

# Diversity and Rabbinization

Jewish Texts and Societies  
Between 400 and 1,000 CE

EDITED BY GAVIN McDOWELL, RON NAIWELD,  
AND DANIEL STÖKL BEN EZRA





<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2021 Gavin McDowell, Ron Naiweld and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra. Copyright of individual chapters is maintained by the chapters' authors.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text and to make commercial use of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Gavin McDowell, Ron Naiweld and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra (eds), *Diversity and Rabbinization Jewish Texts and Societies between 400 and 1000 CE*. Cambridge Semitic Languages and Cultures 8. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0219>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. Copyright and permissions information for images is provided separately in the List of Illustrations.

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0209#copyright>

Further details about CC BY licenses are available at, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Updated digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0219#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

L'École Pratique des Hautes Études has kindly contributed to the publication of this volume.

Semitic Languages and Cultures 8.

ISSN (print): 2632-6906

ISSN (digital): 2632-6914

ISBN Paperback: 9781783749935

ISBN Hardback: 9781783749942

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781783749959

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781783749966

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781783749973

ISBN Digital (XML): 9781783749980

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0219

Cover image: Zodiac motif and figure of Helios on the mosaic floor of the fourth-century Hammat Tiberias synagogue. Moshe Dothan, *Hammath Tiberias* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1983), plates 10/11. Courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society.  
© All rights reserved.

Cover design: Anna Gatti

## 4. IN SEARCH OF NON-RABBINIC JUDAISM IN SASANIAN BABYLONIA

*Geoffrey Herman*

*(École Pratique des Hautes Études, PSL)*

---

It is not for lack of desire that efforts to ‘de-rabbinize’ Babylonian Jewry in the Talmudic period have been so hesitant and so abysmally unfruitful, as comparison with the scholarship on the Jews in the Roman Empire in recent decades can show. However, when almost all you have is the Babylonian Talmud, it is hard to argue with conviction that Babylonia might somehow not have been all that ‘Talmudic’.

Even Jacob Neusner—among the foremost scholars to highlight the sharp distinction between Pharisees and rabbis and to emphasize that the rabbinic movement was something quite new in the post-Destruction era—seems to have given up without too much of a fight when turning his attention to Babylonia. For all his later ‘Judaisms’, his Babylonia knows but one Judaism, and his monumental five-volume *History of the Jews in Babylonia* might be more accurately dubbed a history of the *rabbis* in Babylonia.<sup>1</sup> If his Jewish Babylonia is essentially rabbinic, it had not always

---

1 Cf. Seth Schwartz, ‘The Political Geography of Rabbinic Texts’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. by Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75–96 (91).

been that way, but the change had happened early on, and rapidly, without too much resistance. The Tannaim had exported rabbinic Judaism in the course of the second century CE. There had been a power struggle with the initially non-rabbinic exilarchate, but this, too, was resolved early on. The rabbis became exilarchal employees; and the exilarchs became a part of the new rabbinic world.<sup>2</sup> Neusner sought out 'non-rabbinic Judaism' on the margins of the Babylonian rabbinic mainland. He found it in the Dura synagogue, inspired by Goodenough's provocative interpretation of the synagogue frescos,<sup>3</sup> and in northern Mesopotamia, where, he suggested, the early harbingers of Christianity, via Edessa, had won over some local Jews and God-fearers to Christianity, in contrast to Nisibis and southern Babylonia, where the Tannaim had introduced their Mishnah.<sup>4</sup> Both theories today appear to be little more than curiosities.

One means of finding non-rabbinic Jews was through the writings of the fourth-century Syriac author, Aphrahat. Writing in Sasanian Mesopotamia, perhaps in the north, he addresses close to half of his *Demonstrations* to issues that have a Jewish resonance, such as circumcision, the Sabbath, and the dietary laws. Here he mentions Jewish Sages who pose challenges to the faithful. These 'Jews' possessed a curious familiarity with the New Testament, but exhibited little interest in rabbinic halakhah and aggadah. Scholars had already compared Aphrahat's exegesis to that of the rabbis,<sup>5</sup> but Neusner questioned this approach. For him, Aphrahat's Jews were not straw men, but real Jews—non-

---

2 See, e.g., Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews of Babylonia*, 5 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1965–1970), II, 111–12.

3 Jacob Neusner, 'Judaism at Dura-Europos', *History of Religions* 4 (1964): 81–102.

4 Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, I, 122–77, 180–83.

5 Salomon Funk, *Die haggadischen Elemente in den Homilien des Aphraates, des persischen Weisen* (Vienna: Knöpfmacher, 1891); Louis Ginzberg, *Die Haggada bei den Kirchenvätern und in der apokryphischen Litteratur* (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1900); Frank Gavin, *Aphraates and the Jews* (Toronto: Journal of the Society of Oriental Research, 1923), 27–72.

rabbinic and, in a sense, dinosaurs who “based their Judaism on the Hebrew Scriptures and took literally both the theology and the practical commandments they found in them.”<sup>6</sup> The apparent absence of references to the Oral Law in Aphrahat’s polemics was, to Neusner, instructive. “If rabbinical schools or circles existed in Mesopotamia in his day, the best evidence of their limited impact on Mesopotamian Jewry is Aphrahat’s failure to take issue with them and their teachings.”<sup>7</sup> Subsequent studies have taken issue with Neusner, asserting that Aphrahat’s Jews were, in some way, rabbinic<sup>8</sup> or ‘para-rabbinic’<sup>9</sup> and the interaction ‘real and concrete’.<sup>10</sup>

Neusner’s contemporary, Moshe Beer, similarly imagined Jewish Sasanian Babylonia as decidedly rabbinic. He too, spoke of the rabbis’ steady rise to a prominent position in the leadership of the Jewish community, first among their disciples and supporters, then among local leadership, and ultimately becoming recognized rulers of the entire Jewish people. However, using Talmudic stories of audiences before the Sasanian king as a barometer, he imagined the rabbis wielding serious power, on a par with the exilarchate, already in the first half of the third century, beginning with the Amora, Shmuel.<sup>11</sup>

---

6 Jacob Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 148.

7 Ibid.

8 Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversation* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011).

9 Eliyahu Lizorkin, *Aphrahat’s Demonstrations: A Conversation with the Jews of Mesopotamia* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 11.

10 Ibid., 166. This conclusion, too, remains uncertain. The relationship between Aphrahat’s teachings and Jewish sources requires further study that is, for instance, more sensitive to the nuances of rabbinic literature.

11 Moshe Beer, *The Babylonian Amoraim: Aspects of Economic Life* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1982 [first edition 1974]), 9–10; Geoffrey Herman, *A Prince without a Kingdom: The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 182–83.

The quest for non-rabbinic Judaism has also been conducted from within the Babylonian Talmud, as scholars have explored inwardly focused polemic. This has been said to reflect rabbinic anxiety towards non-rabbinic elements of Babylonian Jewish society. Yaakov Elman, addressing “intellectual theological engagement,” isolated a number of sources that relate to opponents of Rava, who was based in Mehoza. Some are described as “the sharp-witted ones of Mehoza” (b. Ber. 59b). Rava challenges the foolish people (*hanei enashei/she’ar enashi*) who rise before a Torah scroll, but not before rabbinic scholars (b. Mak. 22b). An example of those who have no place in the world to come includes the household of one Benjamin the Doctor who asks: “What use are the rabbis to us? They never permitted the raven...” (b. Sanh. 99b–100a); we also hear of Yaakov the Heretic (*min*) who discusses hermeneutics with Rava (b. Meg. 23a; b. Avod. Zar. 28a; b. Hul. 84a).<sup>12</sup> The sharp-witted ones (*harifei*) of Mehoza, however, are probably as rabbinic as the distinctly rabbinic “sharp-witted ones of Pumbedita” (b. Sanh. 17b; b. Qidd. 39a; b. Menah. 16b) and the only other thing we know about Benjamin the Doctor’s family is that he would bring questions of animal *kashrut* to Rava for his opinion (b. Sanh. 100a). Scholars recognize that the term *min* might have different meanings in different rabbinic corpora, and in Tannaitic and Amoraic literature, some may refer to cynical non-rabbinic Jews, but we know too little about this.<sup>13</sup>

More compelling for the purpose of isolating a non-rabbinic element in Babylonian Jewry has been Steven Wald’s source-critical analysis of the *‘am ha-aretz* chapter in b. Pesah.<sup>14</sup> By

---

12 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. by Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 165–97 (177–79).

13 Most recently, Adiel Schremer, *Brothers Estranged: Heresy, Christianity, and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

14 Stephen G. Wald, *BT Pesachim III: Critical Edition with Comprehensive Commentary* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2000).



demonstrating that the Babylonian Talmud constructed an extended *sugya* on the hostility between two segments of Jewish society, the rabbis and the *‘am ha-aretz*, and invented traditions unattested in Palestinian sources, Wald highlights the existence of an inner-Jewish friction between the rabbinic class and the non-rabbinic segment of society as a *Babylonian* Jewish phenomenon and not merely—or at all—a Tannaitic one, as had been assumed. Of course, since the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, no one has self-identified as an *‘am ha-aretz*, and we cannot really know what they themselves thought or believed. Richard Kalmin, in a series of studies, has argued for rabbinic insularity within Babylonia, in contrast with the situation in Palestine, where rabbis interacted with non-rabbis more regularly.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, stories that depict friction between rabbis and ‘others’ in Palestinian sources are sometimes reconfigured in the Babylonian Talmud to address internal rabbinic conflicts. Sadducees feature more prominently there than in the parallel Palestinian sources, but, argues Kalmin, they are not Sadducees or a stand-in for a real current threat, but only a literary concern for the Babylonian rabbis.<sup>16</sup>

There are other non-rabbis who seem to pose a challenge to the rabbis: dream interpreters;<sup>17</sup> magicians; types like Bati ben Tovi, who is contrasted with Rav/Mar Yehuda at an audience before the Sasanian king; and various powerful or intimidating families whom the rabbis denigrate.<sup>18</sup> These may include Jews of priestly lineage who were not rabbis and who asserted themselves within Jewish society.<sup>19</sup>

15 See, for example, Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3–17, 87–88.

16 *Ibid.*, 149–67.

17 The best-known is a certain professional dream interpreter called Bar Hedyā (b. Ber. 56a).

18 B. Avod. Zar. 76b. See Herman, *A Prince*, 308–9; Jason Sion Mokhtarian, *Rabbis, Sorcerers, Kings, and Priests: The Culture of the Talmud in Ancient Iran* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 90–91.

19 On the *de-vei Elyashiv* (b. B. Bat. 29a; b. Git. 14a; b. Ker. 54a), see Geoffrey Herman, ‘The Priests in Babylonia in the Talmudic Period’ (MA thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1998), 115–17. On priestly butchers in Huzel who persistently defied the ruling by Rav Hisda (also

We are, however, limited. Unlike the Roman world (and Dura is a Roman synagogue), there is no mention of an *archisynagogus* in Babylonia. We do not know anything about synagogues outside of the Babylonian Talmud, where they appear to be rabbinic. The Talmud seems to have it both ways, though: when it receives stories from Palestine set in the synagogue, the Babylonian Talmud, in its retelling, tends to transfer the setting to the House of Study.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, it is worth recognizing the geographic limitations of our information on rabbinic Babylonia. A close examination of the places treated in the Talmud reveals that many areas and places are not mentioned at all or do not feature in the rabbinic scenery. One might be reminded that Nippur, known for its Judaeon population from the Murashu archive (fifth century BCE) and for its Jewish magic bowls roughly a millennium later, is not mentioned with regard to its Jewish population in the entire Talmud.<sup>21</sup> And what of the rabbis' hostility to the Jews of the neighbouring regions of Mesene and Xuzestan? Are the Jewish communities in these regions rabbinized? We cannot know for sure, but here and there the rabbis hint at their inadequacy in their eyes. In Bei-Lapat in Xuzestan there is no one worthy of reaching the world to come except one Jew (b. Ta'an. 22a); the Jews of Kashkar, a province lodged between Babylonia and Mesene, are not "sons of Torah" (b. Shabb. 139a). It is unclear whether the problem with these communities was their insubordination to rabbinic Judaism more generally or a conflict concerning political power and hegemony—their unwillingness to follow rabbinic Judaism's *Babylonian* advocates.

---

a priest) that they should give the priestly gifts from the animals they slaughtered to other priests, see b. Hul. 132b.

20 See the account of the intercalation of the calendar in Babylonia by Hananiah, the nephew of R. Joshua (y. Sanh. 1.2, 19a; b. Ber. 63a–b). Cf. Isaiah M. Gafni, *Land, Center and Diaspora, Jewish Constructs in Late Antiquity* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 110, esp. n. 27.

21 It is mentioned, however, in b. Yoma 10a. See Aharon Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica in the Talmudic Period* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1983), 315–18.



Ultimately, reading non-rabbis into rabbinic literature seems to be a vicious circle, whereby rabbinic sources affirm the centrality of rabbinic power. It yields a frustrating picture of Jewish society where all we seem to find is, to borrow the title of an article by Kalmin, “anxious rabbis and mocking non-rabbis.”<sup>22</sup> However, if the efforts to demonstrate a vibrant non-rabbinic complement to rabbinic society have been so unconvincing, this does not mean that nothing has changed in our perception of Babylonia since Neusner and Beer. Indeed, if it used to be common to construct Babylonian Jewry in institutional terms as a community supported by its two leadership pillars, the rabbinic academies and the exilarchate—a *rabbinized* exilarchate—then one can say that this structure is now in danger of total collapse.

Let us turn, first, to the academies. After the studies by Isaiah Gafni, David Goodblatt, and many others, it remains hard to know for sure when the academies took shape.<sup>23</sup> Primarily this is because the question is tied to so many other open issues, such as the dating of Babylonian aggadot, the redaction of the Talmud, and the dating of the anonymous discursive strata within the Talmudic text. The unavoidable by-product of this uncertainty is scepticism about the position of the academies as dominant political factors in Babylonian Jewish society, as they would become in the Geonic period. For those who assume the emergence of the academies in the course of the Amoraic era, we still do not really know how far beyond their immediate surroundings their influence extended. The insufficiency of the ideologically-driven narrative of Sherira’s *Epistle* and the absence of anything like Catherine Hezser’s study of the rabbinic movement for Babylonia is sorely felt.<sup>24</sup> We simply know very little about the make-up and

---

22 Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 87–101.

23 For an overview see David Goodblatt, ‘The History of the Babylonian Academies’, in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, Volume 4: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. by Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 821–39.

24 Catherine Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).

organization of Jewish society in Babylonia, even of the rabbinic element.

The situation with regard to the exilarchate is even more complex. Here too, the only contemporary sources we have are from the Talmudim. However, its image as a central leadership institution (on the one hand) and the quantity of sources about it (on the other) make its relationship with the rabbis more significant. A comparison with the *catholicos*—the equivalent Christian leader under the Sasanians—may be informative. Early studies on the exilarchate, including a monograph by Beer, portrayed a rabbinized institution. My own research has challenged this. The ‘rabbinized’ exilarchate, I have argued, is ultimately the invention of the Geonim. I shall briefly explain what I mean.<sup>25</sup>

The main Geonic sources of value are the *Epistle* of Rav Sherira Gaon and *Seder Olam Zuta*. The former provides a historical narrative on the rabbis of Babylonia, whereas the latter offers an exilarchal chronicle. These Geonic sources identify as exilarchs certain Talmudic figures who are not labelled as such in the Talmudic sources themselves. I have examined these cases to determine whether such depictions might have been derived from Geonic analysis of the Talmudim. Such analysis might derive from assumptions that are particularly reflective of Geonic literature. For instance, titles such as *Rabbana* or *Mar*, which are associated with the exilarchate in the Geonic era, might be understood anachronistically as such for the Talmudic era. I believe these two Geonic sources contain no independent historical value for the Talmudic era as far as the exilarchate is concerned. The historical analysis of the Sasanian exilarchate must then be conducted on the basis of the Talmudic evidence alone. The significance of this conclusion is better appreciated when we compare the image of the exilarchate implied by these Geonic sources with its image when viewed through the lens of the Talmudim alone. Geonic sources have an exilarchate that is deeply involved in the world of the rabbis. According to Sherira, for instance, many exilarchs

---

25 For full details see Herman, *A Prince without a Kingdom*.

are, in fact, scholar-exilarchs, rabbis with their own disciples and teachings. Many other rabbis are also related to the exilarchal clan. These include Mar Uqba, Huna bar Natan, and others. The two worlds are intertwined and typically harmonious.

These Geonic sources, and their assumptions about the exilarchate, have been the basis for modern scholarly depictions of Jewish society from Heinrich Graetz onwards. Sherira had, however, provided a narrative of Talmudic Jewish society that mirrored Geonic Jewish society: the institutional politics of the Geonic era were read into the earlier period. When, however, these Geonic sources are removed from the database, we find a very different exilarchate. This is the exilarch of the Talmudim alone.

The exilarch of the Talmudim is distinct from the rabbis. He is portrayed as referring to the rabbis in the second person (b. Ber. 46b), occasionally with contempt. Talmudic sources view the exilarchate as powerful, fearful, foreign to their value system, and persianized—and they are mostly hostile to it. The exilarch, or his men, tyrannize, beat up, imprison, or kill rabbis. Rabbis, in turn, typically criticize, ridicule, condemn, or avoid the exilarch. We sometimes encounter stories of rabbis dining with the exilarch. They do not seem to sit too close to the exilarch, though, as is suggested by an anecdote in b. Ber. 50a. There, a rabbi as important as Rava organizes his own communal grace, since he would not be able to hear the exilarch's Grace after Meals (*birkat ha-mazon*). The rabbis' coercive power over the exilarchate was not considerable. For instance, in a Talmudic discussion on the matter of presumptive possession in b. B. Bat. 36a, the rabbis observe that this law is not applicable to the exilarch with the statement that "they have no right to exercise presumptive possession over us; and we have no right to exercise presumptive possession over them." A sense of mutual disdain would seem to sum up the relationship between rabbis and exilarchs.

However, the Talmud may yet reveal evidence of a dynamic and development in the attitude of the rabbis towards the exilarchate within its textual layers. One interesting discussion in b. Eruv. 39b–40a deliberates on the *kashrut* of an item of food

in the exilarchal kitchen. While named rabbis from the third to fifth centuries debate on the question of *kashrut*, it is suggested anonymously to decide the matter on the basis of the principle that “whatever enters the exilarchal house has been approved by all the rabbis.” This would, of course, render the earlier deliberations superfluous.

When we add to all this the fact that the exilarchate features very infrequently in the Talmudim—around a hundred references—we must necessarily reassess our image of Babylonian Jewry and the place of the exilarch therein. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a rabbinically dominated exilarchate when rabbinic sources have little to say about it. If the rabbis had so little to say about it, perhaps, then, it was not all that important? And yet the very titles possessed by the exilarchs, *resh galuta* and *nesi'ah*, bespeak their pre-eminence in Babylonian Jewish society. Despite the fact that our largest and best source on Babylonian Jewry was composed by rabbis, its minimal interest in the exilarchate could suggest that the rabbis were somewhat estranged from the representative leadership of Babylonian Jewry.

A comparison of the exilarch with the Christian *catholicos* would tend to confirm the importance of the exilarchate. With the *catholicos* we have a representative leader of another Sasanian religious community. The contemporary sources date from the fourth century and reflect a broad spectrum of genres from both the *catholicate* itself and its opponents. We encounter a complex dynamic of religious power politics under negotiation in which the Sasanian kingdom is closely involved. We cannot be sure, of course, just how similar the exilarch was to the *catholicos* from the perspective of power and representation. Allowing for a broadly defined similarity suggests that the exilarchate must have been more central to Babylonian Jewish society than its treatment in the Talmud concedes.

The bottom line, then, is that we might need to imagine a Babylonian Jewish society with a powerful central leadership in the form of the non-rabbinized exilarch, and a rabbinic movement, perhaps with its academies, that is less influential in the eyes of the exilarchate than previously assumed.

The Jewish judicial court system of Babylonia has been connected with the exilarchate on the basis of a number of suggestive Talmudic sources.<sup>26</sup> While it is unlikely that the exilarchs oversaw the entire Jewish judicial system, from the harsh tirade that one finds in the Talmud against judges (e.g., b. Shabb. 139a), it would seem that the Jewish judges were not automatically assumed to be rabbis or even rabbinic. However, all these indications of non-rabbinic Jews attested in the Babylonian Talmud, including the exilarchate, suffer from the same inevitable series of problems. On the one hand, we cannot expect to find anything like an objective view of such non-rabbinic Jews in the Talmud; on the other hand, when speaking of non-rabbinic Judaism (rather than non-rabbinic Jews), we cannot expect the rabbis to concede in any meaningful way the existence of a religious alternative to themselves. One wonders whether non-rabbinic ideology is, in fact, *retrievable* from the Babylonian Talmud.

Babylonian magical artifacts, incantation bowls, and skulls offer us a possible, albeit limited, way out of this conundrum. The question is not whether the rabbis practice magic. It is recognized that the rabbis themselves practice many of the same things as do the magicians who are not rabbis. Much of the polemic found in the Babylonian Talmud (and other rabbinic texts) against magicians stems, essentially, from issues of competition, power, and legitimacy.<sup>27</sup> These bowls are apparently not written by rabbis and so give us a glimpse into a non-rabbinic alternative. They do not offer us a complete system, a self-contained version of belief and practice. By nature, magic addresses a limited set of religious needs, the here and now, the individual. And yet, while overlapping rabbinic themes in many places, it is possible

---

26 See, for full discussion, Herman, *A Prince without a Kingdom*, 194–209.

27 Cf. Yuval Harari, ‘The Sages and the Occult’, in *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science, and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature*, ed. by Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson (Philadelphia, PA: Royal Van Gorcum, Fortress Press, 2006), 521–64.

to speak of these sources as reflecting a library separate from the authoritative literature of the rabbis: a separate mythology and cosmogony, a separate pantheon, a separate hierarchy, a separate set of traditions.

At the same time, it should also be borne in mind that it is not a homogenous corpus. The bowls reflect a broad spectrum of practitioners: those whose bowls exclusively evoke forces that are usually judged as native to Judaism; those that relate to both pagan and Jewish content, but conclude with a Jewish confessional signature; and those written in the Jewish Aramaic script, but that are bereft of any Jewish religious content or even Hebrew.<sup>28</sup>

Historians of Babylonian Jewry have not been quick to embrace this material in their studies of Jewish society. Magic in general, including that practiced by rabbis, is confined to the sidelines and regarded as 'popular'; magical artifacts are brushed aside as external to the study of Babylonian Jewry.<sup>29</sup> Even a recent scholar like Isaiah Gafni has marginalized the magical and incantational material in his socio-cultural studies of Babylonian Jewry. Astrology, demonology, amulets, and incantations appear in chapters with titles such as 'Jews and Gentiles in Talmudic Babylonia'; 'Babylonian Jews and Iranian Popular Culture';<sup>30</sup> and 'Cultural Contacts between Jews and Persians'.<sup>31</sup> Persian

---

28 See Tapani Harviainen, 'Syncretistic and Confessional Features in Mesopotamian Incantation Bowls', in *L'Ancien Proche-Orient et les Indes: Parallélismes interculturels religieux*, ed. by Heikki Palva (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 1993), 29–38.

29 The fifth volume of Neusner's *History of the Jews in Babylonia* devotes twenty-five pages to 'other Jews, other magicians', with the addition of a thirty-page appendix penned by Baruch Levine on 'The Language of the Magical Bowls', which is mostly a textual study of earlier readings (217–43; 343–75). In his fourth volume, he devoted but three pages to magic and the rabbis (347–50).

30 Isaiah Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia in the Talmudic Era: A Social and Cultural History* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1990), 149–76 (Hebrew).

31 Isaiah Gafni, 'Babylonian Rabbinic Culture', in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. by David Biale (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 223–66 (238).

origins are claimed for much of the demonology. As many of the clients who commissioned the bowls have Persian names, many explicitly theophoric, it was tempting not only to claim this material as fundamentally foreign, but also to suggest that it was mainly an export industry—serving a foreign audience.

However, with the increase in the number of bowl texts available to scholars, we now encounter many clients with Semitic names. Furthermore, the Zoroastrian input to the magical *content* of the bowls and its demonology is minimal, as was observed already a century ago by James Montgomery.<sup>32</sup> With the majority of known bowls written in the Jewish script, and the spread of Jewish magical elements to the texts of other religious communities, an argument could be made that Jews are actually more invested in the practice than their neighbours. Perhaps one of the more striking aspects of these sources is just how *similar* they can be to the Talmud and are sometimes obviously dependent upon it. This is reflected in their Babylonian Aramaic language, the use of the Hebrew Bible and its Targum, the citation of liturgical formulae and sections from the Mishnah, and the mention of familiar Tannaim, such as Hanina ben Dosa and Joshua ben Perahia. There are many points of contact between rabbinic literature and the bowls; not merely in magical praxis and worldview, but even in the formulae of actual spells. These can even contribute towards establishing the most accurate original text within the Talmud. Points of identity occur also in the formulae employed, for instance, in ‘divorcing’ demons. However, one should note that these divorce formulae derive, first and foremost, from the scribal world of documents rather than exclusively from the rabbinic world. One is inclined to see, then, the scribes of the incantation bowls and the rabbis both employing the language of legal documents for their own purposes.<sup>33</sup>

---

32 James A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia University Museum, 1913), 116.

33 For these last points, see, for instance, Avigail Manekin Bamberger, ‘Jewish Legal Formulae in the Aramaic Incantation Bowls’, *Aramaic Studies* 13 (2015): 69–81.



With the Mishnaic texts, one may be witnessing the transformation of the Mishnah and its recitation—since one can assume that recitation was a vital component of the magician’s work—into a text of magical potency. One can also imagine that the activity of the Babylonian Tanna, who was tasked with memorizing and repeating the Mishnah upon demand, acquired a magical aspect, raising the possibility that the perception of a mantra prevalent in the magical milieu had wafted into the House of Study.<sup>34</sup>

One of the Mishnah texts that is cited in two bowls (MS 1929/6 and MS 2053/170) deals with the location of the daily sacrifices and the sprinkling of the sacrificial blood on the altar in the Jerusalem Temple, a text taken from the fifth chapter of the Mishnah tractate Zevahim. Shaul Shaked suggested that it might have been familiar to the scribe from the liturgy rather than from the House of Study, since it is known in later sources to have been incorporated into the daily prayer service.<sup>35</sup> The symbol of the Temple is used then as a weapon against demons, as indeed it begins, “In the name of the public sin-offerings....” It was incorporated into the liturgy with the sense that studying the sacrificial laws is akin to performing the sacrificial service. Since magical praxis can itself involve the slaughter of animals and the ritual use of their blood, one might wonder whether the choice, in this magical context, is not more deliberate. Perhaps its inclusion in a bowl text is itself intended to replace (or accompany) a sacrificial magical activity—a familiar text but with a difference.

There are places where the bowls diverge from rabbinic Judaism. This corpora’s most significant divergence from rabbinic Judaism—indeed, from Judaism itself—is its inclusion of demonized deities, many of whom would have been recognized by contemporaries as gods, including the sun, the planets, and so on. It has been argued that bowls appealing *exclusively* to such

---

34 Moulie Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 150–66.

35 See Shaul Shaked, James Nathan Ford, and Siam Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls, Volume One* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 23–27.

deities, even though written in a Jewish script, are in reality pagan and not Jewish. They are, however, a small minority of the bowls written in Jewish script.

This interesting aspect, which we would otherwise not know from the Talmud, is precisely what this material reveals about Babylonian Jewish society. Incantation bowls tell us of Jews and of a Judaism that is more integrated into its Babylonian terrain: it is heir to local magic traditions, formulae, demonology, and pagan practices familiar to all who inhabited this region. It also tells us something of what this terrain looked like. The syncretism reflected in the bowls, for instance, despite the energetic agendas of some recent scholarship on the culture of the Babylonian Talmud, has only limited borrowings from either Christianity or Zoroastrianism.

It offers us, then, an unfiltered and unedited view of a magically-inclined Babylonian Jewish society, embedded in the local milieu, less resistant to the draw of contemporary pagan and ancient Babylonian beliefs than the rabbis. It reveals to us something of the contacts between people, Jew and Gentile, and channels of communication. It can transmit Aramaic poetry unattested in the rabbinic sources, lend traditions, formulae, and texts, and borrow others, and reveal that Jews were part of a cross-cultural society, sharing in a Mesopotamian religious *koine*, in ways we would not have realized.

In conclusion, with the collapse of the assumption of close institutional cohesion of Babylonian Jewish society, the centrality of the rabbis during the Sasanian Era has been declining in proportion, but the search for a non-rabbinic alternative to Judaism in Sasanian Babylonia has been largely an unsuccessful endeavour. The incantation bowls provide a partial exception by suggesting an alternative Jewish society to that depicted in the Talmud. They have also required us to reassess the Judaism of the Talmud itself. Indeed, the impact of the magic bowls has yet to be fully realized in studies about Babylonian Jewish society. With such a vast corpus of sources, constantly growing and slowly approaching the Babylonian Talmud in sheer volume, the day may not be far off when, instead of speaking of the 'Talmudic

era', it would be more appropriate to talk of 'Babylonian Jewry in the Period of the Incantation Bowls'.

## Bibliography

- Bamberger, Avigail Manekin, 'Jewish Legal Formulae in the Aramaic Incantation Bowls', *Aramaic Studies* 13 (2015): 69–81, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1163/17455227-01301006>.
- Beer, Moshe, *The Babylonian Amoraim: Aspects of Economic Life* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1974). [Hebrew]
- Elman, Yaakov, '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. by Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 165–97, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521843901.009>.
- Funk, Salomon, *Die haggadischen Elemente in den Homilien des Aphraates, des persischen Weisen* (Vienna: Knöpfmacher, 1891).
- Gafni, Isaiah, *The Jews of Babylonia in the Talmudic Era: A Social and Cultural History* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1990). [Hebrew]
- , *Land, Center and Diaspora: Jewish Constructs in Late Antiquity* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).
- , 'Babylonian Rabbinic Culture', in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. by David Biale (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 223–66.
- Gavin, Frank, *Aphraates and the Jews* (Toronto: Journal of the Society of Oriental Research, 1923), <http://dx.doi.org/10.7312/gavi90376>.
- Ginzberg, Louis, *Die Haggada bei den Kirchenvätern und in der apokryphischen Litteratur* (Berlin: Calvary, 1900).
- Goodblatt, David, 'The History of the Babylonian Academies', in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, Volume 4: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. by Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 821–39, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1017/chol9780521772488.034>.
- Harari, Yuval, 'The Sages and the Occult', in *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science, and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature*, ed. by Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 521–64, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004275126\\_018](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004275126_018).
- Harviainen, Tapani, 'Syncretistic and Confessional Features in Mesopotamian Incantation Bowls', in *L'ancien Proche-Orient et les Indes: Parallélismes interculturels religieux*, ed. by Heikki Palva (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 1993), 29–38.

- Herman, Geoffrey, 'The Priests in Babylonia in the Talmudic Period' (MA thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1998).
- , *A Prince without a Kingdom: The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-152138-6>.
- Hezser, Catherine, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).
- Kalmin, Richard L., *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/0195306198.001.0001>.
- Koltun-Fromm, Naomi, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversation* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.31826/9781463222710>.
- Lizorkin, Eliyahu, *Aphrahat's Demonstrations: A Conversation with the Jews of Mesopotamia* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012).
- Mokhtarian, Jason Sion, *Rabbis, Sorcerers, Kings, and Priests: The Culture of the Talmud in Ancient Iran* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520286207.003.0006>.
- Montgomery, James A., *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia University Museum, 1913), <http://dx.doi.org/10.9783/9781512818130>.
- Neusner, Jacob, 'Judaism at Dura-Europos', *History of Religions*, 4 (1964), 81–102.
- , *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, 5 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1965).
- , *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran*, *Studia Post-Biblica* 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1971).
- Oppenheimer, Aharon, *Babylonia Judaica in the Talmudic Period* (Wiesbaden: L. Reichert, 1983).
- Schwartz, Seth, 'The Political Geography of Rabbinic Texts', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. by Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75–96, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521843901.005>.
- Shaked, Shaul, James Nathan Ford, and Siam Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls, Volume One* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004229372>.
- Vidas, Moulie, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), <https://dx.doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691154862.001.0001>.
- Wald, Stephen G., ed., *BT Pesahim III: Critical Edition with Comprehensive Commentary* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2000).

