed a trend in which the Babylonian amoraim become generally more lenient in some of the matters relating to interaction with non-Jews, including around the time of their festivals. See Zvi Arie Steinfeld, *A People Alone: Studies in Tractate 'Avoda Zara* (Hebrew; Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2008); cf. Christine Elizabeth Hayes, *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds: Accounting for Halakhic Difference in Selected Sugyot from Tractate Avodah Zarah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 154–70.

55. The appearance of Jews in Pahlavi literature has been the subject of a number of articles, including James Darmesteter, “Textes pehlevi relatives au Judaïsme,” *Revue des Études Juives* 18 (1889): 1–15, and Darmesteter, “Textes pehlevi relatives au Judaïsme,” *Revue des Études Juives* 19 (1889): 41–56; Louis H. Gray, “The Jews in Pahlavi Literature,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901–6), 9:462–65; Jean de Menasce, “Jews and Judaism in the Third Book of the Dēnkart,” in *K. R. Cama Oriental Institute Golden Jubilee Volume* (Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1969), 45–48; Shaul Shaked, “Zoroastrian Polemics against Jews,” in *Irano-Judaica II* (ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1990), 85–104.

56. See the discussion in Chapter 1.

57. Following the Copenhagen manuscript K20: škwptyh; Cf. the Munich manuscript: wy'krtyh.

58. *Šāyest nē šāyest* 6.7. The text primarily follows *The Pahlavi codices K20 et K20b containing Ardāgh Viraz-Nāmagh, Bundahishn etc.* (Copenhagen: Levin and Munksgaard, 1931), 65v. For critical notes and a somewhat different rendition, see Jehangir C. Tavadia, *Sāyast-nē šāyast: A Pahlavi Text on Religious Customs* (Hamburg: De Gruyter, 1930), 97–99.

59. The tripartite classification is an interesting permutation of social dualism in that it consists of a double binary distinction between “us” and an external “them,” as well as an internal division separating orthodox (“us”) from heterodox (internal “them”).

60. Just as our text refers to the school of Sēn (*sēnīg*), the other text that deems him a heretic, *Dēnkard* 6:C83 (Shaul Shaked, *The Wisdom of the Sasanian Sages (Dēnkard VI)* [Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1979], 174–75), refers to the disciplines of Sēn (*hāwištān ī sēn*) who are deceived (*frēftag*):

ahlomōg 3 ēwēnag frēftār ud frēftag ud xwad-dōšag xwad-dōšag ān bawēd kē gōwēd kū sēn weh bawēd az ādurbād, ud xwad-dōšagihā ān sēn girēd ud frēftag ān bawēd čiyōn hāwištān ī sēn ud frēftār čiyōn xwad sēn kē ciš az ān ī čiyōn pōryōtkēšān ī pēšēnīgān cāšīd pad nigerišn bē wardēnēd

There are three kinds of heretics—a deceiver, a deceived one, and the self-indulgent. The self-indulgent is one who says: “Sēn is better than Ādurbād” [the important Zoroastrian high priest of the fourth century]; he accepts Sēn self-indulgently. A deceived one is like the disciples of Sēn (*hāwištān ī sēn*). A deceiver is like Sēn himself, who deliberately twists things away from the manner in which they were taught by the early masters.

61. It is not entirely clear if this Sēn (Avestan, Saēna) was the ancient mythological teacher “to first stand upon this earth with a hundred students” (*Yašt* 13.97), or a separate, contemporary figure. Elsewhere, Sēn’s (Saēn) teachings are quoted *against* the heretical Akwān’s “counter-instructions” without any indication that Sēn was considered a heretic. See *Dēnkard* 3:197 (ed. Madan 212–13; ed. Dresden, 165–66; Jean de Menasce, *Le troisième livre du Denkard* [Paris: Klincksieck, 1973], 205–6) and *Dēnkard* 3:198 (ed. Madan 213; ed. Dresden 166–67; ed. de Menasce 207). The more ambivalent tradition about Sēn survives only in the *Dēnkard* Book 6 and *Šāyest nē šāyest* passages.

62. *Dēnkard* 3:150.1 (ed. Madan 152; ed. Dresden 115–16; ed. de Menasce 153). See Shaked, “Zoroastrian Polemics,” 91.

63. *Dēnkard* 3:197.7 (ed. Madan 213; ed. Dresden 166).

64. Shaked, “Zoroastrian Polemics,” 91.

65. See MS MR 19, reproduced in ed. Dresden 136, which records zwyynytn’. Cf. ed. Madan, which it is read incorrectly as mwyyynytn’ (Shaked assumes the latter in his transcription, which he transcribes as *mōyēnīdan*—“moan”). Note that the verb *wizandēn*- in the sense of “cause to quake” also appears in *Dēnkard* 3:93.2 and 3:229.15 and in the passive “be caused to quake” at *Dēnkard* 3:93.2. I am particularly grateful to Oktor Skjærvø for this reading.

66. In the text, this name is spelled *maših* = *mašiy*.

67. *āš-kerdan*]. The text is corrupt here. The word reads ’y’kwtn’ (= škwtn’), which Shaked emends to the heterogram HŠKHWNtn, read *windādan*. Cf. de Menasce, who suggests *hašāgird* (disciple).

68. *Dēnkard* 3:227:11–16 (ed. Madan 253–54; ed. Dresden [MS MR], 135–36). Cf. Shaked, “Zoroastrian Polemics,” 97–98.

69. See Cantera, *Studien*, 216–18.

70. See the previous discussion in Chapter 2 in regard to the *bei abeidan*.

71. *Dēnkard* 3:288.12

72. Samuel Frank Thrope, “Contradictions and Vile Utterances: The Zoroastrian Critique of Judaism in the Škand Gumānīg Wizār” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2012).

73. See Adam Becker, “Martyrdom, Religious Difference, and ‘Fear’ as a Category of Piety in the Sasanian Empire: The Case of the Martyrdom of Gregory and the Martyrdom of Yazdpaneš,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2 (2009): 300–336.

74. See also Richard E. Payne, “Christianity and Iranian Society in Late Antiquity, ca. 500–700 CE” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2010).

75. For a collection of relevant texts and analysis, see Winrich Alfried Löhr, “Did Marcion Distinguish Between a Just God and a Good God?,” in *Marcion und seine kirchengeschichtliche Wirkung* (ed. Gerhard May and Katharina Greschat; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 131–46. Admittedly, we know relatively little about groups who held this view in Sasanian Mesopotamia.

76. Shaked, “Zoroastrian Polemics.”

77. B. Yevamot 63b. See Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 134.

78. The Oxford Opp. 248 (367) manuscript adds the words “דרכיב גמלא” (“that was riding a camel”). The Venice edition simply records “דרכיב” (“that was riding”).

79. [ר'] [ל] לוי. Thus the Oxford and Vatican 111 manuscripts, along with an early Spanish print and ed. Venice. MS Vatican 111 preserves an alternative reading—א'ל לוי לרבי (“Levi said to Rabbi”)—while the Munich 95 manuscript has: א' לוי רבי לויא (“said to me R. Levay”).

80. b. Qiddushin 72a. The text is from MS Vatican 111.

81. While it is possible that the beginning of the passage is correctly attributed to the Palestinian rabbis Rabbi Yehuda the patriarch and Levi, the discussion about the magi and Babylonian sages is most probably Babylonian in provenance. Similarly, the passage immediately following this one has Rabbi Yehuda on his deathbed instructing his students about which areas in Mesopotamia contain Jews of “impure” lineage. Scholars have assumed that this too is a secondary attribution to the Palestinian patriarch of information that was really of significance only to Babylonian Jews.

82. This positive assessment of the Persian army might be related to Palestinian Jewish expectations that the Persians would usher in the redemption by conquering the Romans. See for example Lamentations Rabba 1:13 (Buber ed., 77; parallel at Canticles Rabba 8:10): “Rabbi Shim'on b. Yoḥai taught: When you shall see a Persian horse tethered to the graves of the Land of Israel—expect the feet of the King Messiah.” Compare this with the more negative view present in a Bavli parallel at b. Sanhedrin 98a that emphasizes the need to bury one's coffin deep in the ground since Zoroastrians may exhume it. On the latter, see Geoffrey Herman, “Bury My Coffin Deep: Zoroastrian Exhumation in Jewish and Christian Sources,” in *Tiferet leYisrael: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Israel Francus* (ed. Joel Roth, Menahem Schmeltzer, and Yaakov Francus; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2010), 31–59.

83. This comparison is apparently based on the similarity of the word used here for magi: *ḥabarim* (plural) / *ḥabara* (singular) and destroying angels (*malakhei ḥabala*), where the “l” and “r” are interchangeable for established phonological reasons.

84. On this term, see Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 274, “גזירפשא”; and Ciancaglini, *Iranian Loanwords*, 143.

85. The text is from b. Sanhedrin 98a according to MS Herzog 1. A more or less exact parallel of the passage appears at b. Shabbat 139a.

86. Of course, not every occurrence of the term “judges” (*dayana*) in the Talmud refers to judges who were associated with the exilarch. But see also b. Bava Batra 65a. On negative rabbinic attitudes toward the exilarchate, see Geoffrey Herman, *A Prince without a Kingdom: The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

87. Perhaps relatedly, the Bavli attributes haughtiness to the Persians at b. Avoda Zara 71a.

88. B. Bava Meṣia 30b.

89. For an in-depth study of this term, as well as *bei *dādwār* (which we encounter below), see Ezra Spicehandler, “דיני מגיסתא and בי דואר: Notes on Gentile Courts in Talmudic Babylonia,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 26 (1955): 333–54.

90. See for example Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (7 vols.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1928), 6:433n7, regarding b. Megilla 12a.

91. See Robert Brody, “Judaism in the Sasanian Empire: A Case Study in Religious Coexistence,” in *Irano-Judaica II* (ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1990), 52–61; Herman, *A Prince*, 42–48.

92. See Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 121–48.

93. See Elman, “Middle Persian Culture”; Elman, “Rav Yosef in a Time of Anger,” *Bar Ilan Annual* 30–31 (2006): 9–20 (Hebrew).

94. For an exposition of this view, as well as a critique, see Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “Blood, Identity, and Counter-Discourse: Rabbinic Writings on Menstruation,” *Prooftexts* 23 (2003): 210–28.

95. This theoretical approach will be further pursued in the final chapter of the book.

96. This is a primary claim of Boyarin, *Border Lines*. For some related thoughts about Judaism and Christianity in the Middle Ages, see Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

CHAPTER 4

1. [שבבבל] The Jewish Theological Seminary Rab. 1623/2 (EMC 271) manuscript omits this word, which is present in the other witnesses.

2. B. Pesahim 113b. The text is reproduced from the Vilna edition. Although this statement is introduced in most manuscripts with a marker that identifies it as Palestinian and tannaitic (הנו רבנן—“Our rabbis taught”), its appearance in an extensive sequence of tangentially related sources, and its absence from Palestinian rabbinic literature makes it quite possible that the statement is of Babylonian provenance. Given this, as well as the gist of the statement, it is best to translate *ḥabarin* not as “charmers”—which follows Deuteronomy 18:11 and is attested in Palestinian Jewish Aramaic—but according to its normal Babylonian Jewish Aramaic usage, namely, Zoroastrian priest.

3. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

4. See Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia the Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 127–30, and the accompanying bibliography.

5. See Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 54–66. Rubenstein describes how dialectical violence is a major motif in talmudic narratives, and he charts an increase in the military imagery found in depictions of rabbinic dialectical

debates. In his view, the thematization of scholastic violence intensifies in the Babylonian Talmud, and particular in its later, anonymous layers.

6. B. Sanhedrin 24a. The text follows the Yad Harav Herzog 1 manuscript. I am grateful to Tzvi Novick for suggesting that this text be brought into the current discussion.

7. B. Qiddushin 72a. The translation is based on MS Vatican 111. See the previous chapter for the original Hebrew and further discussion of this text.

8. Note that Eliyahu Ahdut, "The Talmudic Expression Qaqei Hiwware as an Aid in Understanding the Making of Social Distinctions among Babylonian Jews," in *Irano-Judaica V* (ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2003), 1–13 (Hebrew section), has read this source and others similar to it as evidence that the distinctive white dress of the Babylonian rabbis may have been similar to that of the Zoroastrian priests. While there is not much evidence to support this specific claim, he does offer a provocative way of looking at sources that assume a strong similarity between rabbis and the magi.

9. See especially Philip G. Kreyenbroek, "The Dādestān ī Dēnīg on Priests," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 30 (1987): 185–208; and Kreyenbroek, "The Zoroastrian Priesthood after the Fall of the Sasanian Empire," in *Transition Periods in Iranian History* (Leuven: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 1987), 151–66.

10. Note that this term is distinct from the early rabbinic "tannaim" who preceded the amoraim in the traditional rabbinic periodization.

11. Moulie Vidas, "Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2009), 134–92.

12. B. Soṭa 22a.

13. See Chapter 3, n. 41.

14. For a related account, see Shai Secunda, "Parva—A Magus," in *Shoshannat Yaakov: Jewish and Iranian Studies in Honor of Yaakov Elman* (ed. Shai Secunda and Steven Fine; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 391–402.

15. [הפרווה] Thus, the Kaufmann manuscript, which vocalizes the word: הַפְּרוּוּה. All other manuscripts record the word with a single *vuv*. For variants, see Yehoshua Rosenberg, "Mishna 'Kipurim' (Yoma): A Critical Edition" (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1995).

16. B. Yoma 35a according to the manuscript Munich 6. For manuscript variants of this and the related talmudic passages, see Secunda, "Parva."

17. As a matter of fact, scholars do not know the origin of the name of the Parva chamber altogether. See the traditional suggestions collected in Elhanan Eibschitz, *Ha-Bayit ha-sheni be-tifarto* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1996), 210–11. It is possible that the name of the chamber derives from Latin "*parva*—small." For a different approach, see J. N. Epstein, *Studies in Talmudic Literature and Semitic Languages* (Hebrew; 3 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983–91), 3b: 834–35.

18. M. Yoma 1:1. This is the form of the word as it appears in MSS Kaufmann, Parma, and most witnesses of the parallel Tosefta.

19. T. Yoma 1:1.

20. Y. Yoma 1:1 (38c) and b. Yoma 8b–9a.

21. For the above reconstruction, see Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta ke-fshuṭa* (10 sections; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1955–88), 4:718. Lieberman's comments are based primarily on Gedalia Alon, *Studies in Jewish History in the Times of the Second Temple, the Mishna, and the Talmud* (2 vols.; Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameyuhad, 1967–70), 1:48–76.

22. פורסי This is the reading that appears in MS London - BL Harl. 5508 (400), and, apparently, in MS St. Petersburg - RNL Evr. II A 293/1. MS Munich 6 records: פירסי; MSS JTS Rab. 1623/2 (EMC 271), JTS Rab. 218 (EMC 270), and Vatican 134 have פירסי; MS Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23 records: פירסי, while MS Munich 95 has פירש.

23. B. Yevamot 45b. Note that פורסי is the reading of the Vatican 111, Moscow Guenzberg 1017, and Munich 95 manuscripts. The Moscow Guenzberg 594 manuscript and Cambridge Add. 3207 fragment have פירסי; while MS Oxford Opp. 248 (367) has פירסיה. The title does not appear in Iranian or Syriac sources. It is possible that it should be related to Babylonian Jewish Aramaic פורסא—or “designated time” (b. Shabbat 129b). See Michael Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 892, “פורסא,” meaning 1. As such, it may connote “a ruler for a designated time.” Indeed, this is essentially how the Bavli understands פרהדרין.

24. Interestingly enough, the association between the words *parva* and *magus* reappear elsewhere in the Talmud. Again, for a far more extensive treatment of the entire matter, see Secunda, “Parva.”

25. Prods Oktor Skjærvø has recently offered the following suggestion: Rav Yosef may be connecting the sacred space within the Jerusalem Temple known as the Parva with the ritual sacrificial space known by contemporary Parsis—Indian Zoroastrians—as the “*pāwī*.” The term *pāwī* is a younger form of a word that must have existed in Middle Persian sources, perhaps as *parwārā*—“enclosed area.” The term appears in an even earlier form in the Young Avestan ritual work, the *Nērangestān*, as “*vara-*” (“separated area”), which is rendered by Pahlavi exegetes as “*war*.” On the *pāwī*, see for example Jamsheed K. Choksy, “To Cut Off, Purify, and Make Whole: Historiographical and Ecclesiastical Conceptions of Ritual Space,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123 (2003): 21–41, 26–27. (Note, however, that Choksy has a different reconstruction of the word's etymology.) If Skjærvø's suggestion is correct, then Rav Yosef's association of the *parva* chamber with “magus” is not one of identity but in reference to a Zoroastrian ritual space that he compared with a sacred space in the Jerusalem Temple.

26. See for example b. Yevamot 61a. For a recent treatment of the Bavli's reworking of Second Temple sources about priests, see Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 37–43.

27. See for example b. Pesahim 57a=t. Menaḥot 13:21.

28. For an important examination of this reality in early medieval Mesopotamia and its environs, see Uriel I. Simonsohn, *A Common Justice: The Legal Allegiances of Christians and Jews under Early Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

29. See Maria Macuch, "Jewish Jurisdiction within the Framework of the Sasanian Legal System," in *Encounters by the Rivers of Babylon: Scholarly Conversations between Jews, Iranians and Babylonians in Antiquity* (ed. Uri Gabbay and Shai Secunda; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming).

30. B. Bava Me'zia 30b.

31. For variants, see n. 35, below.

32. My reading of בִּי דוּאָר as *bei *dā(d)war* instead of *bei dawār* reflects the Iranian evidence, though it is admittedly not consistent with the Aramaic form. It does seem clear that the form of the word in talmudic and geonic sources should be related to New Persian *dāvar* (or Manichaean Middle Persian *dāywar*—although the meaning of this term is not clear). That said, one needs to account for the relatively early disappearance of the second "d," and also for the shift of the long vowel from the first to the second "a." For discussion, see Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Babylonian*, 310, "דָּאוּר, דָּאוּר."

33. B. Bava Qamma 113b–114a, according to MS Hamburg 165.

34. There is some difficulty in reading בִּי דוּאָר as *bei *dā(d)war* instead of *bei dawār*. It seems likely that the form of this word in talmudic and geonic sources should be related to New Persian *dāvar* or Manichaean Middle Persian *dāywar*—whose meaning is not clear. However, it is unclear why in Babylonian Jewish Aramaic the long vowel is switched from the first to the second "a." See Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Babylonian*, 310, "דָּאוּר, דָּאוּר."

35. The main variants are as follows: MSS Escorial G-I-3: בִּי דִינָא דְּמַגִּיסְתָּא; B. Bava Me'zia 113b–114a, according to MS Hamburg 165: בִּי דִינָא דְּמַגִּיסְתָּא; Florence II-I-8: בִּי דִינָא דְּמַגִּיסְתָּא; B. Bava Me'zia 113b–114a, according to MS Hamburg 165: בִּי דִינָא דְּמַגִּיסְתָּא; Munich 95: בִּי דִינָא דְּמַגִּיסְתָּא; Vatican 116: בִּי דִינָא דְּמַגִּיסְתָּא; ed. Soncino: בִּי דִינָא דְּמַגִּיסְתָּא.

36. For a recent and convenient survey, see Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 126–34.

37. Ezra Spicehandler, "בִּי דוּאָר and דִּינֵי מַגִּיסְתָּא: Notes on Gentile Courts in Talmudic Babylonia," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 26 (1955): 333–54.

38. M. Bava Batra 10:14, according to the text and numbering of the Kaufmann manuscript.

39. On this form of surety contrasted with "surety of debt" in talmudic, geonic, and medieval sources, compared with Islamic law, see Gideon Libson, "Surety for Person in the Writings of Rav Shmuel Ben Hofni Gaon, Maimonides and Parallel Moslem Literature," *Annual of the Institute for Jewish Law* 13 (1981): 121–84.

40. Alternatively, as the next clause of the *mishna* states, according to the first opinion even if the borrower is solvent the guarantor must pay the loan in a case where the lender made a special stipulation.

41. This is the reading of all the manuscripts, except MS Paris 1337 which records רַב וְשִׁמְעוֹן ("Rav and Shmuel").

42. This and the following passages from the *sugya* are from b. Bava Batra 173b according to MS Hamburg 165.

43. See the medieval commentator Rashbam ad loc., "*gavra*." However, see Libson, "Surety," for a different view on the development of the laws of surety in medieval *halakhic* sources.

44. Note that Rashbam and other talmudic commentators explain that this literal reading of the *mishna* is merely a temporary presumption. As a matter of fact, there is no indication that Rabba and Rav Yosef ever retracted their opinion. Indeed, the late tenth- and early eleventh-century gaon Shmuel Ben Ḥofni did maintain Rabba and Rav Yosef's opinion in certain circumstances, as did some other medieval jurists in his wake. See Libson, "Surety"; and Berachyahu Lifshitz, "A Guarantee for the Body—Halacha and Aggada," in *Studies in Talmudic and Midrashic Literature in Memory of Tirzah Lifshitz* (Hebrew; ed. Moshe Bar-Asher, Joshua Levinson, and Berachyahu Lifshitz; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2005), 231–45, which contains an important analysis of this passage.

45. מתקיר לה. This is the reading of almost all witnesses. However, note that *geniza* fragment Cambridge T-S F2 (2) 53 records: אמר ("said").

46. רב נחמן. This is the reading of all the manuscripts. Note the MS Escorial corrected this name from רבא.

47. האי דינא. This is the reading of most manuscripts. Note, however, MSS Florence II-I-9 and Escorial G-I-3 have האינא ("now"). Aside from the similarity to the normative reading "האי דינא"—it is possible that the variant האינא can be connected with two other passages that discuss Persians in reference to "nowadays" (האינא)—b. Avoda Zara 16a (אשי לפרסאי) והאינא דקא מזבנינן אמ' רב אשי לפרסאי—"and nowadays that we do sell [non-Jews material for weapons]? Rav Ashi said: To the Persians, who protect us") and b. Bava Mezia 108a (. . .). והאינא דקא כתבין פרסאי—"and nowadays that the Persians write . . .").

48. דינא דפרסאי. Only MS Hamburg repeats these words.

49. כי דינא. Thus MS Hamburg. See also the Cambridge *geniza* fragment T-S NS 121.20: כדינא; MSS Escorial, Vatican 115 and the Pesaro edition have בי דינא ("the courthouse") while MSS Florence and Munich 95 have בדינא ("with the law").

50. יתרבע. This is the reading in all witnesses, save for MS Florence and the Cambridge *geniza* fragment T-S F2 (2) 53, which have יפרע ("exact payment").

51. See Yaakov Elman, "Returnable Gifts in Rabbinic and Sasanian Law," in *Irano-Judaica VI* (ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2008), 139–84.

52. Although Rav Nahman's objection ostensibly appears as a response to Rabba and Rav Yosef, this seems unlikely. First of all, one never finds Rav Nahman responding to the latter two amoraim with a formal objection, probably on account of Rav Nahman's seniority. See Yaakov Elman, "Yeshivot Bavel u-vatei din Parsiyim," in *Yeshivot and Battei Midrash* (Hebrew; ed. Emanuel Etkes; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2006), 31–55, 34–36. Note again that the *geniza* fragment T-S F2(2) 53 records "said" instead of "raised the objection." In addition, MS Paris attributes the first interpretation to the early amoraim Rav and Shmuel instead of Rabba and Rav Yosef, though this reading is unconvincing.

53. See b. Bava Mezia 108a and Shmuel's well-known dictum "the law of the Empire is law," cited originally at b. Bava Batra 55a and also at b. Bava Qamma 113a–b; Bava Batra 54b; b. Gittin 10b; b. Nedarim 28a and 28b; and Sanhedrin 25b according to MS Herzog 1.

54. On these and many issues raised in the *sugya*, much of the discussion is indebted to Elman, “Yeshivot Bavel.” For further discussion of credit problems in the Sasanian Empire as they may have influenced rabbinic law, see also Yaakov Elman, “The Chronology of the Sasanian Law-Book and the Fall of the Empire,” paper presented at the Middle Eastern Studies Association Annual Meeting, Boston, November 2009.

55. MHD (*Mādayān ī hazār dādestān*), chap. 40 (MHD 55:10–59:10).

56. MHD 56:6; Maria Macuch, *Rechtskasuistik und Gerichtspraxis zu Beginn des siebenten Jahrhunderts in Iran* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993), 387 (text), 392 (translation); Anahit Perikhanian, *The Book of a Thousand Judgements: A Sasanian Law-book* (trans. Nina Garsoïan; Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda, 1997), 144 (text), 145 (translation).

57. MHD 56:6–8.

58. See the variants collected in n. 49, above.

59. See Elman, “Yeshivot Bavel,” as well as Lifshitz, “A Guarantee,” which stress the difficulties in viewing Persian law as *systematically* lacking reasoning.

60. Elman, “Yeshivot Bavel,” is somewhat hesitant to attribute criticism of Persian law to the acculturated Rav Naḥman. Nevertheless, it remains possible that specifically those closest to a certain institution, like Sasanian culture and law, might be those who hold the right to criticize it.

61. B. Bava Qamma 58b; גבי ריש גלותא דדאין דינא דפרסאי למה לי. The reading דינא דפרסאי appears in MS Escorial G-I-3; MS Florence II-I-8 and the Soncino edition record דינא דפרסאה; MS Vatican 116 and apparently the JTS fragment ENA 2069.2 have דינא פרסאה while MS Munich 95 seems to have דינא ופרסאה. Interestingly, MS Hamburg 165 had דינא דפרסא, though it later marked the second “ד” for erasure and added a “י” at the end of the word.

62. For references to previous scholarship, see Moshe Beer, *The Babylonian Amoraim: Aspects of Economic Life* (Hebrew; Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1974), 88–99.

63. Y. Bava Qamma 6:2 (5b).

64. This interpretation can already be found in geonic literature. See B. M. Lewin, *Ozar ha-Geonim: Teshuvot geone Bavel u-ferushehem ‘al pi seder ha-Talmud* (12 vols.; Haifa and Jerusalem, 1928–43), 12:40 (responsa section); 12:62–63 (R. Ḥananel section). The first modern scholar to advance this reading was Immanuel Löw, *Die Flora Der Juden* (4 vols.; Vienna and Leipzig: Löwit and Kohut Foundation, 1924–34), 4:334. At the same time, it should be noted that there actually is some evidence that copyists were already (incorrectly) reading the litigant’s complaint as a reference to Persian law, and not Persian palms. See for example the erasures and corrections in MS Hamburg 165 as recorded in n. 61 above.

65. B. Shevu’ot 34b. The text follows the first printed edition (Pesaro, 1511).

66. We do not seem to have any discussions in surviving Sasanian legal discussions about a case similar to the talmudic one. Still, for some generally connected material, see Elman, “Yeshivot Bavel,” 45–57. Perhaps, as Daniel Boyarin has suggested to me, the term should be taken more loosely to refer to a generally problematic ruling.

67. Only the printed editions introduce the passage with the phrase “There are those who say,” while all the manuscripts simply begin the next case with “Someone said to his fellow.” Regardless, it does appear that the second passage represents a related yet alternate version of the first passage attributed to different amoraim and with different conclusions.

68. Significantly, the omission is not at the very end or beginning of a line where it could be easily accounted for on established philological grounds. In general, Tractate Shevu‘ot is sorely lacking in manuscripts and other witnesses. Although the citation of the passage as it appears in Joel Müller, *Teshuvot ge‘one mizrah u-ma‘arav* (Berlin: Deutsch, 1888), 38 §152, includes the word “Persian,” it is notable that R. Yitzḥaq Alfasi, R. Yosef b. Meir ibn Migash, and other medieval witnesses omit the first passage altogether—perhaps because it was legally inconsequential, though possibly because they simply did not receive this part of the text to begin with.

69. Notably, there is some evidence of textual contamination at b. Bava Qamma 58b as well, which concerns a Persian palm tree yet was connected by some scribes and commentators to b. Bava Batra 173b and its discussion of Persian law—probably due to Rav Naḥman’s appearance in both passages. For a similar and perhaps related example of contamination, see my discussion in n. 47 of the variant הַיִּדְּנָא found in two manuscripts to b. Bava Batra 173b, which may have been influenced by two other talmudic passages about Persians.

70. For a different reconstruction that may have been used by the gaon Shmuel b. Hofni, see Lifshitz, “A Guarantee,” 236.

71. This textual variant found in a *geniza* fragment is noted above in n. 45.

72. Since the evidence is rather complicated and disrupts my larger argument, the relevant sources and analysis appear in a postscript following this chapter.

73. On taxes in the Talmud, see David M. Goodlbatt, “The Poll Tax in Sasanian Babylonia: The Talmudic Evidence,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 22 (1979): 233–95.

74. See for example b. Bava Mezia 28b, which depicts Persians, as opposed to Romans, seizing found goods. See also b. Berakhot 60a. It is worth comparing these depictions with the surviving Sasanian evidence. For the latter, see D. N. MacKenzie, “Finding’s Keeping,” in *Mémorial Jean De Menasce* (ed. Philippe Gignoux and Ahmed Tafazzoli; Louvain: Orientaliste, 1974), 273–80. See also b. Hagiga 5b, where Rava complains of being forced to send money (bribes?) to King Shapur II’s court.

75. See Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* (5 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1965–70), 30–35.

76. See for example b. Avoda Zara 16a, which reverses a decree not to sell raw material for weapons to non-Jews, since “nowadays the Persians protect the Jews.” On this reversal, see Christine Elizabeth Hayes, *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds: Accounting for Halakhic Difference in Selected Sugyot from Tractate Avodah Zarah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 171–79. Somewhat similarly, at b. Mo‘ed Qatan 26a the Bavli

records a conversation where King Shapur I brags to Shmuel about never killing Jews in order to contradict a rumor that the king had massacred 12,000 Jews in Caesarea Mazaca. On this source, see Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 139–45. The issue of Jewish trust or mistrust of the general Persian population was briefly raised in Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “The Political Symbolism of the Eruv,” *Jewish Social Studies* 11 (2005): 9–35, which examines a complex passage found at b. ‘Eruvin 68. Further treatment of that rich text will have to await another occasion.

77. See Alyssa Gray, “The Power Conferred by Distance from Power: Redaction and Meaning in B. A.Z. 10a–11a,” in *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammam) to the Aggada* (ed. Jeffrey Rubenstein; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 23–69; and Ofra Meir, *Rabbi Judah the Patriarch: Palestinian and Babylonian Portraits of a Leader* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameyuhad, 1999), 263–99.

78. Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 81–94.

79. See for example Rav’s lament about the death of the last Parthian king, Ardavan, which mirrors Rabbi’s lament about the passing of Antoninus at b. Avoda Zara 10b–11a.

80. See y. Megilla 1:10 (72b).

81. For some research in this direction, see Jason Mokhtarian, “Empire and Authority in Sasanian Babylonia: The Rabbis and King Shapur in Dialogue,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 19 (2012): 148–80; Gerd A. Wewers, “Israel zwischen den Mächten: Die rabbinischen Traditionen über König Schabhor,” *Kairos* 22 (1980): 77–100.

82. [רב הוּנא] This is the reading in virtually all of the manuscripts and medieval citations. The Pesaro edition has: רב עוקבא בר חמא.

83. [ונועצה עשרה פעמים] This is the order found in MSS JTS Rab. 15, Paris 1337, and the St. Petersburg *geniza* fragment RNL Evr. II A 293/13. Alternatively, MS Munich 95 and the Pesaro edition have ונועצה עשרה פעמים בקרקע (“one sticks it ten times into the ground”).

84. [רבא] All manuscripts have רבא, aside from MS Munich which has רב (“Rav”). The printed edition records דרב יהושע.

85. [ובמקום קשה] This is the reading of the manuscripts. Ed. Pesaro records וברקע שאינה עבודה (“in ground that is not tilled”).

86. [אמ' רב כהנא ובסכין שאין בה גומות] This line is absent only in MS Paris. It has been added from MS JTS. Note that ed. Pesaro also adds the word יפה (“good”) after ובסכין.

87. [יפה] This word is missing from MS Munich, though present in the other manuscripts.

88. [גומות] This is the reading in MS Paris. All other witness have נוחות (“notches”).

89. [ודיו] This word appears only in MS Paris.

90. [ולאכול] This is the reading of MS Paris, the St. Petersburg fragment, and ed. Soncino. MS Munich records ואוכל in the present tense singular, while MS JTS has לאכול without the conjunctive.

91. MS Munich, ed. Soncino, and a number of medieval witnesses including Tosafot RY'D, Pisqei RY'D, and Pisqei RYA'Z link this story to the preceding legal discussion with the words *כִּי הָא* ("like this . . ."). However, the most reliable manuscripts and witnesses omit these words. It should be noted that MS Paris includes the word *אָמַר* ("he said"), but this is almost certainly an error.

92. b. Avoda Zara 76b. The text is based on MS Paris 1337 with variants and changes indicated in the notes.

93. See n. 91.

94. In addition to MSS JTS, Paris, and St. Petersburg, there are also medieval citations that support this reading. See for example Ezriel Hildesheimer, ed., *Halakhot gedolot* (3 vols.; Jerusalem: Meqize Nirdamim, 1971–1987), 3:273.

95. The passage seems to have undergone a complex and protracted development. Noticeably, the amoraic discussion is disrupted by a purportedly tannaitic *baraita* which rules that a good unblemished knife [i.e., *סכין יפה*, "שכין יפה שאין בה גומות" according to MS Paris 1337] should be stuck into the ground ten times. As noted in n. 88, all other witnesses record *סכין יפה שאין בה גומות* ("a knife without notches"). However, the word *גומות*—literally, "holes"—does not retain this usage anywhere in Tannaitic Hebrew. Further, the reading "unblemished" corresponds much better with the reading *יפה* ("good"). It would appear that the reading *גומות* was influenced by its appearance in Rav Kahana's statement regarding un-notched knives. Incidentally, that statement does not appear in MS Paris altogether.

Apparently, this *baraita* evolved from the following line in the Yerushalmi:

סכין תוחבה בארץ ג' פעמים ודיין

A knife—one inserts it (*toḥva*) three times into the earth and it is sufficient.

The Yerushalmi source presented a challenge for the redactor of the Bavli passage, since it implies that sticking the knife in the ground numerous times is all that was necessary to render the knife fit, while the *mishna* itself rules that one must actually sharpen the knife. By placing it after the related amoraic discussion regarding the ritual preparation of knives, the redactor turned the line into a supporting *baraita* introduced with the usual formula "it has also been taught (תניא נמי הכי)," even though the text does not actually support all the amoraim in the prior talmudic discussion. It should be noted that there is a fair amount of disturbance in the witnesses to this passage in the Bavli. This probably reflects an unsuccessful attempt to bring the Palestinian text in line with Babylonian amoraic views. As such, Rav Kahana's statement—which apparently, like the requirement to stick the knife in the ground, is related to t. Hullin 1:7—seems to have been added to the Bavli's reworked *baraita*. It is even possible that the number "ten" in the Babylonian text may also have been altered—perhaps based on its appearance in the King Shapur story. On the latter point, see the following note.

96. Although the passage as it now appears has both the Babylonian *baraita* and Rav Huna proscribing ten plunges into the ground, it should be noted

that the number “ten” virtually never appears in proscriptive contexts in rabbinic law. Indeed, in tannaitic literature it generally connotes a large number that is normally modified by the word “even.” On the other hand, in a narrative context the number ten is to be expected, particularly when the storyteller wishes to add dramatic effect. It seems possible that the legal requirement in the *baraita* to plunge the knife ten times into the ground was actually taken over from the non-legal source of the story about King Shapur.

97. The name Baṭi (generally spelled in talmudic sources באטי or בטי) appears in a list of quintessentially non-Jewish names in some versions of b. Gittin 11a and is perhaps related to the Iranian names Bādūg or Bādag. See Philippe Gignoux, *Noms Propres Sassanides En Moyen-Perse Épigraphique: Supplément 1986–2001, Mitteliranische Personennamen* (facs. 3; Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2003), 54 and 205. Regardless of its original meaning, the name is a homonym with a Greek loanword in Aramaic that means (the non-kosher) thornback fish. See Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Babylonian*, 196, בטא, באטא.” Accordingly, at b. Avoda Zara 39a, Rabba b. Rav Huna fears that the fish-hash he was served is impure since he hears a voice saying the word “Baṭi.” Perhaps the resonance of the name as a fish explains Baṭi’s appearance in a story about a non-kosher knife. Given the sexual valence of fish in many cultures including the rabbinic, it is also notable that the name is used in an anecdote where, apparently, allegations of sexual indiscretion—“Remember what you did last night” (this is spelled out in a geonic tradition)—are raised.

It should also be noted that at b. Qiddushin 70b, an amora—different versions have either Rav Nahman (MS Vatican 111), Rava (MS Munich 95), or Rav Yehuda (MS Oxford Opp. 248 [367])—announces that Baṭi was a slave whose pride kept him from accepting his document of manumission. Finally, it may be of significance that Baat was the name of a well-known Mesopotamian convert to Mani’s newly founded religion. On the latter point, see O. Klíma, “Baat the Manichee,” *Archív Orientální* 26 (1958): 342–46.

98. Fascinatingly, an “apologetic” geonic version has King Shapur cutting a *new* citron with the knife. See *Halakhot gedolot*, 3:237.

99. Cf. Mokhtarian, “Empire and Authority.”

100. אפרין This is the reading of MS Florence II-I-8. See also MS Munich 95, which has אפרין. MS Vatican 117 has אפרין while the printed edition has אפרין; MSS Hamburg 165, Vatican 115 and the Oxford - Bodl. heb. d. 45 (2674) 40–55 fragment have אפריה, while MS Escorial G-I-3 records אפרייה.

101. B Bava Meṣia 119a according to MS Florence II-I-8.

102. See Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Babylonian*, 158. Tzvi Novick has pointed out to me that the Middle Persian word *āfrin* seems to pun on the name of the tradent, Efraim.

103. M. Bava Meṣia 10:6. The text follows MS Kaufmann.

104. This lacuna in our knowledge makes it difficult to properly assess the depiction of King Shapur praising R. Shim’on’s ruling. Perhaps the point is that the king is depicted as a kind of Solomonic judge who prefers

a middling position to one of two extremes. Mokhtarian, “Empire and Authority,” suggests that the vignette was placed here to close Tractate Bava Me’zia and makes a general statement about the rabbinic view of the Sasanians. This seems somewhat unlikely since during talmudic times, Tractates Bava Qamma, Bava Me’zia, and Bava Batra were actually considered to be three sections of a larger tractate called Neziqin (see for example b. Bava Qamma 102a). On the other hand, as Mokhtarian points out, it is notable that the story at the very end of b. Avoda Zara is also about King Shapur.

105. B. Bava Qamma 96b.

106. The Soncino edition adds the word עלי (“regarding me”).

107. MS Escorial II-I-8 adds the words here מה שבור מלכא דנא מפיק ממונא בלא דינא אף אנא מפיקא ממונא בלא דינא (“just as King Shapur extracts money without a legal basis, so too I extract money without a legal basis”).

108. MSS Escorial and the Soncino edition include the word עתיקא (“old”) here, while it is added in the margin of MS Vatican 116.

109. B. Bava Qamma 96b according to MS Hamburg 165.

110. It is not entirely clear how to read Rav Nahman’s statement here. The printed editions include the word “regarding me (‘alay)” when Rav Nahman quotes Rav Huna. According to that version, Rav Nahman is citing a praise heaped upon him from Rav Huna. However, the other witnesses do not include this word. As such, it is possible that Rav Nahman is referring to something that Rav Huna used to say about himself, that is, Rav Huna, when he sat in judgment. Perhaps this may be connected to b. Bava Batra 172a–b, where Rav Huna indeed refers to King Shapur (and the exilarch) while ruling on a civil case. In any case, Rav Nahman now applies the same statement to himself.

It is also not apparent what the implications of the comparison to King Shapur are. MS Escorial II-I-8 includes an addition that explains that Rav Nahman is referring to King Shapur’s ability to adjudicate in an extra-legal fashion. However, it is also possible that Rav Nahman simply refers to the king’s expertise—or alternatively to the respect that his rulings command.

111. [אמינא] This is the reading found in all manuscripts aside from MS Hamburg 165 to a parallel at b. Bava Batra 115b, which has איםא (“say” in second person). The same is true of the subsequent occurrence of the word.

112. See the previous note.

113. The text is from MS Munich 6 to b. Pesahim 54a. A complete parallel can be found at b. Bava Batra 115b.

114. Alternatively, according to the reading of MS Hamburg the phrase functions as an encouragement (for a student?) to say something brilliant.

115. The following sources connect King Shapur (I or II) with Shmuel or Rava: b. Berakhot 56a (Shapur I and Shmuel); b. Hagiga 5a (Rava and Shapur II); b. Mo’ed Qatan 26a (Shapur I and Shmuel); b. Sukka 53a (Shapur I and Shmuel); b. Ta’anit 24b (Shapur II and Rava); b. Sanhedrin 98 (Shapur I and Shmuel); and b. Nidda 20b (Shapur II and Rava).

116. See m. Nidda 4:3 and Sifra, *Zavim* 1:1.

117. Rashi to b. Nidda 20b, “Ifra Hormiz.”

118. See Samuel Israel (Shai) Secunda, “Dashtana—‘Ki derekh nashim li’: A Study of the Babylonian Rabbinic Laws of Menstruation in Relation to Corresponding Zoroastrian Texts” (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 2008).

119. This basic approach is adopted in Elman, “Yeshivot Bavel.”

120. This for example is the interpretation of Rashbam ad loc.

121. This is spelled out in the Cambridge *geniza* fragment T-S F2(2) 53.

122. B. Bava Batra 174b.

123. See the early rabbinic legal Midrash to Leviticus *Sifra Behar parsha* 5; Isaac Hirsch Weiss, *Sifra de-ve Rav hu sefer Torat kohanim* (Vienna: Shlosberg, 1862), 109b.

124. The passage reads as follows (following MS Hamburg):

תנו רבנן אל תקח מאתו נשך ותרביית אבל אתה עושה ערב
למאן אילימא לישראל והתנן אלו עוברין בלא תעשה המלוה והלווה והערב והעדים אלא
לגוי כיון דגוי דיני[ה] דאזיל בתר ערבא הוא ניהו דקא שקיל רבייתא אמ' רב ששת שקבל
עליו לדון בדיני ישראל אי קביל בדיני ישר' רבית נמי לא נישקול שקבל עליו לזו ולא קבל
עליו לזו

Our Rabbis taught: “Do not exact from [your kinsmen] advance or accrued interest” (Leviticus 25:36)—but you may become a guarantor [for an interest-accruing loan].

[A guarantor] For whom? Shall we say for a Jew [who is lending on interest]? But we learned: The following violate the negative precept [of charging interest]: The creditor, the borrower, the guarantor, and the witnesses! But if it means for a non-Jew[ish creditor], well since it is the law of the non-Jew to pursue the guarantor, it is he [the guarantor] who [ends up] taking interest [from the Jewish borrower when the guarantor gets reimbursed from the borrower]. Rav Sheshet said: It means that [the non-Jew] accepted upon himself to act in accordance with Jewish law. But if he accepted [upon himself] to abide by Jewish law, he should not take usury either! He accepted upon himself to abide by one [area of Jewish law] but not by the other.

125. Note that this line of reasoning does not exist in the tradition preserved in MS Vatican 115 and *geniza* fragment T-S F2(2) 53.

126. In this regard, see the following passage from b. Bava Batra 173b–174a according to MS Hamburg (cf. MS Escorial):

המלוה את חברו על ידי ערב לא יפרע מן הערב
ואם אמ' לו על מנת שאפרע ממי שארצה יפרע מן הערב
במה דברים אמורים בשאין נכסים ללווה אבל יש נכסים ללווה לא יפרע מן הערב
וקבלן ואעפ' שיש נכסים ללווה יפרע מן הקבלן
רבן שמעון בן גמלי' א' אם יש נכסים ללווה אחד זה ואחד זה לא יפרע מהן

If a man lent his fellow money through a guarantor, he may not exact payment from the guarantor.

If he said to him, “On the condition that I may exact payment from whom I wish,” he may exact payment from the guarantor.

This applies only to the case where the debtor has no property, but where the debtor has property, he may not exact payment from the guarantor.

And [in the case of] an “acceptor” (*qablan*), even though the debtor has property, he may exact payment from the “acceptor.”

R. Shim'on b. Gamliel says: If the borrower has property, in either case he may not exact payment from them.

In this reinterpreted *baraita* (see J. N. Epstein, *Introduction to the Mishnaic Text* [Hebrew; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000], 279–80; cf. David Halivni, *Sources and Traditions: A Source Critical Commentary on the Talmud Tractate Baba Bathra* [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007], 330–31), it is quite clear that the creditor may *not* approach the guarantor under normal circumstances; rather only if the creditor makes a special stipulation *and* the debtor is insolvent. Alternatively, if the guarantor served as a “super-guarantor” (*qablan*—lit. an “acceptor”) the creditor may go directly to the guarantor to collect the loan. Incidentally, the Bavli “emended” the *baraita* in this way due to its version of R. Yoḥanan’s statement (transmitted here by Rabba bar bar Ḥana): “This is only when the debtor was solvent.” In the Bavli this line is appended to the second part of the *mishna* and not, like in the Yerushalmi’s version of R. Yoḥanan cited by R. Abbahu, to the first clause.

127. MHD 56:5–8. In addition, see MHD 57:2–58:7.

128. It is possible to compare some of these instances to the case of the “acceptor” (*qablan*)—apparently a Babylonian invention—discussed at b. Bava Batra 173b–174a. On this category, see Libson, “Surety”; and Berachyahu Lifshitz, *Promise: Obligation and Acquisition in Jewish Law* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 196–200.

129. Ed. Macuch, 387–88 (edition), 393 (translation), and 399–400 (commentary); ed. Perikhanian, 146 (edition) and 147 (translation).

130. See MHD 99:17–100:5.

131. Cf. Lieberman, *Tosefta ke-fshuta*, 9:228.

CHAPTER 5

1. Because this book is an initial attempt to describe a major research endeavor, textual examples are kept relatively brief while theoretical discussions and potential avenues of future research are allowed to proliferate. I am currently preparing a companion volume that contextualizes the Babylonian rabbinic system of menstrual impurity based on the theoretical approaches presented here.

2. Jonathan Z. Smith, “Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit,” *History of Religions* 11 (1971): 67–90, 67.

3. A coherent summary of Smith’s approach can be found in the pages of his *Drudgery Divine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Other seminal articles include Smith, “*Adde Parvum*”; Smith, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” in *Imagining Religion from Babylon to Jamestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 19–35; and Smith, “What a Difference

a Difference Makes,” in *Relating Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 251–302. For an assessment and critique of Smith’s work on comparison, see Hugh B. Urban, “Making a Place to Stand,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 12 (2000): 339–78.

4. This idea is alluded to a number of times in Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1978). On this point see Urban, “Making a Place to Stand,” and Sam Gill, “No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith as *Homo Ludens*, The Academic Study of Religion *Sub Specie Ludi*,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66 (1998): 283–312.

5. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 53.

6. As Wilhelm Dilthey put it, “Interpretation would be impossible if [past] expressions of life were completely strange. It would be unnecessary if nothing strange were in between them. It lies, therefore, between these two extremes.” See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society* (ed. H. P. Rickman; New York: Harper, 1962), 77.

7. The scare-quotes follow the lead of William James, A. J. Toynbee, and others. See Smith “Adde Parvum,” 69, and particularly Smith, *Drudgery*, 36–46.

8. Jonathan Z. Smith, “Manna, Mana Everywhere and /_/_/,” in *Relating Religion*, 117–44.

9. See in this regard Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

10. Michael Satlow, “Beyond Influence: Toward a New Historiographic Paradigm,” in *Jewish Literatures and Cultures: Contexts and Intertext* (ed. Anita Norich and Yaron Z. Eliav; Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2008), 37–54.

11. See Peter Schäfer, “Introduction,” in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture* (vol. 1; ed. Peter Schäfer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 1–26. This category is distinct from number 3 in that it assumes that actual historical connections provide an explanation for the parallel expressions. For a compelling articulation of this method regarding the production of rabbinic literature in the Galilee, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood: Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003).

12. James R. Russel, “Ezekiel and Iran,” in *Irano-Judaica V* (ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2003), 1–15, 6.

13. See for example Daniel Boyarin, “Virgins in Brothels: Gender and Religious Ecotypification,” *Estudos de Literatura Oral* 5 (1999): 195–217. Galit Hasan-Rokem has explored the adaptation of tools from the study of folklore studies for the field of rabbinics at length. See Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

14. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

15. For a related argument about opening academic Talmud study to critical theory, see Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *The Rite That Was Not: Temple, Midrash,*

and *Gender in Tractate Sotah* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2008), 11–15.

16. See Geoffrey Herman, “Ahasuerus, the Former Stable-Master of Belshazzar, and the Wicked Alexander of Macedon: Two Parallels between the Babylonian Talmud and Persian Sources,” *Association of Jewish Studies Review* 29 (2005): 283–97.

17. See Geoffrey Herman, “One Day David Went Out for the Hunt of the Falconers’: Persian Themes in the Babylonian Talmud,” in *Shoshannat Yaakov: Jewish and Iranian Studies in Honor of Yaakov Elman* (ed. Shai Secunda and Steven Fine; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 111–36.

18. For a review of some of this discussion and bibliographical references, see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 29–33; and Shaul Shaked, “Eschatology, i. Zoroastrianism and Zoroastrian Influence,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica* (ed. Ehsan Yarshater; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 8:565–69, now available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org>.

19. Saul Lieberman, “Some Aspects of After Life in Early Rabbinic Literature,” in *Harry Austryn Wolfson Jubilee Volume* (3 vols.; Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1965), 2:495–532, 496.

20. אומר ר' שמעון בן לקיש This is the reading of the Venice edition and the *geniza* fragment JTS Rab. 744.1–2. MSS Vatican 110 and Munich 95 add the word מלמד (“this teaches”). Note that MS Vatican omits the attribution to R. Shim’on b. Laqish altogether.

21. B. Sotā 35a. The text is from ed. Venice.

22. *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag* 29.1–4. The translation, with some changes, is based on Faridun Vahman, *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag: The Iranian “Divina Commedia”* (London and Malmo: Curzon Press, 1986), 27:16–28:2; found on 128–31 (text), 204 (translation).

23. *Ardā Wirāz nāmag* 34.1–3. In the edition of Fereyduun Vahman, *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag: The Iranian “Divina Commedia”* (London: Curzon Press, 1986), this passage is numbered 29.2–7 and found on pages 132–33 (text) and 205 (translation). My transcription and translation are adapted from Vahman’s, but with numerous changes.

24. For a comprehensive discussion of traditions concerning hell in Zoroastrianism, including those found in *Ardā Wirāz nāmag*, see Michael Stausberg, “Hell in Zoroastrian History,” *Numen* 56 (2009): 217–53.

25. It is to be expected that visions of postmortem punishment would depict vermin and other undesirable creatures attacking the souls of the wicked, since living humans are used to seeing this happen to corpses. Thus, it is not surprising that worms and mice also appear in Judeo-Christian texts concerning the afterlife. Nevertheless, to my knowledge only in *Ardā Wirāz nāmag* do these creatures play such a central role.

26. See Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “Kirdir’s Vision: Translation and Analysis,” *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 16 (1983; published 1985): 269–306, 299–301.

27. To be sure, the later stages of this compilation do appear to have been affected by Babylonian traditions. On this issue, see Reuven Kiperwasser,

“Midrashim on Kohelet: Studies in Their Redaction and Formation” (Hebrew; Ph.D. diss., Bar Ilan University, 2005), 243–74. Nevertheless, the content and organization of the passage in question does not evince Babylonian influence.

28. The text follows MS Vatican 291 as transcribed by the Historical Dictionary of the Academy of Hebrew Language (available at *maagarim*: <http://hebrew-treasures.huji.ac.il>).

29. In a pioneering study of the so-called “tours of hell” genre in late antiquity, Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), catalogues the various postmortem chastisements described in Christian and Jewish apocalyptic works. Most of the punishments operate according to the principle of *talion*, or *mida keneged mida* in Rabbinic Hebrew. Many are carried out by hanging from the sinful limb. For example, in the Apocalypse of Peter and the Acts of Thomas—second- and third-century C.E. works, respectively—and in the Isaiah and Elijah fragments, as well as in a work known as *Gedulat Moshe*, sins of speech are punished by the sinners hanging from their tongues. See Himmelfarb, *Tours*, 85–92. R. El’azar’s claim that slanderers’ tongues are elongated in heaven so that they extend and range over earth seems to be part of this view—even if the biblical verse itself allows only for a kind of reverse tongue-hanging torture, if you will.

30. B. Soṭa 3b according to MS Vatican 110.

31. See b. Avoda Zara 2a and 4b. As for non-rabbinic literature, the following constitutes an incomplete but representative list: Wisdom of Solomon 4:20 states, “They will come with dread when their sins are reckoned up, and their lawless deeds will convict them to their face”; Revelation 14:13 reads, “‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them’”; and Letter of Barnabas 4:12 has “Each will receive as he has done: if he is righteous, his righteousness will precede him; if he is wicked, the reward of wickedness is before him.”

32. Ernst Böklen, *Die Verwandtschaft der jüdisch-christlichen mit der parsischen Eschatologie* (Göttingen: Vendenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1902), 40–50.

33. *Videvdad* 19:30, the translation is from Prods Oktor Skjærvø, *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011), 180.

34. *Hādōxt Nask* 2.9–14. The translation of the Avestan is taken from Prods Oktor Skjærvø, *Introduction to Manichaeism* (available at http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~iranian/Manicheism/Manicheism_II_Texts.pdf; accessed October 10, 2012), 2:87.

35. *Hādōxt Nask* 2.19. For the later tradition, see for example *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* 24.5, transcribed and translated in Mahmoud Jaafari-Dehaghi, *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* (Paris: Association pour l’avancement des études iraniennes, 1998), 84–85. For further discussion of these texts and their use in the production of an idealized woman, see Shai Secunda, “The Construction, Composition and Idealization of the Female Body in Rabbinic Literature and Parallel Iranian Texts: Three Excursuses,” *Nashim* 23 (2012): 60–86.

36. The relationship between the Manichaean *dēn* and its Zoroastrian precursor is well documented. See Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “Iranian Elements in Manicheism. A Comparative Contrastive Approach: Irano-Manichaica I,” in *Au carrefour des religions: mélanges offerts à Philippe Gignoux* (ed. Rika Gyselen; Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l’étude de la civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 1995), 263–84.

37. Jean Kellens, “L’âme entre le cadavre et le paradis,” *Journal Asiatique* 283 (1995): 19–56.

38. Genesis Rabba 87 in *Midrash Bereshit Rabba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary* (Hebrew; 3 vols.; ed. J. Theodor and C. H. Albeck; Jerusalem: Shalem Books, 1996), 1070, renders the term “with her” as “so that he not be with her in hell.” A similar understanding apparently also lies behind Jubilees 39:6 and it is reproduced, for example, at b. Yoma 35b and in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan ad loc. Similarly, Leviticus Rabba 26 and its later parallels understand the prophet Samuel’s oracular reference to Saul being “with me” as prophesying that Saul will soon join Samuel in the pious section of the afterlife, in which Samuel resides.

39. The Hebrew root *QŠR* appears in the *nif'al* form at b. Sanhedrin 108b. In that passage, the intercourse of dogs in which the penis becomes locked in the female during sex is described as a curse:

ת"ר שלשה שימשו בחיבה וכולם לקו ואלו הן כלב ועורב וחם כלב נקשר עורב רק חם לקה
בעורב

Our rabbis taught: Three copulated in the ark and they were all stricken. These are the dog, the raven, and [Noah’s son] Ham. The dog was tied (*niqshar*) [during copulation], the raven [with] spit [during copulation?], and Ham with his [dark] skin.

Dogs are generally depicted as licentious in rabbinic literature. Also, as Joshua Schwartz points out in a series of articles on the canine in ancient Jewish society, dogs were largely disdained by Jews in antiquity. See for example his “Dogs in Jewish Society in the Second Temple Period and in the Time of the Mishnah and Talmud,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 55 (2004): 246–77. Nowhere in rabbinic literature does one find an owner connected to his dog via a regular leash—something that *is* found with reference to cats. If anything, dogs are more likely to be tied down with an iron leash.

40. According to this midrashic reading, the verse adds the phrase “to be with her” in order to express the imagery of Joseph sexually joined with Potiphar’s wife in the next world.

41. See for example b. Bava Batra 75a.

42. It is also worth noting here that dogs play a prominent role in Zoroastrian postmortem rituals and in the soul’s journey to the next world. For example, the *Videvdad* passage quoted above refers to dogs standing guard at the bridge.

43. Samuel Israel (Shai) Secunda, “Dashtana—‘Ki derekh nashim li’: A Study of the Babylonian Rabbinic Laws of Menstruation in Relation to Corresponding Zoroastrian Texts” (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 2008), 29–53.

44. *Ibid.*, 273–79.
45. On Mazdak and the Sasanian response, see the classic article by Patricia Crone, “Kavād’s Heresy and Mazdak’s Revolt,” *Iran: Journal of Persian Studies* 29 (1991): 21–42.
46. See Kevin Thomas Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 30–39. On the *Xwāday nāmag*, see A. S. Shahbazi, “On The Xwāday-Nāmag,” in *Iranica Varia: Papers in Honor of Professor Ehsan Yarshater* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 207–29.
47. Interestingly, within the Iranian sphere such formulaic correspondences can even traverse great historical distances. See Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “Reflexes of Iranian Oral Traditions in Manichean Literature,” in *Literarische Stoffe und ihre Gestaltung in mittelliranischer Zeit* (ed. Desmond Durkin, Christiane Reck, and Dieter Weber; Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2009), 269–86, especially the example concerning Darius I’s inscription and Manichaean writings on 280–81.
48. For the original talmudic text, see Chapter 3. For a related and more extensive treatment of the parallel, see Shai Secunda, “Reading the Bavli in Iran,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 (2010): 310–42.
49. B. Sanhedrin 39a.
50. On the *kustig*, see J. J. Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees* (Bombay: Times Press, 1922), 183–90.
51. This term refers to six (or seven, when including Ohrmazd) Iranian divine beings and means “Life-giving immortals.”
52. The text is based on the Copenhagen manuscript K20. The translation is from Skjærvø, *Spirit*, 246–47, with some changes. Cf. Adrien L. Barthelemy, *Gujastak Abalish* (Paris: Vieweg, 1887), 37–38; and Homi F. Chacha, *Gajastak Abalish* (Bombay: Parsi Punchayet Funds and Properties, 1936), 45–46.
53. The line I have translated as “in the same way, if you (plural) squat somewhere, from the urine it is shown,” is difficult and not entirely clear. Possibly, by using the second-person plural, Ādurfarnbag is highlighting the Islamic (as well as Zoroastrian) practice presumably familiar to Abālīš of squatting during urination. This practice may have been seen as displaying a concern with the impurity of urine.
54. See Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 3–5; and Richard Kalmin, “The Formation and Character of the Babylonian Talmud,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period* (vol. 4; ed. Steven T. Katz; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 840–76.
55. Reuven Kiperwasser and Dan Shapira, “Irano-Talmudica I: The Three-Legged Ass and ‘Ridyā’ in B. Ta’anith: Some Observations about Mythic Hydrology in the Review Babylonian Talmud and in Ancient Iran,” *Association of Jewish Studies Review* 32 (2008): 101–16, and “Irano-Talmudica II: Leviathan, Behemoth and the ‘Domestication’ of Iranian Mythological Creatures in Eschatological Narratives of the Babylonian Talmud,” in *Shoshannat Yaakov: Jewish and Iranian Studies in Honor of Yaakov Elman* (ed. Shai Secunda and Steven Fine; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 203–35.

56. B. Bava Batra 73a–74b. For a comprehensive discussion of this cycle, see also Reuven Kiperwasser, “Rabba bar bar Hana’s Voyages,” in *Literature and Revolt* (Hebrew; ed. Hannan Hever, Ariel Hirschfeld, and Joshua Levinson; Jerusalem: Mandel Institute of Jewish Studies, 2008), 215–41.

57. This pithy description is attributed to Harold Bloom in Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2000), 2.

58. To be precise, Genette’s umbrella term is “transtextuality.” Nevertheless, when placing his theoretical work into a larger context, it is easier to consider Genette’s entire treatment of the issue as part of the discourse on intertextuality—broadly defined. On the subject in general, see the classic work of Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), and especially Allen’s lucid primer, *Intertextuality*, which has informed the present discussion immeasurably.

59. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 1–2.

60. Genette suggests that the latter constitutes his interlocutor’s Michael Riffaterre’s principal focus of research, though this is debatable. For Riffaterre’s intertextuality, see Allen, *Intertextuality*, 115–32.

61. See for example Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 135n1. It should be acknowledged at this juncture that it was this book that first introduced theories of intertextuality to the study of rabbinic literature.

62. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 66.

63. Notwithstanding Kristeva’s christening of the word, the roots of intertextuality may be traced back to the beginnings of the twentieth century, and ultimately to the extremely influential work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. De Saussure maintained that language should not be seen as a referential system in which specific words refer directly to specific things. Instead, meaning is derived via a complex, conventional interplay between *other* signs and what they point to. These two poles are known as the “signifier” and (its) “signified.” Sense occurs within a larger linguistic system that predates the communicator—whose linguistic choices merely cut a path through the available signs that the linguistic system offers—and meaning is realized by choosing one word or linguistic combination instead of another. As such, meaning is accomplished through difference.

64. Since Daniel Boyarin introduced Michel Foucault’s oeuvre into talmudic studies two decades ago (on this trend, see Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “On ‘Carnal Israel’ and the Consequences: Talmudic Studies Since Foucault,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95 [2005]: 462–69; and Barry Scott Wimpfheimer, “The Dialogical Talmud: Daniel Boyarin and Rabbinics,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 101 [2011]: 245–54), Foucault’s thought has advanced the field in a number of ways. Recent examples include Beth A. Berkowitz, *Execution and Invention: Death Penalty Discourse in Early Rabbinic and Christian Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Rosen-Zvi, *The Rite*. While not using a language of intertextuality but that of “discourse,” the work

of Foucault is equally connected to some of the theoretical trends described here and can also be marshaled to think about the way Sasanian Jews and Zoroastrians operated within the same discursive space. Applying Foucauldian thought to the current project, it is possible to conceive of Jews and Zoroastrians as occupying the same “archaeological layer” and thus bound by the same intellectual horizons and limitations. Accordingly, the texts that both communities produced are variant expressions ripe for comparative discursive analysis aimed at understanding a specific archaeological layer in Sasanian Iran; while the ruptures in Sasanian rabbinic and Zoroastrian intellectual history might be seen as movements from one “sedimentary” layer to another.

65. B. Sanhedrin 38b–39b.

66. This reading is based on the Kaufmann manuscript of the *mishna*, MS Herzog of b. Sanhedrin, and other important manuscripts and medieval witnesses. See Mordechai Sabato, *A Yemenite Manuscript of Tractate Sanhedrin and Its Place in the Text Tradition* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1998), 319.

67. M. Avot 2:14. In the Bavli the term “Epicurean (*apikoros*)” undoubtedly refers to a type of irreverent, heretical Jew and not an actual adherent to Epicureanism. See Jenny Labendz, “‘Know What to Answer the Epicurean’: A Diachronic Study of the ‘Apikoros’ in Rabbinic Literature,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 74 (2003): 175–214.

68. MS Herzog records “Yehuda” (an important Babylonian amora); however, the following statement reads, “and R. Yoḥanan said,” which may suggest that the first statement should also be attributed to R. Yoḥanan. The implication of the difference between the two readings of course is whether this qualifying statement is attributed to Palestinian or Babylonian provenance.

69. For a study of a related passage, see Christine Elizabeth Hayes, “Displaced Self-Perceptions: The Deployment of Minim and Romans in b. Sanhedrin 90b–91a,” in *Religious and Ethnic Communities in Later Roman Palestine* (ed. Haym Lapin; Bethesda: University of Maryland Press, 1998), 249–89, 261.

70. According to the manuscripts and most early printings, all of the stories concern the emperor. This is not the case for some of the later printed editions, which seem to have been altered by censors. It should be emphasized that the dialogues are highly stylized and probably are of little or no direct historical value. In other words, they conform to some of the basic patterns of the rabbi-heretic stories as they appear in Palestinian rabbinic literature.

71. At this point the Barko edition adds the words אַמַּי לֵיהּ (“he said to him”).

72. נִיפּוּסוּ This is the reading of MS Herzog. Both the Munich 95 manuscript and ed. Barko have נִתְפַּיֵּסוּ. Note that the Florence II-I-9 manuscript also corrects to this reading as well: נִסְתַּפַּיֵּסוּ.

73. The printed editions attributes these words to Rabban Gamliel while the manuscripts do not add the words “and he said.” Still, one may assume that this final statement constitutes a response to the emperor’s claim.

74. B. Sanhedrin 39a according to the MS Herzog 1.

75. For a detailed discussion of the possibilities, as well as a discussion of the story's close talmudic parallel, see Secunda, "Reading," 334–35.

76. In particular, see Menahem Kister, "Let Us Make Man," in *Issues in Talmudic Research* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Science, 2001), 28–65; Kister, "Some Early Jewish and Christian Exegetical Problems and the Dynamics of Monotheism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 37 (2006): 548–93; Kister, "'Tohu wa-Bohu': Primordial Elements and 'Creatio ex Nihilo,'" *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 14 (2007): 229–56.

77. See Kister, "Dynamics of Monotheism," 569–79. Noticeably, some of these rabbinic views dangerously approach the "heretical" interpretations, which would in turn further fuel rabbinic anxiety about the whole affair. For a broader treatment on heresy, rabbinic anxiety, and their role in the formation of rabbinic Judaism, see Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

78. Again, see Kister, "Dynamics of Monotheism." For a convenient collection and brief analysis of some of these sources, see also James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 44–47. Interestingly, Philo of Alexandria was one ancient figure who expressed views that can be related to some of the ideas that this talmudic passage attempts to resist.

79. See Kugel, *Traditions*, 80.

80. See for example the Nag Hammadi text "On the Origin of the World," conveniently accessible in Hans-Gebhard Bethge and Bentley Layton, "On the Origin of the World (II,5 and XIII,2)," in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (ed. James M. Robinson; Leiden: Brill, 1988), 170–90, 171–82.

81. See for example Philo, *On Creation* §75:

For this reason it is only in the case of the genesis of the human being that he states that God said let us make, which reveals the enlistment of others as collaborators, so that whenever the human being acts rightly in decisions and actions that are beyond reproach, these can be assigned to God's account as universal Director, whereas in the case of their opposite they can be attributed to others who are subordinate to him. After all, it must be the case that the Father is blameless of evil in his offspring, and both wickedness and wicked activities are certainly something evil.

The text is from Daniel T. Runia, *On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 66. Cf. Philo, *Confusion of Tongues*, §179.

82. The translation is from Guy G. Stroumsa, "The Two Souls and the Divided Will: The Manichees and the Two Souls," in *Self, Soul, and Body in Religious Experience* (ed. Albert Baumgarten, Jan Assmann, and Guy G. Stroumsa; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 198–217, 198.

83. A distinct though perhaps related discourse that may be seen as occupying the wider Sasanian "text-scape" may be found in the fierce Christological debates that took place in the Sasanian Empire concerning the relationship between the divine and human Christs.

84. See n. 64, above.

85. One may also lodge a similar critique of Foucault's focus on discourse, discussed in n. 64, above.

86. As with intertextuality, here it should also be noted that it was Daniel Boyarin who was instrumental in bringing Bakhtin's "dialogism" into conversation with rabbinics. See most recently his *Socrates and the Fat Rabbits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). For a form of dialogism applied by a Talmudist of the next generation, see Barry Scott Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

87. Allen, *Intertextuality*, 18–19.

88. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91–110.

89. Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 20.

90. See Richard Kalmin, "Christians and Heretics in Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity," *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994): 155–69; Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society in Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 27–50, 68–74; and Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 87–102.

91. Kalmin, *Sage*, 71.

92. *Ibid.*, 73.

93. See Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 8–9.

94. Accordingly, the Bavli's many stories about Sadducees need not be attributed simply to "the introduction within Babylonia of literary traditions that portrayed the Sadducees as an ancient group that espoused views that made them anathema to the rabbis" (Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 8 and elsewhere), but rather as responding to a related, perhaps even local problem with heresy.

95. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 128–30.

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Yaakov Elman of Yeshiva University (where I received unfailing support and solid training) and Oktor Skjærvø of Harvard University are the mentors who have stayed on in my life as sagacious guides and constructive critics. This book traces its lineage to the collaboration between Iranian studies and rabbinics that Yaakov and Oktor pioneered over a decade ago. Their perpetual readiness to offer me valuable philological and historical insights and personal advice at (literally) all hours is quite rare in our brave new world of “nine-to-five” academics. Both Oktor and Yaakov read the monograph many times at various stages and shaped its development in innumerable ways. I can only hope to repay them by trying to emulate their selfless dedication to their students in the newfound commitment to my own.

This book first began as a series of lectures that I gave during my second year as a Blaustein Fellow at Yale University. I am grateful

to the faculty, students, and staff of Yale's Program in Judaic Studies and the Department of Religious Studies for inviting me into such a wonderful community of scholars. The conversations that I had with John J. Collins, Steven Fraade, Christine Hayes, Hizky Shoham, Michal and Elitzur Bar-Asher-Siegal, and other Yale friends brought my research in new and productive directions. This is especially true of Tzvi Novick, who provided sagacious comments on an earlier draft of the monograph.

From 2009 to 2012 I was a Mandel Fellow at the Scholion Interdisciplinary Research Center in the Humanities and Jewish Studies. I know of no other society of learning that fosters and incubates scholarship like Scholion does. The crazy idea of Scholion's founder, Israel Yuval, and his successor, Daniel Schwartz, is to place scholars from intersecting disciplines in close quarters for significantly long periods of time and wait for the inevitable, powerful scholarly combustion. Apparently, the formula works. I am deeply grateful to Scholion's administrative and academic staff for this once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Of the many friendships that I made at Scholion, the bond I forged with Galit Hasan-Rokem stands out. When I first arrived in Jerusalem, Galit invited me to join Scholion's "Interpretive Imagination" working group. There, together with Yonatan Benarroch, Irina Chernetsky, Richard Cohen, Anat Danziger, Ruth HaCohen, Vered Madar, Ilana Pardes, and Tehila Mishor, I studied and discussed critical writings concerning the dynamics of the artistic imagination and cultural production. It was this ongoing conversation that ultimately gave way to some of the theoretical models that I put forward in the final chapter of this book. Actually, much of the book was composed orally in Hebrew University's Sinatra Cafeteria, where I shared many memorable lunches with Galit. Following an afternoon coffee, I was able to put my thoughts down on (electronic) paper in my office, which neighbored Galit's. Other Scholion friends who encouraged the development of my ideas in this book and provided the warmth of friendship along the way were Yair Furstenberg, Uri Gabbay, Naama Meishar, Dvir Tzur, Scott Uri, Yosef Witztum, and Sara Yanovsky.

Arguably, the Hebrew University boasts the world's greatest Jewish studies center and Talmud department—both of which were supportive of this project. But unquestionably, Hebrew University's students make up the most talented cadre of budding Talmudists anywhere. Portions of the book were first tried out on my students in Room 2204—the Talmud department's fabled classroom. I would especially

like to single out Yitz Landes and Amit Gvaryahu—two students in the department who have been wonderful friends and *havrutot* during this project.

In the years since I moved to Jerusalem, I have benefited from the scholarly companionship of a unique group of Pahlavi students, a number of whom found their way to Hebrew University on account of Shaul Shaked's influential presence—which I gratefully acknowledge. There is no doubt that this book was positively influenced by the participation of Domenico Agostino, Samuel Thrope, and especially my fellow traveler in Talmudo-Iranica, Yishai Kiel, in our weekly Pahlavi reading group. We were soon joined by my once-student and now research collaborator and friend, Eva Kiesele, who arrived from Berlin, and whose influence on this monograph is also considerable. Other Jerusalem colleagues who helped this project in various ways are two more Talmudo-Iranists—Geoffrey Herman and Reuven Kiperwasser (who read early drafts of some chapters), as well as Uriel Simonsohn and Amram Tropper.

Many friends and colleagues proved themselves dependable despite great geographical distances. I am grateful for my ongoing conversations with Adam Becker, Zvi Septimus (both of whom read drafts), and Barry Wimpfheimer, as well as my old Harvard friends Charles Häberl, Dan Sheffield (who worked hard to secure the Pahlavi manuscript used on the book jacket), and especially my constant dialogue partner Yuhan Vevaina—who were always willing to discuss a particular point or send a scan of an inaccessible article at a critical juncture. As many in the world of Jewish studies know (but rarely acknowledge), Menachem Butler has been an unfailing friend and unparalleled bibliographical resource. Without him, this project would have taken far longer to complete.

In June 2011, Daniel Boyarin came to Jerusalem for a Midrash conference sponsored by the Ben Zvi Institute. I was honored by being given the opportunity to respond to the paper he delivered there, in which I sketched out a number of the ideas that developed into this book. Over breakfast on a bright Jerusalem morning during his visit, Daniel encouraged me to submit the manuscript to Penn Press's *Divinations* series for review. He read and commented on various incarnations of the book, and pushed me on a number of occasions to reformulate and rethink my ideas. I am very grateful to him for encouraging this project from relatively early on. I also am thankful to Jerry Singerman of Penn Press, whose

professionalism and integrity throughout the publication process were most appreciated.

Some of the research builds upon my previously published work, for which I benefited from professional editorial and review processes. These include the following:

“Parva—A Magus,” in *Shoshannat Yaakov: Jewish and Iranian Studies in Honor of Yaakov Elman* (ed. Shai Secunda and Steven Fine; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 391–402.

“Reading the Bavli in Iran,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 (2010): 310–42.

“Studying with a Magus/Like Giving a Tongue to a Wolf,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 19 (2005; published 2009): 151–57.

“The Talmudic *Bei Abedan* and the Sasanian Attempt to ‘Recover’ the Lost Avesta,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 18 (2011): 343–66.

In addition to the Yale lectures and serving as a respondent at the Ben Zvi Institute, I should mention that I also had an opportunity to sharpen some of my ideas when I was invited to present my work at Ben Gurion University and Tel Aviv University—where I was hosted by Gideon Bohak and Ishay Rosen-Zvi.

Without the help and support of family, I never would have been able to see this project to completion. I thank my parents and my parents-through-marriage, my siblings and my siblings-through-marriage—especially Elli Fischer, who has been a valued interlocutor and, more recently, collaborator—and my grandmother and grandmother-through-marriage—the latter of whom passed away the day I completed the monograph.

I express my deep love and thanks to my immediate family. My children Sarielle, Ravital, Adin, and Tal-Or inspired me to finish this book, which by now they must assume—along with the other characters and props of the bedtime stories I tell them—is another figment of my imagination. Finally, I sing the praises of my life-partner, Daphna, who was progressive enough to welcome into our home a mistress for the past few years—this book. Daphna has taught me the two most important branches of philosophy: aesthetics and the philosophy of love. In loving gratitude, I dedicate the book to her.

