



Jewish Babylonia
between Persia
and Roman
Palestine

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Introduction

Fourth-Century Judaism and Christianity between Persia and the Eastern Roman Provinces

This book advances our understanding of late antique Babylonia as partly eastern (i.e., Persian) and partly western (i.e., Palestinian and provincial Roman) in character.¹ The book supports my claim in earlier work that Babylonian rabbis tended to avoid contact with other Jews, particularly those they perceived as their inferiors, and therefore as unable to benefit them socially or economically. Babylonian rabbis avoided (1) informal interactions with nonrabbinic Jews; (2) marriage into their families; and (3) the acceptance of such Jews into the rabbinic movement on the basis of acquired merit.² In this respect, Jewish society in Babylonia had more in common with Persian than with Roman models, since Persian society discouraged movement and interaction between classes,³ in contrast to Rome, where upward (and downward) movement from one class to another was a relatively common phenomenon.⁴ Richard Frye and Nina Garsoïan documented an obsession with genealogical purity on the part of Georgians and Armenians, minority cultures within the Sasanian Persian Empire, comparable to that of Babylonian rabbis as documented in the Babylonian Talmud.⁵ In addition, Talmudic portrayals of rabbis conform to the behavior demanded of Christians training at the school of Nisibis, in Persia, close to the rabbinic centers of Babylonia. For example, according to the statutes of this Christian school, compiled in the late sixth century but containing much material deriving from earlier centuries, students were to avoid unnecessary contact with the inhabitants of the city. Isaiah Gafni points out many structural and terminological

similarities between Babylonian rabbinic and Nestorian Christian schools of approximately the same time and place,⁶ and observes that the Christian school's statutes reveal its "inner-directed character," resembling that of a monastery.⁷

This book utilizes a method of reading rabbinic literature that has found widespread acceptance,⁸ but is still considered inefficacious by several leading scholars.⁹ I refer to the fact that throughout this book, I pay close attention to the Talmud's markers of geography and chronology, which sometimes enables me to trace the development of institutions and ideas. This, in turn, makes possible documentation of what appears to be a significant change in rabbinic literature and society during the mid-fourth century CE, a time when traditions and modes of behavior amply documented in pre-fourth-century Palestine are attributed to Babylonian rabbis, often for the first time. One striking illustration of this conclusion is my demonstration, in chapter 7 and in the conclusion,¹⁰ that some culturally significant traditions from Josephus, or from a source drawn upon independently by Josephus and the rabbis, are known to Babylonian rabbis who flourished in the mid-fourth century, resulting in a dramatic shift in Babylonian rabbinic portrayals of important figures from the distant past.¹¹

It would certainly be premature to conclude from these few examples that the Bavli's familiarity with Josephus or Josephus's sources, as well as with other compilations composed in Palestine or elsewhere in the Roman Empire,¹² date largely from the fourth century. Combined with other data, however, surveyed in detail in the conclusion, the Josephan or Josephus-like material in the Bavli forms part of a larger picture pointing to the mid-fourth century as a time when later rabbinic Babylonia is portrayed as (and, I will argue, becomes) receptive to Palestinian literature and modes of behavior. This book, therefore, builds on the work of Zvi Dor, who documented approximately fifty years ago many of the important ways in which the learning of later Babylonian Amoraim was based on and shaped by traditions deriving from the land of Israel.¹³ The fact that Palestinian literary motifs and modes of behavior manifest themselves in mid-fourth-century (and later) Babylonia may constitute the literary record of a process set in motion, or, to be more precise, accelerated, in the mid-third century, when King Shapur I of Persia transplanted thousands of inhabitants of the eastern Roman Empire and settled them in Mesopotamia, eastern Syria, and western Persia (see below).

Armenia, which bordered Babylonia to the north and west, converted to Christianity in the early fourth century CE,¹⁴ and thus may have manifested the effects of the same process, as did the Babylonian rabbis vis-à-vis the west (i.e., the eastern Roman provinces) at approximately the same time.¹⁵ This process began earlier and was more powerful in Armenia than in Babylonia, because Armenia was a border province, subject to fierce and protracted competition between the rival empires.¹⁶ Babylonia, also a border province,¹⁷ was Armenia's neighbor to the south and east, and was thus closer to the administrative heart of the Sasanian Empire.¹⁸

I am not claiming, it bears emphasizing, that prior to the fourth century the border regions between Rome and Persia were free of influence from the

west. The acceptance by Babylonian rabbis of the Mishnah, a Palestinian compilation, obviously belies such a claim, as does the activity of the *naḥotei*, scholars who traveled back and forth between Palestine and Babylonia, carrying with them Palestinian rabbinic traditions to Babylonia. Nor is it my claim that influences never flowed in the opposite direction as well, namely from Persia and Mesopotamia to Rome. Third-century Babylonian rabbinic statements are found frequently in the Palestinian Talmud, and Manichaeism's expansion throughout the Roman Empire beginning in the late third century is well attested.¹⁹ Rather, it is my contention that the Jewish and Christian developments in the region during the fourth century, continuing until the advent of Islam in the seventh century, may be closely related, and that processes accelerated by Shapur's dramatic conquests of the third century may have had pronounced literary and practical consequences in Babylonia and surrounding territories.

This book, therefore, may contribute to the question of the extent to which the various cultures comprising Syria and Mesopotamia developed or reinforced their Syrian and Mesopotamian identities throughout the period under study. The book provides a modicum of support for those scholars who characterize the territory between the two Empires as culturally linked,²⁰ although it would be a mistake to minimize the very significant differences that remained within this vast expanse of territory until the end of antiquity and on into the Middle Ages.

Other developments may similarly mark the fourth century as a significant turning point in the history of Christianity east of Byzantium. For example, Georgia, to the north of Armenia and also a border province between Rome and Persia, also converted to Christianity in the early fourth century CE. In the words of Gillman and Klimkeit, "while the seeming rapid acceptance of Christianity [in Georgia] in the fourth century would support some long standing foundations, hard evidence is scarce."²¹ In addition, David Bundy notes the paucity of documentation of Syriac Christianity prior to the fourth century, and observes that no Christian documents written in the Syriac language have survived between the writing of Bardaisan (ca. 212 CE) and the early decades of the fourth century.²²

The fourth and early fifth centuries were also a time of rapid development and consolidation for Persian Christianity. The major pioneering figure in Persian monasticism, Mar Awgin, may have introduced Egyptian monastic models into Persia during the mid-fourth century.²³ The first Christian synod in the Sasanian Empire met in 410 CE,²⁴ and in a synod convened in 424 CE, the Persian Church placed itself outside the authority of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, thereby declaring its independence from all Church authority in the Roman Empire.²⁵ Along the same lines, Sebastian Brock writes, "although later tradition traces back the origins of the Christianity in Persia to apostolic times, it is not until the fourth century that we have reliable sources in any quantity."²⁶ The fourth century witnesses a period of intense literary production and Christian activity in eastern Syria and in the Persian Empire. Most notable, but by no means

unique, are Aphrahat (d. ca. 350) and Ephrem (d. 373). Bundy, for example, claims that “Ephrem’s influence in the Syriac-speaking churches was perhaps the most important factor in their intellectual and spiritual development. His work largely determined the relationships between theological investigation, spirituality, and liturgy.”²⁷ Brock similarly characterizes the development of early Christianity in Edessa, the major city of the province of Osroene in western Mesopotamia.²⁸

This is not to suggest that the Christianity of the fourth-century Syriac authors is the same as those who worked in the Christian Roman Empire. The Christological debates provoked by the Arian controversy are absent from the work of Aphrahat, for example, whose primary concern in this area is to demonstrate that the Christian concepts of God and the Son are compatible with monotheism.²⁹ Brock, however, overemphasizes the distinctions between (1) Syrian and north Mesopotamian Christianity in the fifth and sixth centuries and (2) the Christianity that existed in this area prior to the fifth century.³⁰ Distinctions there certainly were, but the flowering of Syriac Christian literature in the fourth century is at least as significant as its later development. Van Rompay, for example, remarks judiciously that “despite its genuine Semitic character, Syriac literature was never isolated from the Graeco-Roman world. . . . In Syria and Mesopotamia [between the fourth and sixth centuries], the conjunction of traditions of Semitic origin and Graeco-Roman culture has given Syriac Christianity its own distinctive characteristics.”³¹ Similarly, Murray observes, “as regards the cultural milieu of Aphrahat and Ephrem, it was probably F. C. Burkitt (with a touch, perhaps, of protestant romanticism) who exaggerated its nonhellenistic character. . . . It must be recognized to what extent the whole Near and Middle East was a culturally hybrid world.”³²

Van Rompay observes that “Aphrahat must have been quite isolated from Christianity as it developed in the Roman Empire. The Council of Nicaea (325 [CE]) did not touch [Aphrahat’s] theology and he probably knew no Greek.”³³ It is not at all surprising that Nicaea left no mark on Aphrahat’s work, however, since his *Demonstrations* were written between 337 and 345 CE, at most two decades after the famous church council. Van Rompay himself, furthermore, writes that “the artistic style of [Aphrahat’s] work attests to his full participation in the literary culture of his day, which was highly complex, and moulded by both Semitic and Hellenistic traditions.”³⁴ In short, Van Rompay means that Aphrahat was strongly influenced by Greco-Roman culture, but he had no direct access to it *via the Greek language*, and he was probably unfamiliar with the most recent fourth-century developments of that culture. This is to be expected, however, if I am correct that the Christianity that manifested itself during the fourth century in Mesopotamia is evidence of indigenous Mesopotamian developments accelerated by events of the previous century, that is, prior to the advent of Nicaea.

As noted, a critically important question addressed by this book is why the hypothesized changes in Mesopotamian Jewish and Christian society took place at precisely this time and in precisely these places. While certainty on

this question is unfortunately beyond our grasp at present, we are at least able to begin to hazard a guess. As noted, it is well documented that King Shapur I of Persia deported large numbers of people from their homes in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, and resettled them in the western border provinces of the Persian Empire in the wake of his conquests of the middle decades of the third century CE, between 242 and 260.³⁵ Christian centers such as Antioch were profoundly affected by Shapur's resettlement policy.³⁶ In the words of Josef Wiesehöfer,

Christian communities had already started spreading in Mesopotamia and Iran in the second century. . . . However, the crucial role in the establishment of Christianity in the Sasanian Empire was not played by this "first evangelization," but by the deportation of . . . inhabitants of Roman Syria, Cilicia and Cappadocia by Shapur I.³⁷ Both Shapur's great *res gestae* and the Christian-Arabic Chronicle of Se'ert³⁸ confirm that those deported were settled in Mesopotamia, Persis and Parthia.³⁹

Similarly, according to Richard Frye,

The campaign of Shapur had delivered many captives into his hands and he settled them in Khuzistan and Fars provinces where traces of their activities exist to the present, such as the Band-e Kaisar or "Caesar's Dam" on the Karun River at Shustan, attributed to the war prisoners of Shapur by Tabari (I, 827),⁴⁰ while mosaics found in a palace at Bishapur also have been attributed to Roman prisoners. The origins of Christianity in the southern part of Iran have been traced primarily to these war prisoners brought and settled by Shapur in his last two campaigns, and the town of Weh Antiok Shapur, "the better Antioch of Shapur," later Gundeshapur, was settled almost exclusively by war prisoners.⁴¹

It is probably no coincidence that Gundeshapur, or, as it was known in Syriac sources, Beth Lapat,⁴² later became a great Christian center,⁴³ the site of a major synod in 484 at which Persian Christians officially rejected the Nicene doctrine⁴⁴ and accepted the Nestorian creed.

In addition to the Persian sources, several late antique Roman historians describe the Persians conquering Roman cities throughout Syria, all the way to and including Antioch,⁴⁵ and from there venturing deep into Asia Minor. We know from other sources that Shapur's armies were not repulsed until they reached Emesa (modern-day Homs, Syria), approximately 150 miles northeast of Palestine.⁴⁶ The Sasanian practice of settling Roman captives in Persian territory is confirmed as well by several late antique Roman historians,⁴⁷ and is taken for granted by the tenth-century author Magdasi.⁴⁸

This movement of whole populations perhaps contributed to important changes in the cultural life of Babylonian Jews as well as Christians, since western Syria was also an important center of Jewish life.⁴⁹ It is not

unreasonable to suggest that different communities and literatures within eastern Syria, Mesopotamia, and western Persia showed the effects of Shapur's policy at differing times during this century, and that these effects developed and deepened throughout the region, until the Muslim conquests of the seventh century drastically altered the political and cultural landscape.

Babylonian Rabbis between Persia and Roman Palestine

Many scholars read Palestinian rabbinic literature in the context of the Greco-Roman world, but it is extremely rare to find scholars who read Babylonian rabbinic literature in its larger cultural context.⁵⁰ As Yaakov Elman observes, furthermore, scholars who comment on the place of Jewish Babylonia within the Persian Empire tend to confine the discussion to the realm of popular religion and folk practice, despite the fact that the boundary separating elite and popular culture is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to define when speaking about the ancient world.⁵¹ This book attempts in part to refine our understanding of Babylonian rabbis, bearers of elite Jewish culture, in the context of Persian culture and society.

As noted, chapters 1–4 of this book support my claim in earlier research that Babylonian and Palestinian rabbis relate to nonrabbinic Jews in strikingly dissimilar ways, and that these differences are linked to the larger Persian and Roman contexts within which these rabbis flourished. These chapters support my characterization of Babylonian rabbis as internally focused, their reality to a significant extent bounded by the four walls of the study house, in contrast to Palestinian rabbis, who were more fully integrated into the mainstream of nonrabbinic Jewish life. Chapter 6 further supports this claim, by challenging the conventional portrayal of early Babylonian rabbis as important players in the late antique Jewish political realm. This chapter argues that nonrabbinic Jews did not wait eagerly for Babylonian rabbis to express themselves on the important “foreign policy” issues of their day, such as (1) the relative merits of Persia and Rome, and (2) how the Jewish community should relate to its imperial masters. Rather, Babylonian rabbis delivered their pronouncements on these subjects in the privacy of their own study houses, before an audience of fellow rabbis and their disciples, in keeping with their strongly internal focus. Chapter 7 further supports this thesis, arguing that the Babylonian Talmud's hostility to Sadducees is motivated not by the presence of Sadducee-like groups within the Babylonian rabbis' midst, but more likely by 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. Chapter 5 provides evidence that Sasanian Persian policy with respect to idols and cultic worship affected late antique Babylonia, further supporting my claims regarding Babylonia's partially Persian character.

It is important to emphasize once again, however, that my claim is not that Babylonian rabbis were totally cut off from the outside world, and that all Babylonian rabbis, over a period of several centuries, never left the confines of

their study houses. Yaakov Elman, for example, has shown convincingly that Rav Naḥman, a Babylonian rabbi of the late third century, was criticized by his contemporaries for “putting on Persian airs,” which he appears to have cultivated in his capacity as an official in the exilarch’s bureaucracy, a position that required regular interaction with the Persian government.⁵² In addition, I argued in earlier research that Babylonian rabbis tended to depart from their usual aloofness vis-à-vis the exilarch, aristocratic Jews, and officials of the Persian government, since such powerful individuals were in a position to assist the rabbis socially and economically.⁵³ Any distinctions between two cultures in the ancient or modern world, furthermore, cannot be drawn too starkly, but of necessity must be described as varying degrees of gray rather than as black versus white. If we found no exceptions to our generalizations concerning the behavior of Babylonian rabbis, in other words, we would have to hypothesize their existence, since no culture can realistically be thought of as totally static for centuries over a vast geographic expanse, and no elite group can survive without some significant contact with members outside the group. In this respect, as in others, therefore, Babylonian rabbis resembled late antique monks and holy men, both Christian and pagan, who managed to be both dissociated from and part of the world, detached from society in certain contexts and capable of exercising a leadership role in others.⁵⁴

In addition, substantial portions of this book serve as a necessary corrective to a conclusion one might be inclined to draw from my claim that Babylonian rabbis tended to view the rabbinic study house as the sum total of their experience. Chapters 2, 3, and 7, for example, demonstrate that the rabbis’ monklike quality did not serve to seal them off from all contact with the outside world, since, as noted, we will find abundant evidence that non-rabbinic *literature* reached Babylonian rabbis and found a receptive audience there. We will see that they attempted to rabbinize this literature, for example, by transforming the protagonists of stories from kings and priests to sages; but often the nonrabbinic traditions remain visible despite the rabbinic tampering, and often the rabbis only partly succeeded in domesticating their nonrabbinic sources. It is revealing that a significant amount of rabbinic exposure to the nonrabbinic world took the form of the incorporation of *literary texts* into the developing Talmud. For example, chapter 7’s analysis of the Bavli’s attempt to grapple with the issue of belief in the inefficacy of sages and the authority of the written Torah alone is most likely due to Babylonian rabbinic confrontation with *texts* that express this opinion rather than with *real people* in Babylonian Jewish society who held such a view.⁵⁵

My intent in this book is not to “flatten” the rabbis, to portray them as one-dimensional and unchanging. I have no doubt that another book could be written that would focus on the ways Babylonian rabbis impinged on non-rabbinic society. That other book, however, would have to contend with this book, which examines afresh evidence that earlier scholars maintained depicts the rabbis as politicians or as contending with actual groups in society, and discovers in key instances that the same evidence attests instead to their internally focused character.

The conclusion surveys the evidence that mid-fourth-century and later Babylonian rabbis behaved, or were portrayed as behaving, like Palestinian rabbis, most notably in the form of traditions depicting later Babylonian rabbis as open to and encouraging of informal contacts with nonrabbinic Jews. As noted, these findings are particularly significant, since we appear to find Babylonian rabbis behaving like Palestinians even in situations where the exilarch, the wealthy, or Persian officials were not involved, and thus the contact did not advance the rabbis' social or economic interests. These portrayals of later Babylonians appear to show that they participated in the region's fourth-century reorientation vis-à-vis the west without abandoning their Persian character. In this respect as well, the history of rabbinic Babylonia conforms to that of Armenia, which retained its Persian character long after its conversion to Christianity in the early fourth century.⁵⁶

While the concentration of evidence of the process of Palestinianization in the mid-fourth century, I believe, is difficult to deny, the precise extent to which this period in Babylonian Jewish history represents a departure from the past must await careful study of third- and early fourth-century Babylonian Jewish history. In addition, I have made the case that Mesopotamia's fourth-century "Syrianization" and rabbinic Babylonia's fourth-century "Palestinianization" may be closely related, stimulated, perhaps, by the same mid-third-century events. The parallels are striking, but less than fully exact, since the rabbinic evidence derives almost exclusively from Palestine and the Christian evidence concerns western Syria. It is hoped, however, that this book will stimulate further studies that will decide whether the fourth-century developments in rabbinic Babylonia and Christian Mesopotamia amount to more than an interesting coincidence.

Dating and Interpreting Rabbinic Traditions

The historical conclusions described above depend on methods of interpreting the Talmud that are neither self-evident nor agreed upon by all. Most historians of late antique Judaism, for example, have yet to incorporate the most recent methodological advances of modern Talmudic text criticism, and therefore fail to distinguish adequately between the anonymous, editorial layer of the Talmud and earlier, attributed materials.⁵⁷ As noted, concentration on the layered nature of Talmudic discourse enables me to distinguish between (1) Palestinian and Babylonian and (2) early and later Babylonian traditions, and to discover significant ways in which Babylonia, without losing its Persian character, behaves like Roman Palestine in the fourth century. Absolutely crucial to my work is the ability to identify (1) authentically Palestinian traditions in the Babylonian Talmud and (2) the overlay of later Babylonian commentary on earlier traditions.

In addition, some influential scholars of rabbinic literature today tend to concentrate on the work of the Talmud's later editors,⁵⁸ and thus fail to appreciate the extent to which statements attributed to Palestinian and early

Babylonian rabbis in the Bavli are not sixth-century pseudepigraphs, but rather derive, at least approximately, from the period or place they purport to derive from. While Jeffrey Rubenstein, for example, acknowledges that some, even many, statements in the Bavli attributed to Palestinian or early Babylonian rabbis are what they purport to be,⁵⁹ in practice he builds his theories around exaggerated claims that purported Baraitot and Palestinian Amoraic statements are of sixth-century Babylonian provenance.⁶⁰ This book is not a systematic refutation of his arguments. In fact, it is theoretically possible that he is correct about the chronology and geography of the traditions he analyzes, since he bases his conclusions on traditions not analyzed in this book. Nevertheless, the frequency with which this book supports the claims of earlier scholars that the Bavli's markers of chronology and geography are at least partially and approximately accurate⁶¹ (often, but by no means always) casts serious doubt on Rubenstein's tendency to disregard the sources' chronological and geographical markers, and his persistent claims that the Bavli routinely presents us with the pseudepigraphical inventions of later editors.⁶²

Correct dating of rabbinic traditions is not simply a matter of antiquarian concern, since inevitably we will fail to understand the Jewish experience of late antiquity if we improperly date rabbinic materials, the most abundant historical source for the period. The relationship between ancient Judaism and Christianity will serve as a case in point. Daniel Boyarin, for example, rejects the traditional conception of Christianity as Judaism's "daughter religion," and a significant part of his argument depends on demonstrating that phenomena that scholars claim manifest themselves in Jewish sources already in the first or second centuries CE actually date from the fifth or sixth centuries, contemporaneous with or postdating the Christian evidence.⁶³ If Boyarin's dating is incorrect, then the persuasiveness of his theory is seriously undermined. Along the same lines, we learn much about the relationship between the Jewish and Christian communities in Mesopotamia if both experienced similar transformations in the fourth century, partly in response to the same third-century events. If the Jewish sources turn out to derive from the sixth or seventh centuries, then obviously our understanding of this relationship needs to be revised.

Often, the arguments of this book depend on detailed comparison between parallel versions of a tradition preserved in the Bavli on the one hand and a Palestinian compilation such as the Yerushalmi on the other. While this method of analysis is extremely important and useful, it is insufficient when not accompanied by examination of the full gamut of Babylonian and Palestinian literature to see if the absence of motifs, attitudes, emotions, institutions, or modes of interaction from the Palestinian or Babylonian version of a tradition is part of a consistent pattern, or is simply an idiosyncratic feature of a single text. In addition, analyzing literature preserved in a variety of different Palestinian compilations (which, as noted in the preface, tend to be specialized compared to the more encyclopedic Bavli) decreases the likelihood that the absence of a particular feature of a text from its Palestinian parallel is

simply a function of the genres which the Palestinian compilation tends to exclude or include, or is the result of the less than perfect transmission of a single text over a period of well over a thousand years, including centuries of oral transmission. Due to its vastness, it is often feasible to examine only part of the rabbinic corpus, but this book is characterized, I believe uniquely, by exhaustive scrutiny of large amounts of material beyond the comparison of parallel texts, which makes possible accurate assessments of what is Babylonian about the Bavli and what is Palestinian, as well as what is early in the Bavli and what is late.

Fundamentally, therefore, this book is a series of textual analyses intended to serve as models for analyzing rabbinic discussions and identifying their component parts. The textual analyses in the present book distinguish systematically between (1) material attributed to Babylonian rabbis in the Bavli; (2) material attributed to Palestinian rabbis in the Bavli; and (3) material attributed to Palestinian rabbis in Palestinian compilations. These analyses often result in surprising revisions of our understanding of the two rabbinic communities that produced the texts. Other scholars have approached rabbinic sources with the same goals, but they have tended to focus on distinctions between parallel texts rather than viewing individual texts against the background of as much as half or even the entire rabbinic corpus. In addition, scholars have tended to approach the rabbinic material with interpretive goals (what does this specific text mean?) rather than with significant historical questions in mind (what does this text, when read against the backdrop of rabbinic literature as a whole, say about rabbinic culture?).

Competing Theories of the Character of the Bavli and Its Proper Use as Historical Evidence

To utilize the Talmud as a historical source, however, it is not enough to divide a story or a discussion into its component parts. For, as I will have occasion to observe elsewhere in this book, a tradition can be early but still a fiction, or Palestinian but still worthless as evidence regarding Palestinian Jewish history. To use a tradition as historical evidence, it is also necessary to know who composed and transmitted it, what its intended message and intended audience were, and, occasionally, what it looked like before it reached the rabbis' hands.

A theory that radically contests the historicity of the Bavli's portrayals of interactions between rabbis and nonrabbis, for example, conceives of the Talmud as "internal rabbinic discourse."⁶⁴ According to this theory, ostensible dialogues and interactions between rabbis and nonrabbis are actually Babylonian rabbinic monologues, occasions for rabbis to work out their anxieties, aggressions, or fantasies, or to imagine how such interactions might take place in a perfect world. According to this theory, the Bavli's obsession with genealogical purity, for example, is no proof that Babylonian rabbis were any less involved in nonrabbinic society than their Palestinian counterparts.

People routinely say or think one thing and do another; why assume that Babylonian rabbis were any different?

This theory is problematic, however, first because it does not explain why a single compilation, the Bavli, portrays Babylonian and Palestinian rabbis so differently. If the Bavli presents us with little or nothing but internal Babylonian rabbinic discourse, why does it distinguish between rabbis from different localities? Why do we find geographical patterns rather than randomness and inconsistency? Why does the Bavli not attribute to Palestinian rabbis as well as to Babylonian rabbis a powerful concern for genealogical purity? If the Bavli is simply a forum for Babylonian rabbis to exorcise their demons and give expression to their anxieties, why does it depict rabbis differently depending on their geographical provenance?

In addition, it bears mentioning that if we concede (which I do not) that the Bavli is “internal rabbinic discourse,” then we may have another argument in favor of my characterization of Babylonian rabbis as relatively removed from the rest of Jewish society. If the Bavli is little or nothing more than a collection of rabbinic monologues, then my point regarding the detachment of Babylonian rabbis receives significant support. It is important for my argument to reject this characterization of the Bavli, however, since if Babylonian rabbis talked to no one but themselves, then it is more difficult to argue that we can (1) discern within the pages of the Talmud evidence that Babylonia was both a Persian and a provincial Roman (i.e., Palestinian) province; and (2) that a significant body of nonrabbinic literature found its way into the rabbinic study house and from there into the pages of the Babylonian Talmud.

Other considerations further support the claim that the Talmud contains rabbinic responses to stimuli from the nonrabbinic world. First, the Talmud is a historical artifact, and it is the nature of historical artifacts to be embedded in a historical context, to serve the purposes of individuals and groups within a society situated within a larger culture. To view the Talmuds as *primarily* a record of rabbinic discourse, by rabbis for rabbis, seems to me eminently reasonable, a point to which I will return later. To say that the boundary separating rabbinic literature from the community at large is all but totally impermeable is counterintuitive, not to mention counter to the explicit claims of the literature itself. In addition, it is one thing to claim that it is extremely difficult to derive reliable information about nonrabbinic society based on rabbinic texts, which refract everything through the spectacles of the rabbis. It is another thing to claim that we can say nothing whatsoever about nonrabbis, that it is impossible to correct for the distortions caused by the rabbinic lenses we look through when we read rabbinic texts. I find extremely improbable the notion that rabbinic encounters with nonrabbis are not occasionally documented, in however distorted a manner, in rabbinic texts, and that we can never draw reliable conclusions about these encounters.

It is at times indisputable, in fact, that rabbinic corpora preserve nonrabbinic traditions. Several stories in rabbinic compilations, for example, have parallels in Josephus, a pre- and nonrabbinic author.⁶⁵ As noted, rabbinic

storytellers and editors tend to rabbinize such stories, for example, by transforming the protagonist from a king or a priest into a rabbi. Often, however, the process of rabbinization is incomplete; the priest or king is dominant and the rabbi only secondary or absent altogether, a claim I will substantiate in detail in chapters 2 and 3. Sometimes, in other words, nonrabbinic voices find a place, albeit muted, within rabbinic documents, and a source's nonrabbinic features survive the process of editorial homogenization. And if nonrabbinic voices deriving from Josephus find their way into the Bavli, then why should the same not occur, at least occasionally, with nonrabbinic voices deriving from late antique Babylonia itself?

Further proof that rabbinic corpora contain accurate information about relationships between rabbis and nonrabbis is provided by stories that portray Jews not explicitly identified as rabbis appearing before rabbis for judgment. Modern scholarship has shown that sometimes these stories yield a picture not of disciples appearing before their masters but of nonrabbis appearing before rabbis. A significant number of these stories do not portray rabbis adjudicating every aspect of life; instead, there are important emphases and omissions that we would not expect were the Talmud simply comprised of rabbinic monologues. Contrasts between these portrayals and portrayals of conversations between individuals explicitly labeled "rabbi" lead Jacob Neusner to conclude that the Bavli routinely depicts Babylonian rabbis litigating cases "involving exchanges of property, torts and damages" and "court-enforced documents" but only rarely cases involving "points of religious observance."⁶⁶ If the Talmud depicts rabbis judging cases involving nonrabbis, one can understand this lacuna in the sources: nonrabbis did not need or want rabbis to determine their religious observances. They apparently preferred to decide such questions on their own or to consult nonrabbinic authorities. According to the claim that the Talmud contains little besides internal rabbinic discourse, in contrast, this lacuna is incomprehensible.

It has also been argued (in my opinion, incorrectly), that the evidence surveyed above is attributable to the differing audiences to which Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic literature is directed.⁶⁷ What was characterized above as the insular nature of Babylonian rabbis, in other words, is perhaps a function of the inner-directed character of the Babylonian Talmud. What was characterized above as the greater openness of Palestinian rabbis to nonrabbinic Jewish society is perhaps a function of the more outer-directed nature of Palestinian rabbinic compilations. In the ensuing discussion I refer to this theory as the "theory of audience."

The Bavli, according to this theory, is intended for a rabbinic audience, which explains the inner-directed character of the rabbis it depicts. This theory also explains another phenomenon heretofore unmentioned: the fact that statements by and stories involving Babylonian rabbis tend to emphasize Torah study to the exclusion of all else, that is, to emphasize the importance of values and preoccupations unique to the rabbinic elite.⁶⁸ More of Palestinian literature, according to this theory, is intended for a nonrabbinic audience, which explains why this literature depicts a more outer-directed Palestinian

rabbinate, and why statements by and stories involving Palestinian rabbis emphasize values and preoccupations shared by rabbis and nonrabbis alike: the importance of charity to the poor, hospitality to the wayfarer, observance of the Sabbath, and the like.

The theory of audience, however, fails to explain why statements attributed to Palestinian rabbis in the Bavli tend to exhibit the same outer-directed character as do statements attributed to Palestinian rabbis in Palestinian compilations. Were the inner-directed portrayals of Babylonian rabbis attributable solely to the inner-directed nature of the Bavli, we would expect Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis to be depicted by this Talmud in basically the same fashion. Why is this not the case? Why are Palestinian rabbis often depicted as outer-directed in the Bavli as well as the Yerushalmi? Why does the Bavli routinely contain accounts of Palestinian rabbinic encounters with nonrabbis, or quote statements by Palestinian rabbis expressing values they shared with nonrabbis, but tend to exclude such encounters and such statements when they involve Babylonian rabbis, apparently (according to the theory of audience) on the grounds that they would not be of interest to the Bavli's audience? Why is such material of interest to the Bavli's audience when it depicts interaction between Palestinian rabbis and nonrabbis, but not when it depicts interaction between Babylonian rabbis and nonrabbis? It is likely, therefore, that the differing portrayals are evidence of distinct rabbinic roles in society and not merely of distinctions between Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic literature.

In addition, the theory of audience needs to explain why Babylonian Jewish society is structured differently from other societies within the Persian Empire.⁶⁹ Why is Babylonian Jewish society less hierarchical, why are boundaries between classes less rigid, in Babylonian Jewish society than in Persian society in general, including the societies of non-Jewish minorities within that empire? The structure of Persian society, in contrast, conforms well to the theory that Talmudic sources in this one instance accurately reflect historical reality. The Persian intellectual and judicial elites had relatively little to do with other groups in Persian society, corresponding to the rabbis' character as an intellectual and judicial elite in Babylonian Jewish society.

The inner-directed nature of Babylonian rabbinic literature, in contrast, versus the more outer-directed nature of Palestinian rabbinic literature is easily explicable according to the theory that the literary portrayals in the Talmud in this one instance reflect historical reality. If I am correct that Babylonian rabbis tend to be more aloof from nonrabbis than are their Palestinian counterparts, it is easy to understand (1) why Babylonian rabbis produced a literature intended almost exclusively for rabbinic consumption, and (2) why Palestinian rabbis authored and transmitted for posterity some traditions intended more for a nonrabbinic Jewish audience.

One final argument that has been raised against the attempt to derive history from Talmudic sources bases itself on the fact that rabbinic compilations of late antiquity have been subjected to centuries of imperfect transmission, such that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make far-reaching

generalizations about the history, culture, or society of the Jews of this time period.⁷⁰ We are so often uncertain, for example, that a statement attributed to the Babylonian Amora Abaye was actually said by Abaye that it is impossible to draw historical conclusions based on statements he ostensibly made.

It should be noted, however, that my claim is not that it is possible to write biographies of rabbinic figures such as Abaye.⁷¹ My claim, rather, is that it is possible to draw some general distinctions between Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis, and early and later periods of Jewish history of late antiquity. For this purpose, it is necessary only to have confidence that significant numbers of traditions that purport to be Palestinian or Babylonian are what they claim to be, and that markers of Tannaitic, Amoraic, or anonymous editorial provenance are often (but by no means always) reliable. For my purposes it is enough to be reasonably confident that significant numbers of statements preserved in independently edited rabbinic compilations (for example, the Yerushalmi and Bavli) yield substantially the same picture of Palestinian rabbinic attitudes, social roles, or institutions. Our tools, in other words, are often blunt, but they are effective tools nonetheless.

It is also important to emphasize that my claim is not that all sources attributed to Palestinian rabbis in the Talmud (1) were authored by the rabbis to whom they are attributed, or (2) necessarily reflect a Palestinian point of view.⁷² Some statements attributed to Palestinian rabbis in the Bavli are more Babylonian than Palestinian, and other sources attributed in the Bavli to early rabbis were invented or tampered with by later editors.⁷³ It is advisable to look for general patterns characterizing Palestinian and Babylonian, and early and later rabbis, all the while remaining alert to the possibility that the transmitters and editors of these traditions altered them in subtle or not-so-subtle ways. Information about Palestinian rabbis preserved only in the Bavli is of course suspect and can be used as historical evidence only with due caution. *Prima facie*, it can neither be rejected nor accepted as evidence about conditions in Palestine; each individual case must be examined on its own terms. The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of early rabbis whose statements and actions are recorded only in compilations edited centuries after the fact.

As noted, often we can use other rabbinic compilations of late antiquity as controls for the picture supplied by the Bavli. Granted, the textual problems impeding our use of Palestinian midrashic compilations are even more serious than those of the Bavli, since manuscript versions of the former often preserve a veritable chaos of variants, particularly where names of rabbis are concerned. In many cases it is at present impossible to decide which manuscript version is correct. Nevertheless, Palestinian midrashic compilations almost exclusively contain statements attributed to Palestinian rabbis. Often we cannot be sure who authored a particular statement, but generally we can be sure that it reflects a Palestinian point of view.⁷⁴ And we can compare that Palestinian view to the view attributed to Palestinian rabbis in the Bavli. If these views correspond, the various compilations independently confirm one another. If they differ, we must attempt to explain why. Has the Bavli fabricated an attitude and falsely attributed it to Palestinian rabbis? If so, why? Is

the difference a function of differences in genre, since Palestinian midrashic compilations consist almost exclusively of rabbinic Bible commentary and the Bavli contains numerous other genres as well? That is, a rabbi interpreting scripture might behave or speak very differently from the same rabbi speaking without scriptural support, and the “contradiction” might be no contradiction at all. Does the Bavli preserve an authentically Palestinian attitude, deriving from circles other than those that predominate in extant Palestinian compilations? Markers of geographical and chronological provenance supplied by rabbinic compilations, therefore, raise significant questions and yield potentially significant conclusions, questions we would not have posed and conclusions we would not have reached had we assumed without further inquiry that these markers are historically useless.

Throughout this study, except where explicitly indicated otherwise, the term “Palestinian rabbinic traditions” denotes statements attributed to and stories involving Palestinian rabbis in Palestinian rabbinic compilations of late antiquity. The term “Babylonian rabbinic traditions” denotes statements attributed to and stories involving Babylonian rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud (or Bavli). Statements attributed to and stories involving Palestinian rabbis in the Bavli present a particularly thorny methodological problem.⁷⁵ On the one hand, they may be Babylonian creations, fully reflective of Babylonian attitudes and/or reality; on the other hand, they may accurately reflect the opinions or actions of the Palestinian rabbis to whom they are attributed. Such traditions also may have originated in Palestine and been subjected to greater or lesser tampering by Babylonian authors or editors during the course of their journey to and/or transmission in Babylonia. In short, such sources may belong to one of several different categories, and it would be a mistake to prejudge this material or to ignore it entirely. I will decide on a case-by-case basis whether or not a particular statement is best classified as Palestinian, Babylonian, or some combination of the two, or whether we lack a sufficient basis on which to decide the question. In so doing, we attempt to steer a middle course between (1) scholars who a priori tend to view all traditions in the Bavli, even those designated as Tannaitic or Palestinian Amoraic, as having been subjected to the heavy hand of Babylonian editor and (2) scholars who consider all material designated in the Bavli as Tannaitic or Palestinian Amoraic—as precisely what it purports to be.

In the next chapter, the data will require the use of different terminology in referring to Palestinian and Babylonian traditions, since all of the material under investigation in this chapter is attributed to Tannaim (nearly all of whom derive from Palestine), and I will be examining a distinction between purportedly Tannaitic statements in the Bavli and purportedly Tannaitic statements in Palestinian compilations. The precise nature of the investigation and the data in each chapter, therefore, will require a certain amount of terminological flexibility, but as a rule, the foregoing generalization applies for the entire book, except where explicitly noted otherwise.