MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE

# "FRIGHTFUL PERSECUTIONS" OR "PERSIANS WHO PROTECT US?": RE-EXAMINING THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE UNDER SASANIAN RULE

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# INTRODUCTION

A universal issue facing any system of government concerns the definition, treatment and integration into social and political networks of its various minority populations. These groups form on the basis of race, ethnicity, and, most commonly in the ancient world, religion. The Sasanian dynasty of late antiquity ruled over a vast empire that included members of many religions – Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Manichaeans, Jews, and others.[1] While the religion most closely associated with the ruling elite was Zoroastrianism, an ancient dualistic religion, the Sasanians were able not only to co-exist with these other religions, but also to incorporate them into the power structures of the government, despite differences in religious beliefs, traditions, and practices.

Few texts from this period survive, and only a small number of these are from the Sasanians themselves. One of the most important sources from and for the Sasanian period comes from the rabbis in the Jewish communities in Sasanian-ruled Babylonia – the Babylonian Talmud. This text is significant not only for Judaism as a religion, as it remains an essential source of Jewish law, but also for Jewish and

[1] Josef Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia from 550 BC to 650 AD,* trans. Azizeh Azodi (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 199.

Sasanian history. The Talmud provides insights into the dilemmas of ruling powers interacting with minority groups under their jurisdiction, such as the Babylonian Jews who produced the Talmud during the Sasanian period. With the Talmud as our source, the Jewish experience of Sasanian rule becomes a case study for how empires deal with the presence of other religions or ethnicities within their societies, and in turn how members of these groups perceive imperial authority and find ways to participate in the social, cultural, and political institutions of the ruling powers. A careful study of evidence from the Babylonian Talmud as well as a variety of other sources reveals how the Babylonian Jews viewed themselves as fitting into the Zoroastrian framework of Sasanian society. It also provides insight into the particular ways in which the Zoroastrians and Sasanian elites – who were often one and the same – of late antique Iran integrated the Babylonian Jews into the Sasanian cultural and political spheres.

The Sasanian dynasty rose to power in 224 CE, overcoming the Parthians who ruled Persia for 400 years and reigned until their defeat at the hands of the Muslims in 651 CE, governing an empire that constituted most of what is modern day Iran and Iraq.[2] While the Parthians lacked a single strong authority, leaving leadership to the various petty kings who controlled smaller territories within Persia, the Sasanians established a tradition of one powerful, centralized monarchy constructed around the

[2] Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 152-153.

"king of kings." With the title king of kings, the Sasanian rulers claimed authority over not just Iran, a new concept created by the Sasanians but of the whole world – a global, all-encompassing leadership based on the divine sanction of the sacred Sasanian lineage.[3] This form of kingship was strongly associated with Zoroastrianism, the dominant religion of Sasanian Iran. This relationship is most often explained using the famous statement, "religion and kingship are twins."[4] While this claim presents a variety of possibilities for interpretation, fundamentally it provides a very basic idea of the ways in which the Sasanian government and this particularly Iranian religion related to each other.

Zoroastrianism beliefs focused primarily on dichotomies within the world – good vs. evil, pure vs. impure, order vs. chaos. The two major deities, Ahura Mazda and Ahreman symbolized these divisions, with Ahura Mazda as the representative of all that was good, pure, and ordered and Ahreman standing for everything evil, impure, and chaotic.[5] Evidence from inscriptions, coins, and texts tells us that the Sasanian kings officially described themselves as "Mazda-worshipping," making public adherence to and the support and encouragement of Zoroastrian principles part of their pre-requisites and bases for true kingship. In the eyes of the Zoroastrians, this allegiance to Ahura Mazda made the king

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[3] Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, 165-166.
[4] *The Letter of Tansar*, trans. M. Boyce (Rome: Royal Institute of Translation and Publication of Iran, 1968), 33.
[5] Shaul Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies University of London, 1994), 13-15.

the legitimate and right ruler of the empire.[6] The Sasanian kings emphasized the interdependence between the monarchy and religion as vital to the maintenance of balance in society, an important concept politically as well as religiously.[7]

This importance of preserving order in the face of the constant threat of chaos was, of course, extremely relevant to the ruling of a vast empire, and also an essential part of Zoroastrian doctrine. Like any empire, the Sasanians continually struggled to maintain order both internally and externally. The Sasanian kings frequently found themselves engaged in conflict at their borders with the Roman empire. Within their own lands, rebellions against the throne were not uncommon. The vast majority of these challengers constructed a mythology or ancestry for themselves that placed them within the divine lineage of the Sasanian dynasty. In doing so they portrayed themselves as the rightful rulers within this particular framework,[8] casting themselves as the restorers of order and rightness as opposed to being the source of disruption and chaos.

For the Zoroastrians, the king acted as the protector of order in the world, not only in the political realm but also in social/religious spheres.[9]

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[6] Antonio Panaino, "Astral Characters of Kingship in the Sasanian and Byzantine Worlds," *Convegno internazionale: La Persia e Bisanzio (Roma, 14-18 ottobre 2002)* (Rome, 2004): 555-594, 557.
[7] Shaked, *Dualism,* 109-113.
[8] Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 31, 35-36.
[9] Panaino, "Astral Characters," 556.

This relationship served the interests of both the Sasanian kings as well as the Zoroastrian priests, as it played a role in the kings' efforts to control the population and gave the priests the opportunity to gain status and power for themselves and their religion.[10] Zoroastrian concerns in the kingdom also focused on issues of purity, particularly related to fire, water, and earth, which the Zoroastrians revered as sacred elements. They exposed rather than buried their dead so as not to defile the earth, and established fire temples all over Iran, which occupied an important place within the Zoroastrian religion. Fire temples also grew into powerful economic institutions in their own right as a result of the ties of the Zoroastrian priesthood to the Sasanian court and government. Many of these Sasanian aristocrats were also Zoroastrian priests, and since the Iranian elites maintained and upheld the authority of the empire, Zoroastrians held the highest ranks of the ruling powers. This persistent intermixing of the Zoroastrian priesthood with the elites of the Sasanian court carries important implications for the policies of the Sasanian monarchy, as any actions must be viewed with an awareness of the Zoroastrian presence in the Sasanian aristocracy and how it may have affected politics within the empire.

Few historical texts survive from the Sasanian period, and the arguably most extensive source emerged from the Jews of Sasanian Babylonia. The Jewish communities of Babylonia survived and thrived

[10] Shaked, *Dualism*, 113-115.

into, throughout, and after the Sasanian period. The most important result of the success of the Jews in Babylonia, and the source of much of our information about the Sasanians is the Babylonian Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud emerged from several hundred years of rabbinic study, debate, and scholarship on Jewish texts. By the eighth century it became a huge compendium of work including everything from anecdotes to religious debates and arguments; magic and medicine; political, social, and theological commentary; rules and regulations; and any other products of scholarly work the rabbis felt worth preserving. It is referred to as the Babylonian Talmud to distinguish it from a work created in Palestine known as the Jerusalem Talmud. Though the two texts share many similarities, the significance of the Babylonian Talmud has far outstripped that of the Jerusalem Talmud, which was completed several centuries before the Babylonian Talmud.[11] The Babylonian Talmud includes law as well as a significant degree of non-legal commentary on scripture, while the Jersualem Talmud primarily contains legal and Mishnah commentary.[12]

The Babylonian Talmud remains even today one of the most important and respected texts in Judaism as a source of Jewish law and wisdom. Naturally, the environment in which such a significant text was

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[11] Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia Between Persia and Roman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 38.
[12] Richard Kalmin, "The Formation and Character of the Babylonian Talmud," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism,* ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 841.

created carries important implications for how it is read, interpreted, and viewed as a part of the long history of the Jewish people. It is especially vital to consider the milieu in which the Babylonian rabbis composed the Babylonian Talmud, as its prominence in Judaism seems incongruent at first, given the existence of a similar work from rabbis in Jerusalem, the holy city and location of the Jewish Temples. One might expect the text created by rabbis in what the Jews considered to be their God-given homeland to be much more highly esteemed than one composed under conditions of exile.

Given the pre-eminence of a religion obsessed with the correct order and purity of the world, how did minority groups fit into this society? The empire included more than Zoroastrians – within it were Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and, of course, Jews. The history of the non-Zoroastrian communities in Sasanian Iran tends to be discussed in negative terms. Scholars claim that Zoroastrian intolerance lead to persecutions of Buddhist populations in Afghanistan in the third century, as well as the spread of Buddhism towards the east rather than the west.[13] The experience of the Christian groups in Iran is depicted much the same way. Christianity had the opportunity to grow and thrive under Parthian rule, such that near the end of the third century, just after the Sasanian conquest the Christians made an effort to organize and give a specific

[13] R.E. Emmerick, "Buddhism Among Iranian Peoples," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 956-957.

structure to their large, growing communities.[14] However, the experience of the Christians in Iran is largely described in terms of violence. Scholars write of the anti-Christian policies of the Sasanian kings as well as persecutions motivated in part and sometimes entirely for by religion – that is, Zoroastrian intolerance, albeit punctuated by periods of tolerance.[15] This interpretation of Sasanian treatment of its Buddhist and Christian communities bears a strong resemblance to the framework in which many scholars tend to discuss the relationship between the Babylonian Jews and the Sasanian kings.

Jacob Neusner, the primary author of this paradigm, divides the experience of the Babylonian Jews in this period into two possibilities – either the Jews suffered harassment or violence as a result of the Zoroastrian fervor of the Sasanian elites or were left alone.[16] Neusner's interpretation of the evidence casts Zoroastrians into the role of religious fanatics, intent on either the conversion or obliteration of non-Zoroastrians such as the Jews. Zoroastrianism then becomes a religion intent on exclusion, responsible for the violence inflicted on minority religious communities under Sasanian rule. He accuses the Zoroastrians of making life difficult for the Jews not only through legal action, but also by harassment such as the destruction of Torah scrolls, and finally attempting

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[14] J.P. Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 928-930.
[15] Asmussen, "Christians," 934-936.
[16] Jacob Neusner, "Jews in Iran," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 910.

to eradicate Judaism from the empire.[17] His insistence that in times of peace the Sasanians left the Jews alone does not allow for the inclusion of the Jews in any of the social, political, or religious institutions of the Sasanian empire. Consequently, the Jewish communities of Neusner's interpretation lived and worked in isolation for much of the Sasanian period, with the exception of times of unrest and persecution directed towards the Jews and other non-Zoroastrian groups. Neusner maintains that the arrival of the Sasanians did not bode well for the Jews or other non-Zoroastrian communities[18] and the Sasanian kings specifically targeted the Jews, as well as Christians and others in times of unrest, particularly near the end of Sasanian rule.[19]

However, Neusner's interpretation presents a number of problems in light of a close scrutiny of the available sources. The Babylonian Talmud in particular demonstrates that far from remaining in isolation, the rabbinical communities enjoyed high status and an active role at the Sasanian court. Texts that describe persecution of the Jews by the Sasanians do not constitute convincing proof that such cruelty occurred, or that historical acts of violence stemmed from anti-Jewish feeling among the Sasanian aristocracy. In fact, the stories of violence support the argument for Jewish participation in Sasanian politics. Not only do the sources not hold up, but Zoroastrianism also was not the fanatical religion

[17] Neusner, "Jews in Iran," 914-916.
[18] Neusner, "Jews in Iran," 913.
[19] Neusner, "Jews in Iran," 915-920.

Neusner describes. The Zoroastrians readily included Jews and other non-Zoroastrians in their religious and social institutions. The Jews also allowed this integration, resulting in cooperation and collaboration between Jews and Zoroastrians in all levels of Sasanian society. Overall, evidence for the Sasanian era reveals that the Jews occupied an important place within Zoroastrian/Sasanian political, social, and religious structures. This involvement was made possible by Zoroastrian strategies of inclusion for Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians alike, and does not point to the occurrence of persecution or violence directed towards the Jews because they were not Zoroastrian.

# CHAPTER ONE:
# POLITICS AND POWER BETWEEN THE BABYLONIAN RABBIS AND THE SASANIAN COURT

In Mesopotamia during the reign of the Sasanian kings, a woman called Ifra Hormizd, the mother of King of Kings Shapur II (r. 309–379 CE) bestowed upon the Jewish scholars a variety of gifts and contributions. She was not Jewish herself, nor did Judaism occupy a prominent place within her heavily Zoroastrian society. The only surviving record of this patronage lies in five stories in the Babylonian Talmud, which depict Ifra Hormizd in this role as patron and supporter of the Jews. Though brief, these texts nevertheless offer a glimpse of the Jewish experience under Sasanian rule, not only because of the unusual reference to a Sasanian noblewoman, but also because of the implications inherent in the interplay between the Sasanian aristocracy and the Jewish community. These stories reveal the nature of this relationship, as well as how the Babylonian rabbis considered and cultivated their connections with the Sasanian court.

Deciphering the relationship between the Babylonian rabbis and the Sasanian court carries important implications for understanding the

social and political setting in which the rabbis created the Babylonian Talmud. The period of time in which the scholars in Babylonia composed the Talmud, approximately 200 CE to 700 CE roughly corresponds to the rule of the Sasanian kings, 224 CE to 651 CE. It is necessary to take into account the nature of the Sasanian presence in the lives of the Jews in this period in considering the Babylonian Talmud. The Talmud cannot be fully understood without taking into account the types of interactions that occurred between the rabbis and the Sasanian court, as the context in which the rabbis compiled this text undoubtedly affected its creation. The place of the Jews in Sasanian society is important to Sasanian social history as well as Jewish history. Because the Sasanians left almost no writings of their own, studying the texts of those who lived under the Sasanian dynasty provides valuable insight into Sasanian social and political practices. The ways in which the rabbis discussed the Sasanian aristocracy and government reveals a great deal about how the Sasanians dealt with the Jews and other minority groups in their domain.

In any attempt to extract historical meaning from the Talmud, it is vital to establish how the Talmud will be analyzed and interpreted. Given the considerable length and complexity of this work, the various potential frameworks of analysis represent a range of possible conclusions regarding the meaning and significance of any single text. Defining the manner of interpretation requires taking into consideration a number of factors, such as the structure and nature of the text, the extent to which

any final redaction influenced the text as a whole, and whether or not it is possible to distinguish different voices of various times, places, or people within the work. Taken together, these pieces reveal the ways in which the Talmud provides insight into the dynamic relationship between the rabbis and the Sasanian kings.

One of the most contentious areas in the study of the Talmud concerns its final redaction – if it occurred, and if so, when, how, and by who? Some interpret the Talmud believing that a group of final editors reworked the Talmud to the extent that earlier contributions to the text are now undistinguishable from the results of the editing process.[20] However, many scholars currently do not believe that a definitive final redaction occurred, although they propose that by the sixth century CE the Talmud had a type of structure – albeit loosely organized – in place that would keep the text more or less as it was, with only minor variations over time.[21] They view the Talmud as both a product of redaction as well as a preservation of texts from different authors or times. Richard Kalmin demonstrates there exists within the Talmud this evidence for rabbinical editing as well as individual layers originating from different periods throughout rabbinic history, primarily using language to make these distinctions between sections of a single text, as well as other stylistic

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[20] Kalmin, "Formation and Character," 843.
[21] Martin S. Jaffee, "Rabbinic Authorship as a Collective Enterprise," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature,* ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 32-34.

attributes.[22] In the absence of a large-scale redaction, therefore, scholars can and should differentiate and study the various layers of the Talmud within their own context, rather than solely as the product of a group of later editors. Under this assumption, a text that initially reads as one cohesive unit may actually include several statements from different eras, combined either as early as the time of the most recent statements or many years after the rabbis wrote all of the passage's individual pieces. Thus these stories with Ifra Hormizd and Shapur II may be taken in context – one can read them as if they were, in actuality, written at the time when these stories truly occurred, but always with the awareness that they underwent review and redaction.

In using the Talmud to understand the relationship between the Jewish scholars and the Sasanian government, the question of the intended audience or reader presents another important perspective to consider. Knowing for whom the rabbis wrote for reveals more about their particular motivations for discussing or including persons such as Ifra Hormizd or Shapur II. The "theory of audience," states that the rabbinic scholars wrote the Talmud for other rabbinic scholars[23] – educated members of the elite, essentially, "advanced rabbinic disciple[s],"[24] familiar with both the Scripture and the Mishnah and able to engage in academic conversations on these subjects. However, while the

[22] Kalmin, "Formation and Character," 840-843.
[23] Kalmin, "Formation and Character," 857.
[24] David Kraemer, "The Intended Reader As a Key to Interpreting the Bavli," *Prooftexts* 13 (1993): 125-140, 128.

rabbis' primary intent was to write for other scholars, they were not a completely isolated group. Jeffrey Rubenstein describes the rabbis as elitists, but maintains that while they kept some knowledge for themselves, they did not stay completely isolated, instead choosing to meet in small, informal circles and often acting as judges in Jewish courts.[25] Not only did the rabbis participate in their own Babylonian Jewish communities, however, but they also interacted with the Sasanian aristocracy. Within this framework, the Talmud provides insight into which issues mattered most to the rabbis; which, as the Ifra Hormizd texts reveal, certainly included the status of their relationship to the Sasanian court.

Establishing the ways in which the Jewish scholars interacted with and fit into Sasanian aristocratic society provides a context in which to place these stories. This plays an important role in using these texts to understand the rabbis' connection to and perspective of the Sasanian court. Examining what the Jews incorporated into their own culture as a result of their encounters with Sasanian society shows their familiarity with Sasanian court culture. Scholars point to the various Talmudic discussions of several notable rabbis, R. Nahman and Rav, entering into temporary marriages, a Zoroastrian aristocratic custom, as well as the lack of criticism of the practice as an indication that the rabbis of the Sasanian

[25] Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, "Social and Institutional Settings of Rabbinic Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 66-69.

world underwent significant acculturation.[26] This adoption of temporary marriage by leading scholars is telling because temporary marriage represented a particularly Zoroastrian institution, intended as a means to facilitate and encourage the creation of children, which are very important in the Zoroastrian tradition. Producing children was a significant concern for the Sasanian elites, as a way of preserving both family property and holdings as well as ensuring the continuation of their lineage.[27] The fact that well-known Jewish scholars evidently had no difficulties engaging in this practice suggests that the Jews interacted with Zoroastrians regularly and intimately and participated in Sasanian aristocratic culture. The adaptation of various Iranian literary motifs such as the figure of the stable-master to denote low status or the villainization of Alexander of Macedon also suggests Jewish familiarity with the Persian literary tradition.[28] The Sasanian nobility preserved the stories of kings and heroes in epics that played a fundamental role in the transmittance and persistence of the fundamentals of Persian culture, identity, and history.

The repeated use of various features of Sasanian culture and tradition in works created by Jews for other Jews shows the depth of the

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[26] Yaakov Elman, "Middle Persian Culture and Babylonian Sages: Accomodation 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 (New York: Cambridge University Press), 191-192.

[27] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 60-62.

[28] 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 for Jewish Studies Review* 29:2 (2005): 283-297, 292-295.

rabbis' integration into the Sasanian elite culture and the extent to which they took part in both the political and social power structures of the Sasanians. Not only did the rabbis or scholars require sufficient familiarity with Sasanian society to recognize and use the motifs or terms they chose to incorporate into their texts, but they also needed to select elements that would easily and unquestionably resonate with their audience. The rabbis had to know that other Jews would understand all of their references, and the allusions they chose demonstrate that the Jews of Babylonia were well versed and well integrated in Sasanian society and power structures. The acculturation of Babylonian Jewry indicated by their participation in important Zoroastrian religious institutions as well as their use of Iranian literary motifs shows the degree to which the audience was familiar with Sasanian aristocratic culture. This suggests that the Babylonian Jews experienced significant exposure to the Sasanian court, which in turn demonstrates that the rabbis sustained a substantial relationship with the Sasanian aristocracy.

While the rabbis' adoption of various Sasanian customs indicates that the Babylonian Jews regularly interacted with their Sasanian neighbors, it remains unclear what sort of contact the Jews experienced with the Sasanian aristocracy. Some scholars point to the emphasis that the Babylonian rabbis placed on lineage, as they saw themselves as descendants of David, suggesting that this concern was likely intensified by their Sasanian neighbors and their obsession with lineage. This parallel

indicates that the Babylonian Jews did, in fact, have a place of sorts among Sasanian society – one sufficient to impress some of the Sasanians' most important ideologies upon the Jews, even if the rabbis did not intentionally adopt those aspects of Sasanian aristocratic culture.[29] They also refer to hints of rabbinic familiarity with a variety of legal and religious issues present in the vehemently Zoroastrian Sasanian society – R. Yosef, for example, criticized the Zoroastrians using Zoroastrian theology, describing them in Iranian terms as "demons [armies of the Evil Spirit] with parted hair."[30] Given the rabbis' notable emphasis on their place at or near the top of a social hierarchy, similar to that of the Sasanians, it appears that the rabbis attempted to create a comparable social structure for themselves. This in turn indicates that they saw in the Sasanian aristocracy qualities worth emulating, and knew enough about the workings of the court to use certain aspects of it for their own purposes – all of which the rabbis could not and would not do without maintaining good relations with the Sasanian ruling dynasty.

The Talmud reveals the existence of this thriving relationship in three of the stories featuring Ifra Hormizd. These passages depict her primarily and repeatedly as a patron of the Jews and little else, suggesting that it was not unusual for the Jews to receive this type of support from members of the Sasanian nobility. Two stories appear in the same tractate, Baba Bathra, beginning with 8a:

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[29] Kalmin, "Formation and Character," 850-851.
[30] Elman, "Middle Persian Culture," 193.

> Ifra Hormizd the mother of King Shapur sent a chest of gold coins to R. Joseph, with the request that it should be used for carrying out some really important religious precept. R. Joseph was trying hard to think what such a precept could be, when Abaye said to him: Since R. Samuel b. Judah has laid down that money for charity is not to be levied from orphans even for the redemption of captives, we may conclude [8b] that the redemption of captives is a religious duty of great importance.

The second story in Baba Bathra occurs shortly thereafter, in 10b:

> Ifra Hormiz the mother of King Shapur sent four hundred dinarim to R. Ammi, but he would not accept them. she then sent them to Raba, and he accepted them, in order not to offend the Government. When R. Ammi heard, he was indignant and said: Does he not hold with the verse, When the boughs thereof are withered they shall be broken off, the women shall come and set them on fire? Raba [defended himself] on the ground that he wished not to offend the Government. Was not R. Ammi also anxious not to offend the Government? – [He was angry] because he ought to have distributed the money to the non-Jewish poor. But Raba did distribute it to the non-Jewish poor? – The reason R. Ammi was indignant was [11a] that he had not been fully informed.

Both of these stories begin with Ifra Hormizd sending money to a notable rabbi, which prompts the rabbis to discuss the most appropriate use for the donation. In the first story, the rabbis focus on the specifics of her request regarding an "important religious precept," while the second passage becomes a debate regarding the appropriate distribution of non-Jewish charity.

The third text not only draws attention to Ifra Hormizd's gentile status, but also names her once again as the giver of charity. As in B. B. 8a-8b, Ifra Hormizd here asks that the rabbis use her gift for a particular

religious purpose, and the rabbis take advantage of this opportunity to describe the correct procedure for preparing gentile offerings:

> The children of Israel are enjoined against [sacrifices] slaughtered without, but gentiles are not enjoined against [sacrifices] slaughtered without. Therefore each one may build himself a bamah and offer thereon whatever he desires. R. Jacob b. Aha said in R. Assi's name: It is forbidden to assist them or act as their agents. Raba observed: Yet we may instruct them. [This happened with] Ifra Hormiz, mother of King Shabur, who sent an offering to Raba, with the request, Offer it up in the honour of Heaven. Said Raba to R. Safra and R. Aha b. Huna: Go, fetch two young men [non-Jews] of like age, seek a spot where the sea has thrown up alluvial mud, take new [unused] twigs, produce a fire with a new flint, and offer it up in honour of Heaven.[31]

This last section continues with a discussion regarding the protocol and teachings of altars and sacrifices, but mentions neither Ifra Hormizd nor her offering again. In these stories, Ifra Hormizd plays the role of a patron, choosing to send money or gifts to the Jews, and two out of three times the text notes her specific demand that the rabbis utilize it for a religious rite at their discretion. Not only does she send gold to the Jews of her own volition (rather than as a response to a request for charity), but she also gives explicit instructions for its use in a religious function to be determined by the rabbis, not Ifra Hormizd's own religious beliefs, as the texts make it clear that she was not Jewish – in fact, she was most likely a Zoroastrian.

Her role in the story provides insight into the nature of the boundaries between Jews and Zoroastrians. Ifra Hormizd's decision to

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[31] b. Zev. 116b.

give religious donations to the Jews – seen not once but several times within the Talmud – demonstrates that the Zoroastrians did not completely exclude other faiths. The choice of a high-status Zoroastrian closely associated with the king of kings to support the worship of the Jews suggests the existence, acknowledgement, and acceptance of Jewish standing within Sasanian aristocratic culture and society. The mother of a Zoroastrian king may have approached the Jews with religious donations perhaps not only to cultivate goodwill with the Jewish communities, but also for her own religious purposes. Elites often contributed to fire temples, not only as part of their participation in the social and economic culture of the aristocracy, but also in an effort to preserve their souls, in accordance with Zoroastrian concerns about the soul after death.[32] Ifra Hormizd, as well as other high-ranking Sasanians, may have made such gifts to the rabbis in this vein, seeing the rabbis as a part of or equivalent to this tradition. Thus her contributions to the Jews may have been motivated by personal as well as political reasons.

From the Jewish perspective, the actions and presence of Ifra Hormizd imply that the Jewish scholars viewed their relationship with the Sasanian government as beneficial. The rabbis highlight this by choosing not to dwell on the presence of the mother of King Shapur in these stories – they do not emphasize or draw particular attention to this Sasanian

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[32] Maria Macuch, "The Talmudic Expression "Servant of the Fire" in the Light of Pahlavi Legal Sources," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 26 (2002): 109-129, 119.

noblewoman who chose to honor or aid the Jewish community – rather, Ifra Hormizd's part reads as merely incidental, as the text provides her name and her relationship to the king, and then moves on. In these examples, her donation provides a concrete background from which to begin a theological discussion – a literary structure typical of Talmudic discussion.

The rabbis in the stories generally pay no attention to the identity of the sender, instead focusing on the intellectual problems the situation raises, such as what qualifies as an important religious precept, how or to whom to distribute "heathen" charity, or the appropriate circumstances in which to offer a sacrifice. Theoretically, the rabbis could replace Ifra Hormizd with any other non-Jew sending gifts, and the stories would play out in more or less the same way. Indeed, the implication that Ifra Hormizd is not Jewish proves more directly relevant to the rabbinical debates than her actual identity, as two of the stories (B.Bathra 10b and Zev. 116b) discuss specific guidelines that apply to gentiles or gentile donations to Jews. Only in one story does Ifra Hormizd's connection to the government prompt any comment – R. Ammi in B. Bathra 10b refuses her donation, but Raba accepts "in order not to offend the Government." The Talmud's casual attitude towards the personal identity of Ifra Hormizd implies not only that the Sasanian government patronized the Jews often enough that the rabbis could use these contributions as familiar examples, but also that Ifra Hormizd herself truly existed and supported

the rabbis in this fashion. Given that her identity, apart from her gentile status and her association with the King of Kings does not serve any purpose, the rabbis had little reason to mention Ifra Hormizd specifically by name, which suggests that such a person, and others like her truly did bestow gifts of this kind.

Sasanian Queens do not appear often in the texts from this period, either in the Talmud or in the few sources from the Sasanians that exist, making the rabbis' repeated references to Ifra Hormizd all the more remarkable – and all the more likely that they truly received such donations from Sasanian noblewomen. While the Sasanian queens remain largely a mystery, the little information available indicates that contributions of this sort from the queens remains well in the realm of possibility. The Sasanian queens possessed some status of their own, at times using the title "Queen of Queens"[33] and as a result of the emphasis on the right of the divine Sasanian lineage to hold the crown, even ruling the empire in periods without a living, male descendant of the Sasanian line.[34] A queen going out of her way to display some favor to a well received, even familiar group such as the Jewish scholars would not be unreasonable, given Ifra Hormizd's place as the mother of Shapur II, the

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[33] Jamsheed K. Choksy, "A Sasanian Monarch, His Queen, Crown Prince, and Deities: The Coinage of Wahram II," *American Journal of Numismatics* 1 (1989): 117-135, 122.
[34] Touraj Daryaee, "The Coinage of Queen Boran and Its Significance for Late Sasanian Imperial Ideology," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 13 (1999): 77-82, 77.

King of Kings. Publicly bestowing gifts upon minority groups within the empire further served several purposes. The donations not only rewarded and encouraged the cooperation and integration of the groups receiving these gifts into the Sasanian networks of rule, but this support of particular groups would also send a message to other factions in the empire. It both tempted them with the possibilities of royal favor as well as warning them of what they could lose, simultaneously emphasizing the participation of these patronized minority groups in the Sasanian power structure. The fact that the Talmud includes Ifra Hormizd playing the role of beneficiary to the Jews not once but multiple times shows that her appearance in these stories is not coincidental, but instead indicative not only of the presence but also of the significance of the role the Sasanian court played in the lives of the Babylonian rabbis.

While these stories show some evidence of rabbinic hesitation concerning association with the court, the rabbis on good terms with the Sasanians easily outnumber the one dissenting rabbi, an indication of the types of debates the rabbis engaged in over the issue of their relationship with the Sasanian court. B. Bathra 10b-11a stands out as the one story which not only references the Sasanian government beyond noting Ifra Hormizd's relationship to Shapur II, but also results in a disagreement among the rabbis over whether or not they should take her donation. R. Ammi expresses his displeasure when Raba chooses to accept Ifra Hormizd's gift, quoting Isaiah, "When the boughs thereof are withered

they shall be broken off, the women shall come and set them on fire,"[35] essentially reprimanding Raba for taking gentile charity, which enabled the gentiles to retain their position of power over the Jews. If the Jews allowed the Sasanians to use their superior status to perform good deeds, thereby increasing their merit, the Sasanians would remain in power. This ability to act as the supporter rather than the supported implies an unequal relationship, in which the former is, by virtue of this capability, superior to the latter. Thus R. Ammi believes accepting Ifra Hormizd's donation not only helps the Sasanians maintain their overall domination, but also reinforces the non-Jews' superiority to the Jews, as the Sasanians remain the givers and not the receivers of charity. This disagreement, therefore, represents more than simply a theological debate over the protocol for accepting and distributing charity. It reveals the existence of conflicts and uncertainties within the Jewish communities over whether or not the Jews should participate in the non-Jewish, predominantly Zoroastrian social and cultural networks. While R. Ammi's objection gives voice to antagonistic feeling that likely existed among the Jewish scholars under Sasanian rule, Raba's successful overriding of R. Ammi shows that R. Ammi likely held the minority view.

The Talmudic evidence indicates that while for a period of time this more negative view of the Sasanians enjoyed a greater following, overall most rabbis accepted Sasanian rule. For most of B. Bathra 10b-11a, R.

[35] Isaiah XXVII: 11.

Ammi and Raba disagree over whether or not to accept the money from Ifra Hormizd as well as their respective attitudes towards the gentile Sasanian government. At the very end of the passage, however, the text suddenly declares that R. Ammi's indignation is "because [Raba] ought to have distributed the money to the non-Jewish poor," and shortly after explains that Raba did indeed give the money to non-Jews, and R. Ammi simply did not realize this. The shift is abrupt and distinct, giving the impression that this passage actually consists of two stories combined into one, or a single story with a modified ending. Whether the rabbis altered the text for the ease of theological discussion, as a response to some shift in political feeling or both remains unclear. Nevertheless, at some point, most likely after the reign of Shapur II, the rabbinical scholars chose to arrange these passages as one unit – evidently the debate over offending the government became less important than the discussion over the proper treatment of non-Jewish charity. This suggests that while periods of increased tension between the Jews and their Sasanian rulers occurred, the rabbis generally endeavored to maintain their connections to and participation in the Sasanian government.

Not only did the rabbis occasionally experience conflict amongst themselves, but the last two stories also reveal evidence of the rabbis' awareness of the power the Sasanian government wielded over them. These texts demonstrate the variable nature of their relationship with the Sasanian court, stemming from divisions among the Sasanian aristocracy's

view of the Babylonian Jews. Ifra Hormizd plays a much more active role in these stories than in her other two appearances. In Niddah, she:

> once sent some blood to Raba when R. Obadiah was sitting in his presence. Having smelt it he said to him, 'This is blood of lust.' 'Come and see', she remarked to her son, 'how wise the Jews are.' 'It is quite possible,' he replied, 'that he hit upon it like a blind man on a window.' Thereupon she sent to him sixty different kinds of blood and he identified them all but the last one which was lice blood with which he was not acquainted. Luckily, however, he sent her a comb that exterminates lice. 'O, you Jews,' she exclaimed, 'you seem to live in the inner chamber of one's heart.'[36]

Ifra Hormizd and her son Shapur engage in a debate over the wisdom of the Jews, which moves her to test Raba so he can demonstrate the Jews' abilities to the doubtful Shapur. While Raba successfully completes Ifra Hormizd's challenge, he answers the last question correctly by luck, rather than skill. The next story contains a similar back and forth between Shapur and Ifra Hormizd, as well as another display of the powers of the Jews, and again the rabbis succeed only with help:

> Once a man was sentenced by the Court of Raba to receive corporal punishment because had intercourse with a Gentile woman. Raba had the man punished and he died. The matter reached the ears of King Shapur and he sought to punish Raba. Whereupon Ifra Hormuz, the mother of King Shapur, said to her son, Do not interfere with the Jews because whatever they ask of their God He grants them. The king asked her, For example? They pray and rain falls [she replied]. He retorted: This must have been because it is the season for rain; let them pray now, in the Tammuz cycle for rain. She sent a message to Raba: Concentrate now your mind and pray for rain. He prayed but no rain fell. He then exclaimed: Master of the Universe, 'O God, we have heard with our ears, our fathers have told us; a work Thou didst in their days, in the days of old.' But as for us we have not seen

[36] b. Niddah 20b.

> [it] with our eyes. Whereupon there followed such a heavy fall of rain that the gutters of Mahuza emptied their waters into the Tigris. Raba's father then appeared unto him in a dream and said to him: Is there anyone who troubles Heaven so much? Change thy [sleeping] place. He changed his place and next morning he discovered that his bed had been cut with knives.[37]

The major difference between these last two stories and the first three texts lies in the behavior of the characters of Ifra Hormizd and Shapur II. Here they play active roles, rather than standing in as convenient figures leading the rabbis into greater theological discussions. The texts focus on the interplay between Ifra Hormizd and her son Shapur, as well as Raba's response. Ifra Hormizd advocates successfully for the wisdom and abilities of the Jews, while Shapur remains skeptical and dismissive.

In these passages, Ifra Hormizd and Shapur act as the voices for differing attitudes among the Sasanian court towards the Jews, with Shapur representing the opinions ranging from negative to neutral and Ifra Hormizd as the representation of the positive perspective. Shapur acting as the foil to Ifra Hormizd in both stories suggests that Shapur may have, at least outwardly, expressed a less than favorable position towards the Jews. However, the rabbis could not have been privy to actual conversations between Ifra Hormizd and her son Shapur, and so in this case the rabbis may have used Ifra Hormizd and Shapur to personify different factions within the Sasanian court. Ifra Hormizd, as an active benefactor of the Jews provides an obvious choice to advocate for the

[37] b. Ta'anith 24b.

Jews, and Shapur provides an appropriate contrast, not only as a known, high-status figure, but also as a man and the king, thus having more power than a woman, and so potentially representing a greater danger to the rabbis.

Perhaps in recognition of this threat, the Talmud shows in both cases that the Jews cannot pass Ifra Hormizd's tests by themselves. In Niddah, Raba "luckily" sends Ifra Hormizd a lice-exterminating comb despite not recognizing the lice blood, and in Ta'anith he says to God, "we have heard [of a miracle of God] with our ears…But as for us we have not seen [it] with our eyes", daring God to prove that He can, in fact, bring rain on command. It is only after this challenge, which Raba issues after initial attempts at prayer fail does God grant his prayer for the rain to fall out of season. The Jews still need help – only by chance or appealing directly to God do they successfully prove themselves.

These passages demonstrate that the rabbis recognized that the Sasanian kings possessed significant authority and influence over the Jewish communities. The rabbis acknowledge this power by showing the need for the intervention of extraordinary forces on the Jews' behalf in these stories. However, while Shapur engages with the Ifra Hormizd character in these texts, he acts only as a sounding board or devil's advocate for her. The only evidence of Shapur acting explicitly as the King is in Niddah, where he attempts to punish Raba's ruling of corporal punishment. The Talmud does not focus on the literal person of Shapur II;

rather, his presence indicates the rabbis' recognition of the strength of the Sasanian government. This acknowledgement prompted the rabbis to depict the interference of outside forces as necessary to ensure that the rabbis retain the respect and goodwill of the Sasanian court.

This passage is also revealing in terms of the encounters between Jews and Zoroastrians under the Sasanians. The rabbis pray for rain in an attempt to show their power and virtue as being at least equal, if not superior to that of the Zoroastrians. The ability to bring rain on command is not only impressive in and of itself, but it also carried special significance within Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrians respected water as a sacred element, and sacrifices to water constituted a vital aspect of the *Yasna* ritual, a fundamental institution of Zoroastrianism and credited with the ability to bring rain.[38] The rabbis' choice to depict this confrontation in terms of the bringing of rain shows not only the Jews' knowledge of Zoroastrian beliefs and practices, but also the rabbis' view of the Jews' status within these predominantly Zoroastrian power and social structures. The fact that Raba in the story successfully begs God to send rain shows that the rabbis believed they could meet the Zoroastrians on their own terms. The rabbis' careful incorporation of Ifra Horzmid and Shapur as well as the supernatural elements in their story of the Sasanians vs. the rabbis demonstrates the importance of the scholars maintaining

[38] Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians, Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 4-6.

their connections to the Sasanian court, which the rabbis clearly endeavored to preserve.

These Talmudic stories featuring Ifra Hormizd give insight into the relationship between the Babylonian rabbis and the Sasanian government. As an inactive character, her inclusion in these texts provides an indication of the nature of this relationship from both the Jewish as well as the Sasanian perspective, as the Talmud primarily depicts her as a patron and supporter of the Jewish scholars. In her more dynamic appearances, Ifra Hormizd represents those in the Sasanian aristocracy who also contributed to the perpetuation of the relationship and encouraged Jewish participation in Sasanian social networks. The rabbis' responses to Ifra Hormizd show that they continued to engage in debate and discussion concerning their association with the Sasanian court. These texts reveal not only that the Sasanian government played an ongoing role as benefactors of the Jewish scholars, but also that the rabbis actively cultivated this relationship.

## CHAPTER TWO:

## REDEFINING SASANIAN VIOLENCE AGAINST THE JEWS

In approaching the history of the Jewish communities living in the Sasanian empire, one must address the ways in which the Babylonian Jews perceived and interacted with the Sasanian government. Because of the strong ties between the Sasanian monarchy and Zoroastrianism, this discussion must also consider the role of the Zoroastrian priesthood. Most scholars tend to present this period as a time of ongoing or periodic violence and persecution for the Jews at the hands of the "Persian oppressors"[39] – that is, the Sasanian kings and their Zoroastrian priests. Consequently, this interpretation casts Zoroastrianism as a close-minded, overzealous, and brutal religion that refused to co-exist with other faiths. However, upon a closer examination of the sources cited in support of these views, these representations come to appear exaggerated, even misleading. A re-evaluation of the evidence shows that the Jews did not experience constant hostility from the Sasanians, and thus the descriptions of Zoroastrian fanaticism are both unreasonable and untrue. Rather, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the sources indicate that the Sasanian

[39] Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 60.

court actually maintained an active, often positive relationship with members of the Babylonian Jewish communities.

This misleading picture of life for the Jews in the Sasanian empire as one of successive periods of persecution often results from scholars reaching conclusions based on the literal interpretation of various texts. This is evident in the discussion of the disparity between Jewish and Zoroastrian religious principles, particularly in regard to concepts of purity. Jacob Neusner blames these differences, as well as Zoroastrian dominance as an explanation for his reading of the sources, which concludes that the Sasanian presence in Babylonian Jewish life was not only negative but also violent.[40] According to Neusner and others, these religious distinctions lead Zoroastrians to disrupt Jewish rituals and demand adherence to Zoroastrian principles.[41] Neusner concludes that religious differences resulted in actual incidents of brutality, rather than simply literary accounts of conflict between Jews and Zoroastrians.

A Talmudic text often used in defense of this point of view comes from Yebamoth:

> They issued three decrees as a punishment for three [transgressions]: they decreed against [ritually prepared] meat, because the priestly gifts [were neglected]. They decreed against the use of baths, because ritual bathing [was not observed]. They exhumed the dead, because rejoicings were held on the days of their festivals as it is said, Then shall the hand of the Lord be against you, and against your

[40] Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia: II. The Early Sasanian Period* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966), 35-37.
[41] Michael G. Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 314.

> fathers, and Rabbah b. Samuel said that that referred to the exhumation of the dead, for the Master said, 'For the sins of the living the dead are exhumed.'[42]

This particular passage supposedly serves as proof that Zoroastrian Sasanian rulers passed edicts forbidding various Jewish rituals that offended Zoroastrian principles. The decrees do appear to correspond with Zoroastrian ideas about purity, particularly in regard to their treatment of the dead (Zoroastrians, believing that burial defiled the earth exposed their dead). However, this one passage cannot define the entire Sasanian period, in part because of the many uncertainties that still surround it. Richard Kalmin has argued that the text does not make clear exactly who issued the orders or why, what these mandates actually entailed, or if the rabbis actually composed this passage as one cohesive unit.[43] This issue of whether or not the rabbis wrote the text as a unified whole plays a vital role in the interpretation of this as well as other Talmudic excerpts. Some argue that they did not, and that later rabbis added to the story for reasons of their own.[44] If these stories are the result of the work of far-removed redactors, who potentially not only combined but also added or removed selections it would not be possible to use these texts as "proof" for the brutal Sasanian treatment of the Jewish populations.

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[42] b. Yebam. 63b.
[43] Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 132.
[44] Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 135.

The inability to definitively place a story in a particular time or place means that far too many uncertainties remain for it to serve as convincing evidence of systematic persecution. Furthermore, no indication exists elsewhere that the Sasanians ever officially prohibited the practices described, or made any particular effort to exhume graves. It is also worth considering, as Kalmin notes, that the rabbis did not treat the supposed passing of these decrees as some kind of catastrophe.[45] If the Sasanians truly took this type of persecutory action, one might expect the rabbis to preserve some record of the Jews reacting to or commenting on this event, which would surely provoke strong feelings among the Jewish communities. The fact that there is no evidence of such a response remains may also support the notion that while this text at first seems to play into this characterization of Sasanian persecution, it is by no means conclusive proof of such tendencies and shows the dangers of accepting these stories at face value.

Disregarding the issues that arise as a result of this literal system of interpretation, this portrait of constant Sasanian harassment of the Jews falls apart in light of other texts examined in the same way – that is, at face value. Two other stories from the Babylonian Talmud show the disparities that can occur:

> Thus Mar Judah and Bati b. Tobi were sitting with King Shapur and a citron was set before them. [The king] cut a slice and ate it, and then cut a slice and handed it to Bati b. Tobi. After that he stuck [the knife] ten times in the ground,

[45] Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 136.

> cut a slice [of the citron] and handed it to Mar Judah. Bati b. Tobi said to [the king[, 'Am I not an Israelite!' He replied, 'Of him I am certain that he is observant [of Jewish law] but not of you.'[46]

The other passage states "that King Shapur said to Samuel, 'May [ill] befall me if I have ever slain a Jew!'".[47] Accepting these passages at their word implies that, in contrast to the image presented by the original text describing the three decrees, the Sasanian king Shapur I (r. 241-272) maintained a familiar, positive relationship with members of the Jewish community. This disparity clearly shows that ambiguity with respect to the Jews' status in the Sasanian empire exists even within the Talmud, which does not provide a clear answer to these questions. The extravagant, hyperbolic statements are almost certainly others' creations, rather than actual transcriptions of Shapur's words. However, confronted with these texts and using the same methods of passing judgment on this period, it appears as if Shapur was not only on friendly terms with several high-ranking Jews, but also knowledgeable and respectful of Jewish law. This image is quite different from that of persecution and violence. However, at the surface these texts do not necessarily prove that some Jews enjoyed intimate personal relationships with the Sasanian kings, just as the earlier stories of oppression are not conclusive evidence of the pervasiveness of the described violent phenomena. The literal approach, therefore, does not result in decisive answers for either point of view, and

[46] b. 'Abod. Zar. 76b.
[47] b. Mo'ed Qat. 26a.

conclusions regarding persecution derived in this way require careful re-examination.

Actually deconstructing previously cited "evidence" exhibits the unlikelihood that the Babylonian Jewish communities experienced constant or frequent persecution or violence because of the Sasanian government or its Zoroastrian enthusiasts. One common "proof" text featuring a Sasanian king occurs in "The Annals of al-Isfahani":

> [Fayruz, r. 457-484 CE] ordered half the Jewish population of Isfahan to be put to death and their children to be sent as slaves to the fire-temple of Surush Adhran in the village of Harwan, as they had flayed the skin from the backs of two Magian doctors, joined the two skins and used them for tanning.[48]

At first glance, this text appears to provide excellent support for the attempt to prove that the Jewish communities of Iran suffered under the Sasanians – it includes mass murder, captured and enslaved children, and even vicious, anti-Jewish rhetoric. Scholars accept as fact the harsh, anti-Jewish actions of Fayruz as al-Isfahani describes,[49] specifically referring to Fayruz' "anti-Jewish persecutions;"[50] however, basing the entire Jewish experience of Sasanian rule on one tenth-century account presents a variety of methodological problems. al-Isfahani supplies no other information regarding this event, and many elements of this account appear to be merely rhetorical rather than historical, specifically the

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[48] Hamzah al-Isfahani, *The Annals of Hamzah al-Isfahani*, trans. 'Umar Muhammad Daudpota (Bombay: K.R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1932), 102.
[49] Elman, "Middle Persian Culture," 166.
[50] Robert Brody, "Judaism in the Sasanian Empire: A Case Study in Religious Coexistence," *Irano-Judaica* II, (1990): 52-62, 61.

description of putting "half the Jewish population" to death and the accusation of the joining and tanning of Magian skins.

Even if we were to accept this account as historically accurate, it does not allow for any definitive conclusions about Sasanian persecution of the Jews. Indeed, this particular text provides a reason for the Sasanian king Fayruz's violence towards the Jews – the supposed mistreatment of the "two Magian doctors." The text does not reveal whether or not this was supposed to be an excuse for the Sasanians, or a reference to a real offense that the Jews actually committed against Zoroastrians. While the order to kill half the population sounds extreme, it is important to keep in mind that in general, medieval sources are unreliable as far as numbers – most likely this text's account of half the population suffered, like many others from the exaggeration or invention of the author for the sake of the story. It is unlikely that any ruler, regardless of the supposed offense, would even attempt to execute an entire half of a population – clearly, the description of the murder of half the population speaks of the desire for dramatic effect, rather than historical accuracy. There is no way to know if anyone actually died at all – or if they did, how many were actually killed or if there were actually any Jews among them. Even accepting that at least some of the population of Isfahan was murdered, someone passing on this story evidently felt the need to provide or include some sort of rationale behind this massacre – it was not sufficient for the Sasanians to murder Jews just for being Jews.

Returning to the Talmud, Neusner cites a section from Yoma to support his interpretation of Sasanian violence directed against the Jews:

> Rabbah b. Bar Hana…said: Rome is designed to fall into the hands of Persia…If in the case of the first Sanctuary, which the sons of Shem [Solomon] built and the Chaldeans destroyed, the Chaldeans fell into the hands of the Persians, then how much more should this b so with the second Sanctuary, which the Persians built and the Romans destroyed, that the Romans should fall into the hands of the Persians. Rab said: Persia will fall into the hands of Rome. Thereupon R. Kahana and R. Assi asked of Rab: [Shall] the builders fall into the hands of the destroyers? – He said to them: Yes, it is the decree of the king. Others say: He replied to them: They too are guilty for they destroyed the synagogues. It has also been taught in accord with the above, Persia will fall into the hands of Rome, first because they destroyed the synagogues, and then because it is the King's decree that the builders fall into the hands of the destroyers.[51]

This text discussing the rationalizations for the eventual ends of the great empires shows the rabbis casting the Romans as simply destroyers, and the Persians as both builders and destroyers – specifically as destroyers of synagogues. The passage explicitly states that the Persians caused the destruction of synagogues; however, this one Talmudic excerpt does not prove that this in fact occurred. Even if the synagogues were damaged or demolished, this fact still does not suffice as evidence of persecution. The synagogues may have suffered as a result of the conquests of the Sasanians or the frequent clashes between Rome and Iran, and not because they were particularly Jewish institutions. The label of the Persians as "builders" comes from the Book of Ezra, which opens with Cyrus, the

[51] b. Yoma 10a.

Achaemenid king's command to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem,[52] which the Romans would later destroy in the first century CE. None of this, however, provides any information regarding the activities of the Sasanians, and the wording of this text is far too vague to act as an appropriate source for insight into Sasanian treatment of Babylonian Jewish communities.

*The Book of Tradition (Sefer ha-Qabbalah)*, written by 12th century scholar Abraham ibn Daud shows similar ambiguity in its discussions of Sasanian hostilities towards the Jews:

> In the year of Rabbah Tosefa'ah's death, the Persian Empire decreed frightful persecutions against the Jews. [This was at the time] when the second calamity of the Persians was at hand. [This was "the second calamity"] for the Persians who had a monarchic government twice [in their history], and so too the Romans.[53]

Ibn Daud also writes:

> that the Persian king seized three Jewish notables: Amemar bar Mar Yanqa bar Mar Zutra, the colleague of R. Ashi, R. Mesharshia, and the exilarch, whose name was Huna Mar, and put them to death. He also seized Jewish youths and compelled them to leave the fold, in Tebet, 4234.[54]

He later blames the temporary closing of the academies on "the hostility of the Persian kings and their persecutions."[55] None of these passages, however, constitute sufficient proof of intentional Sasanian persecution

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[52] Ezra 1:2.
[53] Abraham Ibn Daud, *A Critical Edition with a Translation and Notes of the Book of Tradition (Sefer ha-Qabbalah)*, trans. Gerson D. Cohen (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 36.
[54] Ibn Daud, *Book of Tradition*, 41-42.
[55] Ibn Daud, *Book of Tradition*, 44.

targeted towards the Jews. The first text provides almost no detail at all – only an approximate date as "the year of Rabbah Tosefa'ah's death" and no specifics as to who within the Persian empire supposedly gave these orders or even what actions the Persians supposedly took against the Jews. Ibn Daud himself points out that the so-called "frightful persecutions" occurred at a time of "calamity" for the Persians. The "persecutions against the Jews" were not necessarily aimed specifically at the Jews because of their Jewish identity. Under politically unstable conditions, the Sasanians were more likely to lash out at groups they felt were not loyal enough, or even communities or individuals that simply committed a minor infraction, thus adding to the general unrest. Jews, or perhaps Jews in addition to other minority groups may have suffered violence because they became scapegoats, or the victims of the paranoia of the King of Kings – or potentially the supported the losing side of some conflict or rebellion against the Sasanian government.

While the second text does include both names and dates, it too, along with the last reference fails to include any reasons or details that attempt to explain the accusations that a Sasanian king killed three Jewish "notables" or that any of the kings or their governments acted in a hostile and persecutory manner. Three high-ranking Jews may have caught the attention of a Sasanian king and suffered execution as an example to others, or perhaps died as a result of committing a real offense deemed worthy of capital punishment. Writing hundreds of years after these

events supposedly occurred, Ibn Daud may have had other motivations for writing these passages or interpreting his own sources in such a way – exaggerating pain and suffering for dramatic effect, for example.

Later evidence exists for Jewish involvement in rebellions against the government, specifically Bahram Chobin's revolt against Hormizd IV and Khosrow II in the sixth century CE, described in a story in which:

> [Mebodes, one of Khosrow's commanders] condemned to death and killed with the sword many Jews who had been closely involved in Baram's revolution. For the support which Baram had received from the Jews for his usurpation had not been inconsiderable…So Mebodes subdued these and handed them over to a variety of deaths.[56]

Clearly, taking sides in any political conflict could easily result in violence directed by a Sasanian monarch towards a Jewish community. In this case, Khosrow's commander killed, or supposedly killed Jews in large numbers as a result of their support of Bahram. The author specifies that the Jewish collaboration in Bahram's campaign "had not been inconsiderable." This accusation of Jewish involvement in Bahram's rebellion carries significant implications for the place of the Jews within the Sasanian political sphere.

Challenges to the Sasanian government occurred with some frequency throughout its history; however, this particular rebellion was the first of its kind and represented a serious threat to the dynasty. While most rebels attempted to legitimate their claim to the throne by fitting themselves into the Sasanian lineage, Bahram was the first to assert his

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[56] Theopylact Simocatta, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta*, trans. Michael and Mary Whitby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 141-142.

right to the crown based on Parthian descent.[57] Not only did Bahram call the legitimacy of the entire Sasanian dynasty into question, but he also reinforced his claim through military victory. By successfully defeating the Sasanian king, Bahram showed that he received divine favor, which confirmed his right as a descendant of the Parthian dynasty to rule through his triumph over the Sasanians. Participation in such a revolt, which nearly put an end to the Sasanian dynasty,[58] was a matter of serious politics and would be expected to result in severe consequences following Bahram's eventual defeat and the return of the crown to the Sasanians. Regardless of whether or not this incident occurred, or if it did, to what extent (if any) the Jews actually supported Bahram's rebellion, this example of Jewish support of the losing side of political conflict likely parallels other instances of violence perpetrated against Jewish communities by the Sasanians.

Scholars tend to place much of the blame for the supposed persecutions of the Sasanians on Zoroastrianism, and the strong ties it had to the Sasanian government. High-ranking officials in the Zoroastrian priesthood and members of the Sasanian aristocracy were often one and the same, with the King of Kings, as the ally of Ahura Mazda on earth at the top of the aristocratic and religious hierarchy. Thus many scholars believe that fervent Zoroastrians took advantage of their positions and

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[57] Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 123.
[58] Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 129.

connections in order to viciously harass anyone participating in rituals they found offensive or contrary to their own Zoroastrian principles.[59] However, working with the idea that the Sasanians most likely did not habitually or gratuitously inflict violence and oppression upon their Jewish subjects also calls for a reevaluation of the depiction of the Zoroastrians as a fanatical, persecutory group.

Texts often cited as evidence for the Zoroastrians' aggressive mistreatment of non-Zoroastrians include the inscription of the Zoroastrian priest Kerdir, who boasted:

> Jews and Buddhists and Brahmans and Aramaic and Greek-speaking Christians and Baptisers and Manichaeans were assailed in the land. And images were overthrown, and the dens of demons were (thus) destroyed, and the places and abodes of the yazads [i.e. fire temples] were established...[60]

Kerdir claims to have targeted these non-Zoroastrian groups and destroyed anything associated with them in favor of the spread of Zoroastrianism. It is important to remember, however, that these examples do not necessarily provide a complete or accurate depiction of the activities or attitudes of the Zoroastrians. Even if Kerdir's statements reflect true events, they do not prove that the Sasanians persecuted the Jews – or any other group – based on Zoroastrian moral or ethical principles. While Zoroastrianism, like many religions, advocates for the destruction of evil (represented by the deity called Ahreman) in order to

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[59] Neusner, *History of the Jews*, 35-37.
[60] *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, ed. and trans. Mary Boyce (Totowa: Barnes and Noble Books, 1984), 112.

perfect the world (perfection/good in the form of the god Ahura Mazda), it does not seem to have had any inclination towards proselytizing or any particular enmity towards non-Zoroastrians. Upholding Zoroastrian principles represented an important part of Sasanian kingship. From the beginning, the kings of kings emphatically identified themselves as Mazda-worshipping;[61] however, it does not appear as if these ideals included or encouraged the persecution and harassment of non-Zoroastrians. While the Zoroastrian priesthood was tied so closely to the Sasanian aristocracy that many high-ranking figures from both classes were in fact the same individuals, this does not mean that the Sasanians made Zoroastrianism into a state religion.[62]

Nevertheless, Zoroastrians dominated the Sasanian aristocracy that ruled the empire, and thus the Zoroastrian aspect of Sasanian rule in relation to this question of Sasanian/Zoroastrian persecution of the Jews cannot be ignored. Shaul Shaked observes that the Zoroastrian priests and the Sasanian aristocracy viewed Zoroastrianism's role in the kingship differently, but both in terms of the famous declaration that "Religion and royalty are twins."[63] The kings of kings likely had their own political reasons to include members of other religions in Sasanian court life. A text from the Sasanian period called the *Testament of Ardashir* advocated

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[61] Shaul Shaked, "Religion in the late Sasanian Period: Eran, Aneran, and other Religious Designations," in *The Sasanian Era*, ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 103-117, 103.
[62] Shaked, "Religion," 104.
[63] Shaked, "Religion," 105.

keeping the various religious leaders close to the supervision of the court as a way of maintaining control over minority groups within the empire.[64] Thus, as part of their efforts to ensure social and political stability, far from calling for the exclusion and harassment of non-Zoroastrians, the rulers of Sasanian Iran used Zoroastrian principles to integrate non-Zoroastrians into the power structure of Sasanian rule. They utilized the particular vocabulary developed within Zoroastrianism to categorize non-Zoroastrians, and used these distinctions in order to include as well as exclude these "others."

Shaked explains some of the terms used to distinguish between followers of non-Iranian religions, *an-ērān*, followers of evil religions, *ag-dēnān*, and those guilty of mortal sin, *marg-arzānān*, as well as others. Zoroastrians evidently used these forms as they provided instruction on the correct treatment of a non-Zoroastrian by Zoroastrians, which varied according to the situation. They discuss a variety of contexts, from slavery to conversion to intermarriage.[65] All of this suggests that the Zoroastrians did not keep themselves isolated and respond to others with violence. Instead, they both acknowledged and accepted the presence of members of other faiths in their midst, to the extent that they created separate terminology for different types of non-Zoroastrians rather than adopting a general, all-inclusive identifier.

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[64] Shaked, "Religion," 104.
[65] Shaked, "Religion," 107.

Despite these divisions, however, Shaked notes that some of these terms, *an-ērān* in particular tended to be vague and imprecise and were more easily described by what they were not.[66] This combination of specificity and generalization allowed the Zoroastrians to either include or exclude non-Zoroastrians as the situation required. Evidence such as that pointing to members of different religions co-existing within individual families[67] demonstrates that very often the Zoroastrians easily incorporated non-Zoroastrians into their lives. Furthermore, several of the sources typically used as proof of Zoroastrian/Sasanian persecution of the Babylonian Jews actually demonstrate this tendency of the Sasanians to include, rather than persecute the Jews in the empire.

All of the stories of the so-called persecutions of the Jews at the hand of the Sasanians, while apparently contradicting this notion that the Jewish rabbis maintained an active, working relationship with the Sasanian kings, may actually support it. If the Jewish communities in Iran were not subject to harassment simply because of their Jewish identity, why did they occasionally experience this violence? In all likelihood, the Jews occasionally became the targets of Sasanian brutality not in spite but in fact because of the relationship they maintained with the aristocracy. If the Jews of Iran held no significant status or sustained few or no meaningful ties to the Sasanian court, there would be no point to spending valuable time and resources – namely, men and money – for the purpose

[66] Shaked, "Religion," 106.
[67] Shaked, "Religion," 109.

of fighting or killing an inconsequential group. Such treatment therefore required that the Jews specifically catch the attention of high-ranking members of the Sasanian court. The only way this was likely to happen is if the Jewish communities already had established ties among the aristocracy, such that if one or more Jews committed an offense of some sort, joined the wrong side in a rebellion, or seemed refused to cooperate in any way, the Sasanians would not only notice these infractions, but also act upon them.

The Talmud provides one example of how this may appear in the sources:

> when they informed Samuel that King Shapur had slain twelve thousand Jews at Caesarea-Mazaca, he did not [then] rend his clothes…For there, it was they [the Jews] that had brought it on themselves, as R. Ammi said, that the noise of the harp-strings about Caesarea-Mazaca burst the wall of Laodicea.[68]

The reference to the harp strings bursting the walls, according to footnotes, indicates that Jewish rebellion against the Persians caused the destruction of Laodicea. Here the Talmud provides a reason for wide-scale killing of the Jews by the Sasanian government, whether or not this incident ever actually occurred – the Jews sealed their fates by rebelling against the Sasanians. In this way the Sasanians both punished and endeavored to put a stop to insolent or rebellious behavior, as well as sending a message to other groups as a warning should another minority community – such as the Christians – consider acting in a similar way. As

[68] b. Mo'ed Qat. 26a.

discussed previously, this likely occurred with greater frequency during times of "calamity," as Ibn Daud specified,[69] as a result of both governments and the governed feeling increased stress and vulnerability.

Another passage cited earlier also calls for a second consideration:

> [The Persians] too are guilty for they destroyed the synagogues. It has also been taught in accord with the above, Persia will fall into the hands of Rome, first because they destroyed the synagogues, and then because it is the King's decree that the builders fall into the hands of the destroyers.[70]

This text falls within an apocalyptic discussion of the end of the world. Regardless of who built or destroyed anything or not, the construction of this story proves to be more revealing. The rabbis depict Rome as destroyers and Persia as both destroyers and builders, yet they say it is the Romans who will triumph over the Persians. But if the Romans only destroyed, and the Persians built as well as destroyed, why did the rabbis designate the Persians as the losing side? One could argue that the destruction caused by the Persians was more significant – whether in quality or quantity – than that of the Romans. However, because the references to building and destroying are meant to invoke the Book of Ezra and the Second Temple, this seems unlikely. The Roman destruction of the Second Temple was the motivation behind major Jewish flight to Babylonia. This move constituted a traumatic event in Jewish history, despite the growth and development the Jewish communities in

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[69] Ibn Daud, *Book of Tradition*, 36.
[70] b. Yoma 10a.

Babylonia experienced throughout the centuries. Thus, if all of the previously discussed tales of violence truly occurred in one form or another, these episodes actually support the view that members of the Jewish communities maintained active, working relationships with the Sasanian aristocracy.

Further evidence of Jews and Zoroastrians interacting on non-violent terms supports this idea that room for maneuverability and acceptance of non-Zoroastrian groups such as the Jews existed within the Sasanian/Zoroastrian system of government. One Middle Persian Zoroastrian text, *A Catalogue of the Provincial Capitals of Ērānshahr,* written in the eighth century specifically identifies Jews occupying positions of higher status in the Sasanian aristocracy. It refers to "Shosin-dukht (Shushan), the wife of Yazdkert…the daughter of the [exilarch], the king of the Jews."[71] This reference to the exilarch's daughter as the wife of Yazdkert, the king of kings, acts as a vital component in the consideration of the mechanics of the Zoroastrian-Sasanian government relevant to the question of persecution. Because the divine lineage of the Sasanian dynasty played such an important role in Sasanian kingship, the king of kings had to choose a wife carefully. A wife held an important place not only due to her marital status as spouse of the king of kings, but also because she bore the king's children and heirs.

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[71] J. Markwart, *A Catalogue of the Provincial Capitals of Ērānshahr: Pahlavi Text, Version and Commentary*, ed. G. Messina (Rom: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1931), 19.

Children, as the ideal way of continuing and preserving a lineage, were extremely valued within Zoroastrianism, to the extent that the Zoroastrians developed a number of unusual marital practices with the aim of having as many children as possible. Thus the implication that the daughter of a Jew – albeit a high-ranking Jew, at least within the Sasanian court – could be the wife of the King and ideally the mother of his children, who carried on the King's divine lineage indicates that Zoroastrians did not automatically target non-Zoroastrians simply due to the different religious identities. In fact, it instead represents an example of the extent to which Zoroastrianism allowed the inclusion of non-Zoroastrians, and the various ways – such as marriage or government office – the Sasanians incorporated non-Zoroastrians into the aristocracy and power structure of the government.

Although the work is Zoroastrian in origin, *Provincial Capitals* makes no attempt to hide, explain, or criticize the fact that Yazdkert married a Jew's daughter – the text merely uses Shosin-dukht's relation to the exilarch as an identifier. This apparent indifference suggests that while most likely such marriages did not happen often, it was not a cause for concern, either within Zoroastrianism or the wider Sasanian society as a whole, as no indication exists within this text that the marriage caused any particular public outcry or controversy. Since the treatise implies that this marriage occurred without any objection worth recording, it is unlikely

that the Zoroastrians completely opposed any and all non-Zoroastrians or desired their destruction.

Having established that constant conflict was not the nature of the relationship between the Jewish communities and the Sasanian rulers, the discussion turns to the redefinition of the relationship – if any – that existed between these two groups. Some scholars have argued for the rabbinical community as an isolated, elite group concerned with its own affairs and little else, rarely interacting with anyone outside of their own circle.[72] However, it seems that this was also not the case – even non-Talmudic texts indicate that the rabbis maintained an active and generally positive relationship with the Sasanian kings.

Returning to *Provincial Capitals*, and the reference to "Shosin-dukht (Shushan), the wife of Yazdkert…the daughter of the Resh-gaultak, the king of the Jews,"[73] the allusion to the "Resh-gaultak," or the exilarch as "the king of the Jews" stands out. While the specifics of the exilarchs' role and status remain unclear, this text seems to indicate that at least within the Sasanian court, the exilarch was a figure of some importance. The "king of the Jews" label suggests that, even if only for the Sasanians and not within the Jewish community, the exilarch represented Jewish authority, and the Sasanians recognized his influence. This recognition occurs not only by the naming of the exilarch as "the king of the Jews" – the notion of kingship, of course, denoting authority and importance,

[72] Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 121.
[73] Markwart, *Provincial Capitals*, 19.

particularly within a culture that placed great significance on its kings – but also by permitting the marriage of the exilarch's daughter to the Sasanian king, as discussed previously. Thus this text implies that the Sasanians maintained a degree of respect and familiarity with the Jewish community, rather than hatred or separation.

*The Book of Tradition* also suggests that a non-violent relationship existed between the Sasanian kings and the Babylonian Jews. Ibn Daud writes:

> in the days of Ardashir, who is Ahasuerus, they were friendly to the Jews, and so too in the days of King Shahpuhr…[The Persians] had many other emperors who were friendly to the Jews, until the Muslim empire attained power and destroyed them from the earth. Before this, however, the Almighty, blessed be He, had turned their heart to hate His people.[74]

This text implies that, from the early days of their rule, the Persian kings remained on good terms with the Jews. By invoking Ahasuerus, a biblical figure who makes several appearances in the *Ketuvim*, and who may represent one of the Achaemenid kings,[75] Ibn Daud implies the existence of a long tradition of good relations between the Persians and Jews. Ibn Daud wrote *The Book of Tradition* in the 12th century, several hundred years after the fall of the Sasanian empire. Touraj Daryaee argues that while the Sasanians themselves did not attempt to present themselves as successors to the Achaemenids, the Jewish tradition, among others, did preserve this

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[74] Ibn Daud, *Book of Tradition*, 40-41.
[75] W.S. McCullough, "Ahasuerus," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, last updated July 28, 2011, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ahasureus.

memory of the Achaemenid dynasty in connection to the Sasanians – that is, they saw the Sasanians as a continuation of the Achaemenids.[76] Looking back on this Sasanian history and referencing a Sasanian king in connection to a an Achaemenid king known in Jewish tradition as one who honored and protected the Jews suggests that the Sasanians did in fact maintain their positive relationships with the Babylonian Jews.

Regardless of whether or not the Sasanians saw themselves as carriers of these traditions, from the Jewish perspective, the Sasanians did fit themselves and their connections to the Jews into the models of the Achaemenids. In fact, Daryaee notes that any memory the Sasanians had of the Achaemenids may have come directly from the Jews.[77] Passing on these paradigms required close contact between the two groups, and thus Ibn Daud's reference to Ahasuerus reveals the ways in which the Jews thought about the Sasanian empire in relation to themselves and their history, and more about the type as well as the consequences of the relationship between the Sasanians and their Jewish subjects. Significantly, not until the end of the time of the Muslim conquests do the Persians suddenly become hostile – as discussed earlier, this was a time of great instability for Iran which likely explains an increase in violence within the empire as the Muslims invaded. Therefore this part of the text does not contradict the passages describing Sasanians ordering the deaths

[76] Touraj Daryaee, "The Construction of the Past in Late Antique Persia," *Historia: Zeitschrift fur Alte Geschichte* 55, no. 4 (2006): 493-503, 502.
[77] Daryaee, "Construction of the Past," 498.

of Jews, but supports the idea that such brutality was in fact not the common experience throughout the Sasanian period.

Within the Talmud itself, several passages allude to a relationship between Shapur I and several high-ranking Jewish figures. One of these is the previously cited story from Avodah Zarah:

> Mar Judah and Bati b. Tobi were sitting with King Shapur and a citron was set before them. [The king] cut a slice and ate it, and then cut a slice and handed it to Bati b. Tobi. After that he stuck [the knife] ten times in the ground, cut a slice [of the citron] and handed it to Mar Judah. Bati b. Tobi said to[the king], 'Am I not an Israelite!' He replied, 'Of him I am certain that he is observant [of Jewish law] but not of you.'[78]

This text appears at the end of a discussion regarding cleanliness. While it seems unlikely that this exact event occurred, it carries implications worth considering. The point about the appropriately cleaned knife in Jewish law fits with the rest of the tractate, but King Shapur plays no special role except as the agent of this ritual cleaning, so why include him? Some scholars note that the rabbis tended to exaggerate their ties to or interactions with the Sasanian kings to improve their own image,[79] and while there may be an element of that here, it does not explain everything.

From the text, it appears as if Shapur possessed some knowledge of Jewish law and respected it as well. According to the story, he not only knew to purify the knife, but also recognized that perhaps one of these men obeyed Jewish law and the other did not. In truth, Shapur may not have known such minutiae of Jewish law, he probably demonstrated some

[78] b. 'Abod. Zar. 76b.
[79] Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 143.

awareness and reverence for it. If he did not, his presence in this story would be a distraction, as he would attract attention, acting unusually familiar with these issues. The rabbis could easily replace Shapur's character here with another rabbi – therefore they must have specifically included him in the story for a reason. It may be that this passage connected in some way to the worries or issues the scholars had over the different views of purity held by the Jews and the newly empowered Zoroastrians. Shapur's actions in this story may have functioned as a kind of reassurance that the Sasanians remained on good terms with high-ranking Jews and respected Jewish customs.

Another Talmudic passage supporting this paradigm also comes from Avodah Zarah, which in large part discusses laws for Jews living among non-Jews:

> Said R. Adda b. Ahabah: One should not sell them bars of iron. Why? – Because they may hammer weapons out of them. If so, spades and pick-axes too [should be forbidden]! – Said R. Zebid: We mean [bars of] Indian iron. Why then do we sell it now? – Said R. Ashi: [We sell it] to the Persians who protect us.[80]

Clearly questions regarded of the proper use and sale of iron existed to some extent, even if only as the subject of theoretical, scholarly debate. While the reference to the Persians occurs only in one sentence, it stands out because the rabbis here make an exception for the Persians – the only exception given. More importantly, the rabbis supply an explanation for this exemption – that the Persians protect them. The passage does not

[80] b. 'Abod. Zar. 16a.

specify what type of protection the Jews receive, but it implies that the rabbis felt secure under Sasanian rule. “Protect” also implies action on the part of the Sasanians, as if they actively promised or in fact provided for the safety of the Jewish community, whatever “safety” might entail. Further analysis of this text may be useful; however, even a brief discussion reveals that the Sasanian government evidently acted in such a way to make the rabbis feel protected rather than threatened, which again suggests that the Sasanians sustained a generally positive relationship with the Babylonian rabbis.

Re-examining the evidence cited as validation of the traditional view of the constant brutality and persecution Babylonian Jews supposedly suffered under Sasanian rule reveals the methodological and interpretative issues present in this debate. It is not sufficient to accept the sources at face value. By delving deeper into these texts, it becomes clear that no conclusive proof exists to show that the Sasanian rulers did not habitually harass their Jewish subjects, or that Zoroastrianism supported or encouraged violence against non-Zoroastrians. In fact, the sources indicate that the Sasanian government sustained some type of established, non-violent interactions with various Babylonian Jews.

## CHAPTER THREE:

## JEWS AND ZOROASTRIANS: STRATEGIES OF INCLUSION

Life for the Jews in the Sasanian empire was not, as we have discussed in previous chapters, an experience of constant government-ordered violence. Even without this violence, many scholars believe that the Jews suffered continual harassment from the Zoroastrians due to their religious differences, most notably as a result of the Zoroastrian reverence for fire and the purity of earth and water. The Zoroastrians, however, had no interest in either converting the Jews or preventing them from their traditional religious practices, as we aim to show in this chapter. At most, the Zoroastrians were interested in securing the proper treatment of the fundamentals of their own religion. The Babylonian Talmud contains many references to Jews interacting with Zoroastrians in a variety of ways – working together, debating religious ideas, and even participating in Zoroastrian religious institutions. This Talmudic evidence suggests that the Jews did consider these questions of intervention, and despite making some concessions for Zoroastrian beliefs, were able to not only continue their own traditions but also work with Zoroastrians and within this predominantly Zoroastrian society.

Fire, a necessity in everyday life in the Sasanian period as well as the object of Zoroastrian reverence, represented a potential source of conflict between Jews and Zoroastrians. Scholars often blame the Zoroastrian veneration of fire as an explanation for the supposed persecutions of the Jews by Zoroastrians. However, such incidents were often motivated by the Zoroastrians' desire to protect the sacred element, rather than a wish to punish, restrict, or otherwise make life difficult for the Jews. A frequently cited passage from Gittin reveals evidence of the Babylonian rabbis discussing these very issues. The rabbis set out to determine a specific definition for the idea of persecution as well as the appropriate response to such actions:

> Raba said: When they [sc. the persecutors] demand it for their personal pleasure. it is different. For otherwise, how dare we yield to them' [sc. the Parsees or fire worshippers] our braziers [or fire bellows] and coal shovels? But their personal pleasure is different; so here too [in Esther's case]. This [answer] concurs with Raba's view expressed elsewhere. For Raba said: If a Gentile said to a Jew. 'Cut grass on the Sabbath for the cattle, and if not I will slay thee', he must rather be killed than cut it; 'Cut it and throw it into the river, he should be slain than cut it. Why so? – Because his intention is to force him to violate his religion.[81]

This text clearly shows the rabbis making the distinction between persecution – which requires the intent of the individual to force a Jew to break Jewish law – and actions motivated by "their personal pleasure." If actual persecution is the goal, Raba rules that the Jews must not violate Jewish law, but otherwise accommodation is acceptable. It is significant

[81] b. Sanh. 74b.

not only that the rabbis make this particular differentiation, but also how they describe and rule on each definition. Raba illustrates persecution by explaining that "if a Gentile" attempts to pressure a Jew into violating the Sabbath, the Jew should choose death instead. This apparently random case was most likely not based in reality, as the use of the word "if" rather than "when" implies. This is not a situation that the Jews experience, merely a hypothetical circumstance, given to make it clear when the Jews should not capitulate to persecution.

In contrast, the example given for accommodating for personal pleasure is the yielding of "our braziers…and coal shovels" to the Zoroastrians. In this case, Raba references true events – he asks, "how dare we yield to them" – mentioning a current practice rather than using the hypothetical "if." Furthermore, this yielding of braziers specifically indicates Zoroastrians, while the generic term "Gentile" could mean any non-Jew. The Jews' distinction of these concepts is significant – it marks Zoroastrians in particular as ones whom the Jews can accommodate according to the idea of the motivation of personal pleasure and does not single out any particular group as persecutors of the Jews. While the text is not completely clear in regards to what the Jews give to the Zoroastrians, Robert Brody suggests that this may represent an occasional required "donation" of sorts of embers or coals to Zoroastrians for the fire-temples, a theory supported by a description of such practices in a Geonic responsum from the ninth century as well as the observations of trades of

this type even in the 20th century.[82] Brody concludes that the sacredness of fire, rather than any ill will towards the Jews motivated the Zoroastrians' behavior in such cases.[83]

The difference between these concepts helps to clarify another section of the Talmud where the Zoroastrian reverence for fire appears to interfere with the Jews:

> a Gueber [Zoroastrian] came in and took away their lamp; whereupon Rabbah b. Bar Hanah ejaculated: 'O All Merciful One! either in Thy shadow or in the shadow of the son of Esau!' This is as much as to say, [is it not,] that the Romans are better than the Persians? how does this square with what R. Hiyyah taught: 'What is the point of the verse, God understood her way and he knew her place? It means that the Holy One, blessed be He, knew that Israel would not be able to endure the persecution of the Romans, so he drove them to Babylon'? – there is no contradiction. One dictum refers to the period before the Guebers came to Babylon, the other to the period subsequent to their coming.[84]

Modern scholars often see the "Gueber" stealing a lamp as a clear sign of Zoroastrians taking offense by the Jewish use of fire, as Zoroastrians venerated fire as a sacred element. The rabbis' reaction appears to support this – R. Hanah immediately expresses a preference for Roman rule and argues that Persia only provided a safe haven for the Jews before the coming of the Zoroastrians, implying that after the arrival of these "Guebers" Babylonia became worse than Rome. Thus from this perspective, reading the text as a whole, the passage suggests that

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[82] Robert Brody, "Zoroastrian Themes in Geonic Responsa," *Irano-Judaica* IV (1999): 179-186, 182-184.
[83] Brody, "Judaism," 56-58.
[84] b. Git. 16b-17a.

Zoroastrians frequently harassed the Jews as a result of what the Zoroastrians viewed as a misuse of fire, so much so that the rabbis looked to Rome as a better alternative.

However, this exclamation of a desire for Roman, rather than Persian rule in response to the removal of a lamp may strike the reader as extreme, and recent scholarship demonstrates other ways to interpret this text. Richard Kalmin remarks that another possible interpretation of this passage shows R. Hanah's reaction as an expression of irritation, rather than a comment on the entire Jewish experience in Babylonia, particularly when comparing this story to depictions of Roman treatment of the Jews elsewhere in the Talmud.[85] Brody's suggestion regarding the nature of this event as an example of required donations to the Zoroastrians and their fire temples fits with Kalmin's claim that this text does not prove that the Zoroastrians made life unbearable for the Babylonian Jews. Furthermore, Kalmin notes that the sections of the text after R. Hanah's exclamation appear to be the work of the later anonymous editors. As such, these later scholars may have had their own motivations for arranging the story as it now appears in the Talmud, which possibly, but not necessarily reflected conditions in their own time.[86] Viewed within this framework, R. Hanah's reaction may simply be, as Kalmin theorizes, a voicing of passing irritation, with the last sections incorporated into the story by anonymous editors to suit their own purposes.

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[85] Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 131.
[86] Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 130-131.

In this case, it seems that while some Zoroastrians may have on occasion come into conflict with the Jews over religious matters, the Jews hardly looked to Rome as a preferable alternative. This leaves the question of why the editors chose to include the last sections on Persia vs. Rome. These scholars worked later in this period, near or at the end of Sasanian rule – a time of some disorder and instability within the Sasanian empire. The last century of Sasanian rule saw a series of military campaigns, primarily against Rome that at first found success but later cost the Sasanians significant captured territories in the west. These wars occurred under a succession of kings that, unable to secure their own kingships were deposed or assassinated by the various rebellions instigated by rival claimants to the throne.[87] As noted earlier, these times of stress lead to increased violence and unrest, which the Jews were not immune from – potentially prompting the rabbis to consider such comparisons, and how their situation under the Sasanians differed from that of the Jews under the Romans. Given the success of the Roman retaliation to Sasanian invasions in the early part of the seventh century,[88] the rabbis may have been responding to an increasingly tense and uncertain atmosphere.

Further evidence of the Jews adjusting their behavior to account for the Zoroastrian reverence for fire exists elsewhere in the Talmud. Discussing the appropriate placement for lamps, Rav asked:

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[87] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 31-36.
[88] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 33.

> Is it permitted to move the Hanukkah lamp on account of the Guebres on the Sabbath? and [Rav] answered them, It is well. –A time of emergency is different. For R. Kahana and R. Ashi asked Rav: Is that the law? wherat he answered them, R. Simeon is sufficient to be relied upon in an emergency.[89]

This suggests that the Jews modified their practices concerning the Hanukkah lamps in response to Zoroastrian concerns about the use of fire. Significantly, the text does not say that the Jews had to eradicate the lamps – merely to move them, presumably out of sight of the Zoroastrians. The "emergency" Rav refers to does not prove violence on the part of the Zoroastrians – rather, it merely indicates the presence, as opposed to the absence of the Zoroastrians, which would necessitate the preemptory action of moving the Hanukkah lamp. In this way the Jews could observe the Hanukkah rituals while not offending Zoroastrians. While this example only speaks of Hanukkah, it is likely that the same applied in other situations where the Jews lit lamps or candles for religious purposes. The Jews were clearly able to maintain the essence of their religious traditions while not upsetting their Zoroastrian neighbors.

The Zoroastrian reverence for fire did not always restrict the Jews – in some cases, the Jews could use it to their advantage. According to Raba:

> A Rabbinical scholar may assert, 'I am a servant of fire, and will not pay poll-tax'…it is [only] said in order to drive away a lion. R. Ashi owned a forest, which he sold to a fire-temple. Said Rabina to R. Ashi: But there is [the injunction]. Thou shalt not put a tumbling-block before the blind!' – He replied: Most wood is used for [ordinary] heating. [90]

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[89] b. Shab. 45a
[90] b. Ned. 62b.

This claim is often discussed in regards to the intended meaning of "servant of fire," which Isaiah Gafni claims to be an intentional misrepresentation on the part of the rabbis in an effort to evade paying the poll tax.[91] While "servant" typically implies a menial or subservient role, Maria Macuch notes that people referred to as fire-servants sometimes occupied high-status positions within Sasanian society, and while they were not necessarily priests, they did assist in fire upkeep.[92] The Babylonian rabbis were a part of these high ranks of society, lending some validity to the claim that they served the fire. Moreover, the term carried sufficient ambiguity to allow the rabbis to identify themselves as servants of the fire without risking accusations of apostasy from other Jews.[93] Professing to be a servant of the fire did not automatically make someone a Zoroastrian, thus the rabbis could use this role to avoid the poll tax without sacrificing their Jewish identity.

The discussion of R. Ashi's sale of land to a fire temple further shows the Jews taking part in Zoroastrian religious institutions and finding ways to make this acceptable within the framework of Judaism. Even though R. Ashi's land went to a fire temple, just as many elite Zoroastrians donated to fire temples "for the sake of the soul," making the

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[91] Isaiah Gafni, "The Political, Social, and Economic History of Babylonian Jewry, 224 – 638 CE," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 807.
[92] Macuch, "The Talmudic Expression," 124-126.
[93] Macuch, "The Talmudic Expression," 126.

fire temples powerful economic forces in their own right,[94] the rabbis deem the transaction acceptable because "Most wood is used for [ordinary] heating." Whether or not this was in fact the case is not necessarily significant – evidently this justification sufficed for the rabbis.

Even if the Zoroastrians did include this wood in the sacred fire, the ways in which the Zoroastrians used the wood may not have been relevant to the Jews. The Jews did not worship fire or hold the wood to be inherently sacred, therefore it may not have made any difference to the rabbis what the Zoroastrians did with the wood. In particular, because there was no question of using the wood after the Zoroastrians used it, the defilement of a substance by a non-Jew would not present a problem for the Jews. The phrase "ordinary heating" may then represent the rabbis' indifference to the Zoroastrian use of the wood. If indeed the Jews made such sales, the Zoroastrians too seemed to find these transactions – and therefore the transfer of the land of a non-Zoroastrian to the sacred and vital institutions that were the fire temples – permissible. Thus this text indicates that both the Babylonian rabbis and the Zoroastrians accepted the validity of such claims, demonstrating flexibility and the ability to integrate on both sides. Jews could participate in Zoroastrian practices, and Zoroastrians permitted non-Zoroastrians to serve and give to their fire temples.

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[94] Macuch, "The Talmudic Expression," 119-123.

In fact, given that a non-Zoroastrian could avoid paying the poll-tax by identifying as a servant of fire, it is clear that Zoroastrians encouraged and wanted others to join and respect their rituals, but did not require a full, official conversion. The Zoroastrians' concern primarily lay in maintaining the fire temples and ensuring that everyone demonstrated a reverence for fire, not in forcing the entire population to become Zoroastrian. These Talmudic passages demonstrate not only that the rabbis actively considered this issue of persecution, but also that they did not feel harassed by the Zoroastrians or anyone else. The Jews could continue to practice their own traditions with some allowances for Zoroastrian beliefs, and even use Zoroastrian institutions for their own benefit.

Not only did the Jews debate these issues among themselves, but there is also evidence that they engaged directly with the Zoroastrians regarding matters of religion. The Talmud recreates such a discussion:

> A magi once said to Amemar: From the middle of thy [body] upwards thou belongest to Ormuzd; from the middle downwards, to Ahriman. The latter asked: Why then does Ahriman permit Ormuzd to send water through his territory?[95]

Yaakov Elman notes that the Jews appeared to be well informed in regards to particulars of Zoroastrianism, pointing to Jewish references to Zoroastrian demonology throughout the Talmud.[96] This passage shows that the Jews recognize and understand the figures of Ahriman and

[95] b. Sanh. 39a.
[96] Elman, "Middle Persian Culture," 193.

Ormuzd, the mythological relationship between them, as well as an awareness of the importance of the element of water. The story does not continue any further – the rabbis did not include a Zoroastrian response to the final question posed to the magi. This brief anecdote appears among others of a similar nature – the rabbis may not have recorded a reply because they wanted to give the impression that they left the magi without an answer, proving the superiority of Judaism. An element of competition may have accompanied these types of religious dialogues, and in their own texts the rabbis would wish to present themselves as the intellectual victors.

Isaiah Gafni correctly points out that while this text does not necessarily tell the story of a specific discussion between a rabbi and a Zoroastrian, it is indicative of the degree to which the Jews were exposed to Zoroastrian beliefs and culture.[97] This story depicts a rabbi actively conversing with a Zoroastrian over religious matters – inquiring, but not arguing or persuading. The reader gets the sense that the two men are merely trying to understand each other and their differing concepts of the world. The text suggests that, while Zoroastrians and Jews did not always see eye to eye, they were able to engage on these issues by way of non-violent dialogue. As the evidence shows, they used this understanding to build and maintain relationships in a variety of ways without causing offense.

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[97] Gafni, "Babylonian Jewry," 813.

Looking beyond the specifically religious sphere to other ways Jews and Zoroastrians interacted, there exist throughout the Talmud a variety of rabbinical sanctions of business transactions and partnerships between Jews and non-Jews, many of whom were Zoroastrians, showing that these various religious groups could interact peacefully in daily life. One such example occurs in Baba Metzia:

> If one purchases from or sells to a heathen, there is no law of pre-emption. 'If one purchases from a heathen' -- because he [the purchaser] can say to him [the abutting neighbour], 'I have driven away a lion from your boundaries.' 'If he sells to a heathen' -- because a heathen is certainly not subject to [the exhortation], 'And thou shalt do that which is right and good in the sight of the Lord.' Nevertheless, he [the vendor] is placed under a ban, until he accepts responsibility for any injury that might ensue through him [the heathen].[98]

Here the rabbis discuss in detail the particularities of buying from and selling to heathens – that is, non-Jews. Whether or not such transactions are permissible is not an issue; rather, they are treated as a common occurrence. Instead, the text focuses on the rules and implications surrounding these sales, referring to the ban placed on the vendor, as well as the purchaser's ability to claim to have "driven away a lion from [the neighbor's] boundaries." The rabbis consider the matter in depth, providing details and explanations for particular situations – such deliberation on secular matters would serve little purpose if Jews and non-Jews were not engaging in such enterprises – the rabbis have clearly encountered this issue before.

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[98] b. B. Metzia 108b.

The reference to driving away a lion is also used in a previously cited passage from Nedarim, which justifies the rabbis' evasion of the poll tax by identifying themselves as servants of the fire by stating, "it is [only] said in order to drive away a lion."[99] This text clearly refers to Zoroastrians, indicated not only by the specification of "a servant of fire" but also the issue of the poll tax. The greater implications of this particular pronouncement are discussed in greater detail above; however, it may be useful here as a way of supporting the idea that the rabbis had Zoroastrians in particular in mind when they worked on the text in Baba Metzia, thereby lending it greater weight in the consideration of Jewish-Zoroastrian relations.

Elsewhere in the Talmud, the rabbis do not always incorporate this allusion to driving away lions, but they do clearly give thought to the nature of the relationships between Jews and non-Jews. A story in Avodah Zarah relates that:

> Two saffron-growers, [one of whom was] a heathen who took charge of the field on the Sabbath, and [the other] an Israelite who did so on the Sunday, came before Raba; he declared the partnership as permissible. Rabina, however, cited the following in refutation of Raba's ruling: If an Israelite and a heathen leased a field in partnership, the Israelite must not say subsequently to the heathen, Take as they share the profit in respect of the Sabbath, and I will take as mine that in respect of a week-day; only when such a condition was made originally is it permitted. [Likewise] if they just calculate the profit it is forbidden![100]

[99] b. Ned. 62b.
[100] b. A.Z. 22a

This passage states that the rabbis generally approved of collaboration between Jews and non-Jews, which despite the vague "heathen" almost certainly included Zoroastrians, particularly given the predominance of Zoroastrians within the population. Not only did the rabbis permit these arrangements, but they also actively discussed the rules and parameters involved in constructing these partnerships. The text describes the Jew and the non-Jew coordinating in such a way that allowed the Jew to refrain from working on the Sabbath, a clear indication that these two groups could work together and respect each other's religious practices.

Evidence for this appears throughout the Talmud. A story later in Avodah Zarah again shows the rabbis debating the terms of these relationships:

> There was a boy who had learnt the Tractate on Idolatry when he was six years old. He was asked, 'May [an Israelite] tread grapes together with a heathen in a press?' He replied, 'It is lawful to tread grapes together with a heathen in a press.' [To the objection] 'But he renders it *yen nesek* by [the touch of] his hands!' [he answered], 'We tie his hands up.' [To the further objection] 'But he renders it *yen nesek* by [the touch of] his feet!' [he answered], 'Wine touched by the feet is not *nesek*.' It happened in Nehardea that an Israelite and a heathen pressed out wine together.[101]

*Yen nesek*, or "libation wine" means wine that was offered to an idol and thus forbidden to Jews.[102] This text shows the scholars providing a way for Jews to include non-Jews in the making of wine, despite reservations

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[101] b. A.Z. 56b.
[102] Christine Elizabeth Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 219.

about the state of the wine. The rabbis adhere to Jewish beliefs, requiring that non-Jewish hands not touch the grapes, but accept non-Jewish feet treading grapes as acceptable. The Jew and the non-Jew can not only work together, but also still produce wine permissible for the Jews, indicating that the rabbis created strategies of inclusions for non-Jews, just as the Zoroastrians did for non-Zoroastrians. This story demonstrates that the rabbis thought seriously about the implications of the collaboration between Jews and non-Jews, and that the diverse inhabitants of Babylonia did come together in this way.

The passage not only declares that the Jew and non-Jew may press grapes together, but also expands the response into a discussion of the consequences of non-Jewish involvement in the making of Jewish wine. The boy, representing the wisdom of the rabbis satisfactorily answers all questions posed to him after he asserts that such a partnership is lawful. The rabbis indicate that his answers are sufficient by raising no further objections, and the text immediately after begins a story with a Jew and a non-Jew pressing wine together in Nehardea, thereby confirming the rabbis' approval. All of these stories of the rabbis considering and allowing mundane business relationships not only show that the Jews formed such partnerships with rabbinical permission, but also that they must have been similarly non-offensive to the non-Jewish side, because both sides were necessary components. These texts show that the Jews and the Zoroastrians encountered few difficulties interacting on social or

economic terms, with each group finding ways to reconcile their differing beliefs without sacrificing their own sacred principles.

While some blame the disparities between Judaism and Zoroastrianism for the supposed tension that existed between these groups under Sasanian rule, a variety of passages from the Babylonian Talmud reveal that religious differences were not as problematic as they might seem. Zoroastrians were primarily concerned not with the conversion or harassment of non-Zoroastrians, but with the reverence for the fundamentals of Zoroastrianism, particularly in regards to fire. The Talmud shows the Babylonian rabbis discussing the various ways in which the Jews could work with Zoroastrians. The Jews were able to cooperate with Zoroastrians in business matters as well as preserve Jewish traditions while not blatantly offending Zoroastrian beliefs. Both the Jews and the Zoroastrians endeavored to create a framework in which they could include and work together with both individuals of their own faith as well as members of other religions. The evidence suggests that they succeeded – the Jews could generally worship in peace, form partnerships with Zoroastrians, and even participate in one of Zoroastrianism's most important institutions – the fire temple.

# CONCLUSION

The period of Sasanian rule was extremely important for Jewish history, as it saw the creation of the Babylonian Talmud, which remains one of the most important texts in the Jewish tradition. The Babylonian Talmud represents an essential source of information, not only on Jewish theology, practice, and law but also of the history of the rabbis who composed it and the environment they worked in – Sasanian Babylonia. The rule of the Sasanian dynasty centered around the figure of the king of kings, a representative of the divine Sasanian lineage with close ties to the Zoroastrian religion and priesthood. While the rabbis did not write the Babylonian Talmud as a historical document, the stories and allusions to the Sasanian aristocrats and Zoroastrians they encountered reveals a great deal about Jewish and Sasanian society. It also shows how these two groups interacted with each other, particularly regarding the ways the Sasanian government, with its Zoroastrian inclinations, successfully integrated the Babylonian Jews into Sasanian political and social structures.

The experience of the Jews of Sasanian Iran carries broader implications for Jewish history as well. During this period the rabbis

developed the concept of דינא דמלכתא דינא, or "the law of the kingdom is law."[103] This idea appears several times throughout the Talmud to explain how the Jews could reconcile adherence to Sasanian rule despite warnings against non-Jewish law. The rabbis evolved this precept as a justification for as well as a result of their relationship with the Sasanian elite and their participation in Sasanian politics. In order to continue to cultivate these connections, the rabbis needed to determine that obedience to non-Jewish authority was permissible within Judaism. The rabbis' ongoing involvement with the social and religious networks of Sasanian power gave them the opportunity to further refine exactly what "the law of the kingdom is law" meant for Jews living with non-Jewish cultures, as they were constantly faced with new challenges as they interacted with the predominantly Zoroastrian members of the Sasanian aristocracy.

The model the rabbis created served as a guide not only for the Babylonian Jews during the Sasanian era but also for all rabbinic Jews after this period using the Babylonian Talmud as a source of law and wisdom. As Jewish communities have almost inevitably found themselves members of the minority rather than the majority, this paradigm set out by the Jews in the Sasanian empire represents an essential part of the ways in which the Jews coexisted with other governing authorities they were subject to after the Sasanian period.

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[103] b. Bathra 55a.

Outside of Judaism, the relationship between Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Sasanian kingship acts as a model for ways that empires deal with minority groups, particularly religious communities within their domain. Contrary to traditional views, instead of excluding or persecuting the Jews because they were not officially Zoroastrian, the Sasanians readily and successfully integrated the Babylonian Jews into all realms of social and political power. This re-examination of the experiences of the Jews under Sasanian rule is a significant part of the study of Jewish and Sasanian history, as this period represents an important moment in the development of rabbinic Judaism as well as conceptions of imperial power and its ability to cultivate a strong, integrated society.

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