

A HISTORY OF THE JEWS  
IN BABYLONIA



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III. From Shapur I to Shapur II

by

Jacob Neusner

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A History of the Jews in Babylonia, Part III  
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By Neusner, Jacob  
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*For Samuel Aaron*



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## PREFACE

The years between the death of Shapur I, in 273, and the accession of Shapur II, in 309, a valley between two mountains, mark a period of consolidation in the cultural history of Babylonian Jewry. The legacy of the great masters, Rav and Samuel, required considerable study. The legal and social institutions they had begun needed time in which to stabilize and mature. Their chief students and heirs, Rav Judah, Huna, Hisda, Sheshet, Nahman b. Jacob, Adda b. Ahavah, Mattena, Rabbah b. Abbuha, Hamnuna, and the rest, had to apply in fact and detail what had come forth as general principle. Only one of them, R. Nahman, a student of Samuel, proved to be a significant innovator in the law, and none produced a theological, liturgical, or exegetical contribution worthy of the master Rav. It would be inviting to suppose that just as Shapur's successors took as their task the maintenance of the frontiers he had reached, so too did Rav's and Samuel's. The comparison breaks down, however, for while Bahram II was defeated, and Narseh humiliated, in attempting to preserve their legacy the rabbis of this generation found great success indeed.

The chief themes of this volume focus upon the politics, culture, and sociology of Babylonian Jewry in a transitional period. The impact of external events diminishes, as the various millet-communities of the Sasanian Empire were left ever more to their own devices by a weak, harassed, and ineffectual regime, barely able to maintain its frontiers and hard-pressed by restless grandees. In Chapter One, sections i, ii, iv, v, and vi, the facts of Iranian history and the history of religions in this time are summarized. I have tried to assess the extent of Kartir's "persecutions" of the Jews, in Chapter One, section iii, but found remarkably little evidence in Jewish sources to sustain his claim to have given Jewry, or Judaism, much trouble. The internal political life of Jewry is surveyed in Chapter Two, which forms the bridge to the dominant motif of this study, the growth and influence of rabbinic Judaism. The relationships between rabbi and exilarch are analyzed and the political foundations of rabbinic authority outlined, in particular in sections iv, v, vi, and vii. The same theme recurs in Chapter Four, sections ii, iv, v, and vi, and Chapter Five, sections i, ii, iv, vi, vii, viii, ix, and x. The nature of the rabbinate is delineated

in Chapter Three, sections i, ii, iii, iv, v, and ix, and analogies to the role of the rabbi in Jewish society are suggested in Chapter Three, sections i and ix, and Chapter Four, sections i and xii. The character of academic culture is outlined in Chapter Three, sections v, vi, vii, and viii. Chapters Four and Five are concerned with the relationships between ordinary Jews and the rabbinate. After surveying means by which the rabbis enforced the law through court action, or influenced the people through personal charisma, in Chapter Three, sections ii, iii, and ix, and Chapter Four, sections iii, iv, v, and vi, we turn to specific kinds of laws and their affect upon popular life. Laws we today regard as peculiarly religious, such as those pertaining to holy objects, food, sex, and other taboos, the sacred calendar, and the like, are studied in Chapter Four, Sections vii, viii, ix, x, and xi. Laws concerning transactions of property, personal status, the provision for various recurring crises in the passage of normal life, civil damages and torts, which were enforced, and not merely exemplified, by the rabbi, are considered in Chapter Five, sections ii, iii, iv, v, vi, vii, viii, and ix. Tables summarizing the data of Chapters Four and Five are provided in Chapter Five section x. I lay no claim for the perfect accuracy of these tables, for the recognition of an "exemplification of law enforcement" is naturally somewhat subjective, and the assignment of a given example to a chronological period is rather arbitrary at times. It is the fantastic disproportions, emerging from the preceding sections, which I want to summarize and stress. We do not know very much about Babylonian Jewish history, but what we know centers upon a single theme, namely, the relationship between a religious elite and the masses that surrounded it. The rabbinate eventually reshaped the life of Babylonian Jewry, so that in time, an ancient religious civilization, by the turn of the fourth century nine hundred years old, was radically reformed to conform to laws and beliefs produced elsewhere, under different circumstances, for another world entirely. The eventual success of the rabbinate resulted in the identification of "Judaism" with "rabbinic Judaism", and in the specification of rabbinic-Jewish law and mores as "normative" in lands and ages themselves as distant from Babylonia of the third and fourth centuries as Babylonia was from Palestine of the first and second centuries, when the rabbinic movement took shape. The rabbinic movement represents, therefore, one of the remarkable and successful groups of religious virtuosi in the history of religions. The rabbis wanted to define "Israel" and to determine its configuration. And they succeeded. In the years after Rav's and Samuel's

deaths, we begin to discern the outlines of their policies, and to be able to measure their progress.

As earlier in this project, whose beginning is long past and end not yet in sight, I have not discussed legal, literary, or narrowly academic questions, answers to which the sources render so easily accessible. I am attempting rather to provide a coherent outline of political, religious and cultural, and social history, and isolating the data relevant to each successive generation in order to do so. But my focus is, so far as possible, upon the life of the Jewish *group*, or community, rather than upon the virtuosi of the academy and their works. I nonetheless find that the divisions imposed by the conventional arrangement of the rabbis by generations is historiographically helpful, and have followed it. That arrangement does provide a means of knowing what happened first and what happened afterward, of tracing developments over a period of time, and of identifying sayings and stories with the life of a given age. Even in sources which exhibit such remarkable consistency as Talmudic ones, it seems to me likely that we shall be able to recover, despite the legal and theological continuities which are so striking, a sense for change. We may hear beyond the timeless rhetoric of argument and the presupposition of principled agreement or disagreement the echo of what was actually *happening* among Babylonian Jews in a particular age. It may be that in the end, our study will exhibit continuity, and little change, so that we may rightly speak of "the Talmudic view" of this, and the "rabbinic idea" about that. But whether or not one can historically combine all the ideas of the significant rabbis into such a composite portrait remains to be demonstrated, rather than to be assumed as in the past. In fact, because of studies for this volume, I have been more than ever impressed by the changelessness of rabbinic discourse and by its lack of innovation. However, reflection upon the earlier history suggests otherwise. The rabbinic movement did establish itself in a relatively brief period, and did rapidly transmit to Babylonia institutions and ideas formerly absent. The stability of the academy masked changes in the streets and marketplaces. Indeed, closer knowledge of the literary sources and their forms may in the end reveal that the conservatism of the processes of tradition mostly concealed extraordinary vitality even in the academy itself.

This period seems to me coherent and worth studying apart from the times of the early Sasanians and Amoraim, on the one side, and those of the great fourth-century figures on the other. What sets it apart is, as I have implied, its transitional quality both in Iranian and

in Jewish politics. The rabbis of this time were heirs of giants and progenitors of giants, but I do not find them either so original or so strikingly creative as either their predecessors or their successors. Rav, Samuel, Ardashir and Shapur I, like Rabbah, Abaye, Rava, and Shapur II, tower over this intervening generation. And yet its very mediocrity—I do not use the word in a pejorative sense—renders it interesting, for in both Iranian and Jewish history, the four decades under study indicated that what had been inaugurated would endure. Though it might be a long time before political and cultural frontiers would once again be reached and crossed, at the center of things stood stable and lasting institutions. It should by no means be supposed, however, that the “period” in Iranian history, or the “generations” in Jewish cultural life, were so neatly arranged as is here implied. I share the widespread rejection of the rigid periodization of history, and do not for one minute suggest that the day Shapur I died marked any very real turning. “A date is,” as Arnaldo Momigliano writes, “only a symbol. Behind the question of dates there is the question of the continuity of . . . history. Can we notice a break in the development of the social and intellectual history? If we can notice it, where can we place it?”<sup>1</sup> Here too, both the *period* of Iranian history and the *generation* of Amoraic authorities seem to me to exhibit characteristics different from earlier and later ones, so that there is a discontinuity, though not a very radical one, worth noting. But for Jewish history, I must stress that the generations of rabbis were hardly so conveniently delimited to begin with. I have omitted consideration of the sayings of some men who could almost as well have been included here, because I think that their chief associations and years of most significant action were with a later group. These include Rabbah and R. Nahman b. Isaac, associated both with the younger contemporaries of Rav Judah and R. Mattena, on the one hand, and with Abaye and Rava, on the other. In general I have been guided by recurring associations in discussion or in the process of tradition of a few men who dominated academic life in this period and who were unquestionably the students and successors, but not the colleagues, of Rav, Samuel, and their adult contemporaries. The sayings of, and stories about, such men provide clear evidence of the Talmudic traditions on this as a coherent period.

Much is made of verifying the historicity of Talmudic and other

<sup>1</sup> “Christianity and the Decline of the Roman Empire,” in *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. Arnaldo Momigliano, Oxford, 1963, p. 2.



ancient sources and traditions. In the positivist tradition, some have held that verification is possible by one means or another, so that behind, or beyond the sources as we have them, we may discover what *really* happened. It is quite true that a history of the literary traditions and how they were shaped would provide a very valuable means of historical criticism, so that we might know, as we do not now, why a tradent might have chosen to tell, even to fabricate, a given saying or story about an earlier figure. If we had a primitive and tentative account of how things seem to have taken place, prepared upon the basis of a relatively uncritical reading of the sources, a history of the traditions might well unfold, which itself would render feasible a still more critical history. In my view, even such a pre-critical account has been unavailable until now. None of the earlier historians has attempted it, and so I must, even though I am deeply aware of the severe methodological limitations of this study. The material is vast, and, for a narrowly historical venture, mostly uncharted. The literary scholars have yet to provide a definitive account of the formation of Talmudic traditions. Such an account is not in fact possible without considerable attention to the later age of Saboraim and Geonim and *its* history—a fact of greatest importance, as we shall see, in considering the exilarchate. A history of the Saboraic and Geonic periods, which traces the way in which that age and its academic issues shaped the formation of Talmudic literature, is not known to me. The literary accounts we now have, such as those of Y. N. Epstein, however penetrating and insightful, still concentrate upon the formation of one or another tractate, or of the Babylonian Talmud as a whole, but make no serious and *systematic* effort whatever to relate literature to academic or other historical realities. S. Lieberman's study of the "Talmud of Caesarea" still stands by itself, and I have found no work of even remotely equivalent usefulness for Babylonian Jewish literature and history. Nor has a consensus been reached even upon significant literary issues. Indeed, I do not think the greater part of the literature has been thoroughly commented upon from the viewpoint of modern philology and critical history. In the pages of *Tarbiz*, *Ziyyon*, *Revue des Études Juives*, *Monatschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums*, *Sinai*, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, and many other journals in the tradition of modern Jewish learning, I have found dishearteningly little relevant research. Critical Talmudic studies concentrate upon Palestinian, particularly Mishnaic, history and literature, or upon the relationship between one Tannaitic document and another. Even the few helpful

articles and monographs on Rav's and Samuel's times have no counterpart for the later period.

And yet, having now considered the history of Rav Judah's times, I could not find a single instance in which one detail of the huge corpus of traditions reported by Rav Judah concerning, or in the name of, Rav and Samuel, might be explained by reference to his *own* interests, needs, or problems. I am convinced, quite to the contrary, that the tradents mostly, though not always, believed that the reports they handed on were accurate, and fabricated little. There was constant discussion of the accuracy of reports among the surviving students of the earlier masters, and varying traditions were compared with one another in a thoroughly critical spirit. Great efforts were invested into accurate transmission of sayings and other data, although the way traditions originally took shape is not now known to us. And so, a pre-critical history seems to me warranted, so long as it is, as here, clearly labelled. It is from New Testament studies that we learn the value of form- and traditions-criticism. And yet, those who suppose it to be of *equivalent* merit for Talmudic studies ignore the very different quality of Talmudic literature and purposes of those who produced it. I do not see how the tendentious Gospel accounts are in any significant way to be compared to the Mishnah and its accompanying Gemara, the former stories, the latter acute, disciplined, and abstract discussions, the former coherent, the latter discrete, the former concerning a single person and reflecting later conditions and issues, the latter centered on objective points of law and logic, criticism of sources, inquiries into authorities, and the like. Form-critical questions and methods provide insight, as this and earlier research has suggested to me. I do not see how they yet promise *equally* helpful results, nor does their absence render our task beyond preliminary accomplishment.

On the other hand, the fundamentalism of the philologist is to be avoided. Once one has properly established, understood, and interpreted a text in its own setting, it has been supposed that he then knows pretty much what happened. He may eliminate details contrary to the prevailing conception of what *could* happen. But for the rest, the text *is* history. For example, a story tells about how a rabbi fled from Babylonia because he got into trouble with the Persians, and settled in Palestine, where he performed numerous miracles, including conversation with, and resurrection of, the dead. The philological fundamentalist, having ascertained "the best text" and the meaning of all its words, concludes that the rabbi did indeed go to Palestine, and cites the account as

evidence of Persian "persecution."<sup>1</sup> He merely omits reference to the resurrection of the dead. If an account is believed in one detail, however, then the reasons for such credibility need to be specified when other details are disbelieved. I am not impressed at all by the 'science' of Funk and Graetz, among my predecessors, who pretended that such details simply did not exist. Halevy and Yavetz, the other two worth taking seriously, found fewer rationalistic problems to begin with. Among the literary and philological scholars, even the critical-historical faculty of Funk and Graetz is absent. The obvious fact is that we do not know what happened. Our historically useful records are very meager, and difficult to verify, because of the lack of comparative data, independent accounts of sufficient merit to support the process of verification, or even coherent, reasonably contemporary Jewish historical chronicles of any sort. All we have are legal sayings and stories, which we may attempt to piece together as best we can into a continuous and coherent account centered upon questions of interest to historians. Much more can be done to render that account critical and sophisticated than has been achieved here or elsewhere. But in the end we do not have, and shall probably never have, more than the Talmuds and cognate literature (indeed, for this period and beyond, the *Babylonian* Talmud alone provides much help). What we do with our data will always depend in the end *not* upon what happened, but upon what *we* make of it. I do not, therefore, share either the unknowing optimism of the philological fundamentalist, or the paralyzing pessimism of the form-critic, because I hope for much less than either by way of final truth. I do not despair that we can contribute nothing whatever by a primitive and probably naive way of doing things. Assuredly future workers will greatly improve upon what I am able to do, just as I make use of, and improve upon, what is available to me. Because of these limitations, some have thought that it is too soon to raise historical questions. It is, indeed, always too soon, for historians ought to await the final results of archaeology, philology, legal history, text- and manuscript-studies and exegesis, and other sciences ancillary to history, the pretender to the throne of all of them, if now only as constitutional monarch. Those who ask historical questions do so in the certainty of the coming obsolescence of their answers. These preserve, in intention if not always in presentation, tentativity and uncertainty perhaps less necessary elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> See vol. II, p. 30-32.

How then do I understand my task? It is one of construction and synthesis. I am confronted with a mass of discrete data, much of which I regard as, if not satisfactorily verifiable, mostly true representations of what people thought was said and done. These data constitute the segments of a jigsaw puzzle, or, more aptly, fragments of a broken mosaic, and my task is to try to fit them together, to see what picture, if any, emerges. Given the character of the sources, one can hardly expect a panorama. We simply do not have the kind of information which permits a rich and full narrative. Indeed, for this period I have found the sources much less tractable than those pertaining to the times of Rav and Samuel. The two great masters are so often brought together, in one matter after another that the history of their day seems to emerge from the conflicts between them. Here by contrast we deal with many men, not just two and a handful of distinguished colleagues. The easy symmetry of "Rav says ... Samuel says ..." is lacking. While one cannot here recover a sense for tensions and their resolution, for the climax and anti-climax of history, still the fragments do form parts of a picture. If we do not know so much as we should like, we do, I believe, know more than we did, because of the effort to draw together isolated data into an approximate unity. I have avoided merely giving a routine, mechanical report of all the sayings of a given generation relevant to a particular topic, e.g. to idolatry, or the exilarchate, or theology, or the sociology of law, though these are all dealt with, but have rather attempted to offer valid generalizations and a connected fabric of discourse. By no means do I claim to have succeeded. But the reader will judge for himself whether I have advanced knowledge at any point through these constructions and syntheses of data and of scholarly discoveries of others where relevant.

The unsolved problems of method in this study are several. First of all, by isolating only the sayings germane to a given period of time, I foreclose the possibility of here offering broad, descriptive statements upon ideas and institutions as they existed over a long epoch. Hence at any one point the discussion is impoverished by a limited perspective. One may well wonder whether the gain is offset by the loss. For example, the nature of the exilarchate, the tax structure, the life of the academies, the application of law to everyday affairs, the wonder-working activities of the rabbis—these are themes for which both earlier and later data are relevant at any given point in the long continuum of three centuries. I have already explained why I have chosen now to concentrate upon limited segments of the longer period, and

the reader will judge whether significant insight has been hereby derived to compensate for the fragmentary and episodic character of the consequent result. A second difficulty, noted explicitly above, must be stressed. I am not sure that Rabbah, R. Naḥman b. Isaac, and a few lesser figures would have provided *no* significant information on this period. I have also excluded stories about the earlier years of Abaye and Rava which pertain to it. Only where I felt quite certain for obvious reasons that sayings were pertinent did I make use of them. As I said, the implication of fixed and neat divisions of rabbis corresponding to convenient chronological lines of the Sasanian dynasty must be rejected.

Third, the reader may wonder why I have not first provided brief biographies of the various rabbis. Except for the instances in which details of personal life become important, as in the cases of R. Naḥman and Rabbah b. Abbuha, I have not offered sketches such as those of the contributors to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, or, especially, of A. Hyman. These I found adequate as collections and formulations of the data. It seems to me that Graetz, Funk, and Yavetz do little more than make such hagiographical collections. The bulk of their chapters dealing with this, as every other period in "Talmudic History" consists of nothing more than pious biographies. (Halevy more helpfully offers a commentary on the Letter of R. Sherira Gaon and a few remarks upon the methodology of the academies; as before, these are penetrating.) So I prefer to avoid biography, because it has already been done, for now, by Hyman. Furthermore, I do not at all conceive this to be a work of "Talmudic History," but of Babylonian Jewish history at a particular period. The Talmud obviously provides the bulk of our information. But I do not see what literary conventions have to do with those of history. These years are called "the Amoraic period," and yet, as we shall see, that does not mean that Amoraim dominated the history of the Jews in them. I do not conceive that the lives of the individual Amoraim or the history of the academy actually *constitute* the history of Babylonian Jewry, though the Talmud has little interest in other matters than who studied with whom, and what was said. I am quite honestly bored by the gossip of the academies, *as we presently understand it*. I am sure that when it is properly understood, we shall learn much from conflicting stories about, or traditions in the name of, a given man, why a teacher supposedly liked or disliked a colleague, or how legal issues and Mishnah-commentary took the form and directions that they did. The exilarchic data have permitted the isolation of

particular viewpoints. This facilitates the study of the way traditions took shape on various events and figures in the exilarchate. Similar studies of the academies are doubtless possible, though hardly on so narrow a foundation as the current work. Those parts of academic culture which touched, and even shaped the life of Babylonian Jewry are dealt with at many points. Matters of theology, liturgy, and exegesis which retain an intrinsic importance were of course by no means bypassed. But the legal sayings and the study of the Mishnah and of theoretical points of law, *standing by themselves*, proved barren for me. I take upon myself all responsibility: "If it is empty, the emptiness is within." And yet it is a fact that requires specification. If legal discussions or Mishnaic commentary reflected upon or shaped the life of the people, or illuminated the values, or issues, or troubles of the times, they were of immense interest, and form the heart of this study. But I cannot overstress the fact that the greater part of what the academies cared about most of all now concerns me all too little. Insofar as the rabbinate was isolated from the life of the Jews as a whole, it does not presently interest me, for it has been more than adequately studied by both classical and modern commentaries, on the one hand, but less than adequately prepared for historical investigation, on the other.

That the Talmud is a rich source for history needs no argument. But by its nature, the Babylonian Talmud impedes as much as it advances the historical inquiry. Its concentration upon law and the academy is an almost insuperable limitation. We know on the whole much less than the available literature would lead one to suppose. One could learn as much about American history and culture from approximately similar data: the minutes of some learned societies and faculty meetings, the pious stories of Parson Weems, fragments of the Congressional Record, some court records, and chiefly Blackstone's Commentaries in an American-annotated edition. Our knowledge would be partial and impoverished for America, as it is for Babylonian Jewry. I do not believe that narrow academic values ever went far beyond the walls of the academy, except so far as the rabbi was believed to be a holy man, or otherwise assumed roles which in the academy itself were secondary. Yet our sources lead in one direction only, and that is, *into* the academy. I conceive my task to move elsewhere, for I think that history comprehends more than the things the rabbis cared about.

I have not set out to prove a particular thesis, but I do come with a number of specific questions and interests. A wise teacher advised me

never to write exposition, but always to answer a question. I here attempt to answer the question, What was it like to be a Jew in Babylonia at the end of the third century? It is a question that presupposes several beliefs. First, I believe that the history of the Jews, and not merely that of one segment of their *élite*, is interesting. Second, as I said, I think that history as the history of Jewish *literature* needs to give way, here as it already has elsewhere, to history as the history of the Jewish *people*, including its literature, and to the broadest themes of that history. Third, the history of Judaism needs if possible to come to grips with all kinds of Judaisms, and not merely that which became authoritative or normative for the Jews later on. Fourth, magic, astrology, medicine, and other aspects of the occult are legitimate, if the data suggest they then were consequential. They cannot be ignored as “not normative,” especially since most of the leading figures among the *élite* were believed to possess great powers in these matters. While “Talmudic magic” has been studied, the wonder-working side of the *rabbinate* has been deliberately ignored, probably because the nineteenth century scholars of “Talmudic culture” found it an embarrassment (with the notable exception of Ludwig Blau), and the twentieth century ones were at least as much concerned with the needs of current theology as with what actually happened (with the major exception of Saul Lieberman). Fifth, as is clear already, I think that the relationships between the rabbis, about whom we know so much, and the people, about whom we hear very little, were more complicated than has hitherto been appreciated. We cannot continue to suppose the identification of academic with popular life, even if we know about the latter little more than what the rabbis chose to tell us. When, five centuries later, we hear from an outsider his impressions of Judaism, we listen with astonishment. Martān Farrux-i Ohrmazddatan<sup>1</sup> saw in Judaism the most astrological and deterministic religion of his day, which not a single extant rabbinic source would have led us to expect, legalistic, perhaps, or centered on dogmas the gentile found unacceptable, but *not* astrological. When, manufactured in the 7th or 8th Century, the incantation bowls appear, we come across substantial evidences concerning Jewish magic, and find the masses of the Jews were using pretty much the same techniques as the Zoroastrians, Christians, Manichaeans, Mandaean, and others, something we could

<sup>1</sup> See my “Zoroastrian Critique of Judaism: Škand Gumanik Vičar, Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen,” *JAOs* 83, 3, 1963, pp. 283-94, and “Škand Miscellanies,” *ibid.*, 86, 4, 1966, 414-16.

not have known had we depended on the Talmudic laws about such matters. So, as I said, we are faced with a disproportion in our sources. We have the reports of lawyers, stories about them and their courts, and vast knowledge of the lawyers' comments about their legal code, the Mishnah, along with their traditions concerning it. These come to us in a form imposed much later than the times in which the reports and stories actually took shape. History is not easy to recover under such circumstances, but it is rendered more difficult still if we are impeded by theological preconceptions concerning what *had* to have happened, or mattered, or have been "normative" to begin with.

It is quite obvious that I have no illusions about the success of this study to date, but mostly, criticisms of its failures. My only defense derives from a phrase in the Farewell Address of President George Washington: *In the discharge of this trust, I will only say that I have, with good intentions, contributed ... the best exertions of which a very fallible judgment was capable.*

It is my pleasant duty to thank the American Council of Learned Societies for a research fellowship in the academic year 1966-1967, and Dartmouth College for a Faculty Fellowship in support of my research. The editors of the Journal of the American Oriental Society and of Numen graciously permitted me to reprint here as an Appendix, with some modifications, my articles appearing in Volume LXXXIV, 3, 1964, 230-40, and Vol. XIII, 2, 144-150, respectively. The Dartmouth College Committee on Research paid for typing and for many other research expenses. I do not believe any generation of scholars has enjoyed the material advantages of ours, which places upon us a grave responsibility to be worthy of our opportunities.

It is appropriate also to note the contribution of my publisher, E. J. Brill, and of the editor of Studia Post-Biblica, Professor P. A. H. de Boer of Leiden, Holland. Professor de Boer has taken a keen interest in my researches, and I am grateful to him, and to E. J. Brill, for including them in this series. The handsome appearance of this and the former volumes does credit to the conscientious and able craftsmanship of E. J. Brill. I alone bear the onus of whatever errors in proof-reading or otherwise which may have escaped correction.

Translations are my own, except where otherwise specified.

The generous colleagues listed in volume II pp. xiii-xv have continued to provide much enlightenment. I am continually grateful to my teacher, Professor Morton Smith, for his comments and criticism. Professor Baruch A. Levine has also graciously commented upon my



work. I learned a great deal in Professor Jonathan Z. Smith's seminar on the history of religions in late antiquity. Mr. David Goodblatt assisted with proof-reading, and offered useful comments. My thanks to these helpful friends.

I hope that some day, our son, Samuel Aaron, will read this book, and understand how he illumined the place and time in which it was composed. I know no way to pay adequate tribute to my wife.

JACOB NEUSNER

Hanover, New Hampshire

‘Erev Pesah 5727

April 24th, 1967

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

*To the list of abbreviations provided in vol. II pp. xxi-xxii should be added the following:*

### *I. Journals*

BJRL	=	Bulletin of the John Rylands Library
DOP	=	Dumbarton Oaks Papers
HR	=	History of Religions
JRS	=	Journal of Roman Studies
Pat. Or.	=	Patrologia Orientalis
YCS	=	Yale Classical Studies.

### *II. Talmudic Literature*

Kil.	=	Kila'im
Tem.	=	Temurah

### *III. Biblical Books*

Koh.	=	Kohelet <i>corrected to</i> Qoh. = Qohelet
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### *IV. Other Abbreviations*

Vol. II	=	A History of the Jews in Babylonia, II. The Early Sasanian Period.
Vol. IV	=	A History of the Jews in Babylonia, IV. The Age of Shapur II.





Source: Freya Stark, *Rome on the Euphrates* (John Murray, London, and Harcourt, Brace, and World Inc., New York, © 1966, reproduced by permission.)

CHAPTER ONE

FROM SHAPUR I TO SHAPUR II

273-309

I. POLITICS

Ardashir and Shapur had sought not merely to found a dynasty, but to erect a government and stable administration. Unlike the Parthians, whose direct, effective administrative control extended only from Ctesiphon northward to Khorassan, and whose title, "the king of kings," accurately reflected the political realities of the realm, the early Sasanians had attempted to rule so far as possible through their own agencies. These bureaus of administration were structured to conform not to the personality of the monarch, but to the routine requirements of an on-going regime. The early Sasanians hoped thereby to avoid the obvious weakness of Arsacid rule, its dependence upon the effective personal leadership of one or another of the scions of the dynasty, by substituting permanent administration for transient charisma, and the iron bonds of bureaucracy for the loose ones of feudal fealty. N. Pigulevskaja sees in the Sasanian reorganization an effort to counter-balance the power of the feudal nobility against that of a central administration. I should suppose a second relevant factor, as here inferred: the new regime was very seriously attempting to avoid the insufficiencies of the old. If it knew the history of the Arsacids from the last third of the first century B.C. to the rise of Vologases I about a century later, it would have determined on a very different administrative policy. It built a bureaucracy, subservient to, but acting independently of, the king of kings, hierarchically arranged to be sure, but *not* upon the basis of feudal fealty alone. Yet the power thus gained for the center in the end laid just as much stress upon the personal qualities of the monarch as had the Arsacids' mobile and decentralized system. The personality of the king of kings still mattered, probably more than Shapur I would have liked, as we shall see, for the bureaucracy at his death was still incompletely effective to carry on when unimpelled by a powerful and determined ruler.

Of the six emperors between Shapur I and Shapur II, only the next

to the last, Narseh, exhibited the qualities of ambitious leadership one associates with the early Sasanians. The three Bahrams<sup>1</sup> were at best unfortunate, but more really, incompetent. Indeed, Shapur excluded his eldest son, Bahram Gelanshah, from the throne, Henning suggests,<sup>2</sup> precisely because he did not have confidence in him. His younger brother, Hormizd I, succeeded in 272 or 273, but died within the following year. Bahram I then held power for the next three years (273-276). We know very little about his reign. He suppressed the Manichaeans and Christians, as we shall see (Section ii, below). He may have sent some help to Zenobia of Palmyra, who had built a great empire in the abiding manner of Near Eastern buffer states, by exploiting the temporary weakness of Rome or Iran to expand and fill a power vacuum, then contracting as soon as one or the other could restore its interests.<sup>3</sup> Since the Palmyrenes had invaded Babylonia a decade or so earlier, after Shapur spurned their friendship, they had had to face very powerful Roman opposition. As the Romans' suppression of Palmyra was the first step in the restoration of their shattered position in Mesopotamia, it became very much in the Iranian interest to assist Zenobia.<sup>4</sup> Bahram I may well have sent some help, for Iranian troops are mentioned among the forces opposed to Aurelian in 273. When Zenobia was taken captive, however, Bahram sent an embassy to propitiate Aurelian, and in his triumph of 274, the Roman emperor was able to exhibit Persian envoys bearing rich gifts. Within the year, however,

<sup>1</sup> Among the several spellings in use, Professor Henning recommends Hormizd, Bahram, and Narseh (Personal communication, Nov. 19, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> "Notes on the Inscription of Shapur I," *Professor Jackson Memorial Volume* (Bombay, 1954), 44-5.

<sup>3</sup> See Vol. II, p. 48-52.

<sup>4</sup> And the Jews applauded the destruction of Palmyra, see b. Yev. 16b. On the conversion of Palmyrenes to Judaism, see y. Yev. 1.6. Nahman Zvi Ge'zav, *'Al Neharot Bavel* (Warsaw, 1878), p. 27 n. 12, offers the interesting proposal that Midrash Esther refers to the negotiations of Appharban and Diocletian. The passage is as follows:

"Why is it called Persia (Paras)? Because it obtained sovereignty (*malikut*) in segments (*perusot perusot*), one segment in the time of TRDH, and one in the days of 'RDYKY'N, and one in the age to come." (Esther R. 1.18)

Ge'zav suggests that TRDH refers to Tirdat, the Armenian shah in the time of Bahram II who took Armenia out of Persian control, and 'RDYKY'N he reads as 'RPBY'N, hence Appharban. Apart from the groundlessness of the emendations, I think Ge'zav misunderstands the passage, which tells that the Persians *gained*, not lost, "sovereignty in pieces." TRDH could just as well signify Mithridates I, so far as the rabbis knew, who was the real founder of the Parthian empire, or any number of shah-an-shahs. I do not see any grounds for supposing that "the rabbis" knew whom Narseh sent to negotiate with the Romans.

he set out on a Persian campaign, but was murdered in the spring of 275. Bahram died soon afterward, leaving his son, Bahram II, to rule.

Bahram II (276-292) proved unable to maintain the frontiers bequeathed to him by Shapur. Indeed, his was a singularly disastrous reign. At first, he turned eastward, fighting a Scythic people in Seistan, and afterward in Afghanistan. Early in 283, he had to meet a new and more serious incursion in the west, as Carus, the new Roman emperor, embarked upon a Persian campaign. We do not know the specific pretext for war. The humiliation of Valerian and the inherently unstable settlement of 260, which would be challenged as soon as Rome could manage it, were reason enough. Carus crossed the Euphrates, defeated Bahram II, and took Seleucia-Ctesiphon, assuming the title "Parthicus Maximus." He proceeded eastward, but died, in July, 283, under mysterious circumstances. In 284, the war ended, however, with Rome retaining Mesopotamia, her chief interest in the first place. She thus recovered the position gambled and lost by Valerian twenty years earlier. In 286, Diocletian undertook a still more aggressive policy, perhaps finding Bahram's demonstrated weakness a welcome opportunity to renew the struggle. By the Romans' astute maneuvering, Bahram was forced in 288 to relinquish all claim to Mesopotamia and to acknowledge Trdat III as king of Armenia and client of Rome. All that had been achieved by Ardashir and Shapur in the preceding half-century thus slipped from Iranian hands. Armenia in Roman control was a natural route of invasion, threatening first of all Adiabene, and then Ctesiphon itself. The Romans, never forgetting the lesson of Carrhae, always avoided meeting Persian cavalry on the broad northern plains, but invariably chose to advance through the Armenian foothills. The Persians' loss of Armenia therefore meant that whenever their enemies wanted, they had an easy invasion route into the heart of the Iranian west, or directly into Media and the Iranian highlands, as they would choose. So the loss of their part of Mesopotamia, coupled with the reversion of Armenia to a Roman protectorate, represented a major disaster for the Iranians. But because of domestic unrest, with Bahram's brother, the governor of Khorassan, in revolt, Bahram had no choice but to acquiesce.

Such was the situation when his son, Bahram III, ascended the throne in 292. He died four months later, leaving *his* son, Hormizd, to vie for power with Narseh, his great-uncle and Shapur's last son. The Paikuli inscription, set up as a monument to victory, tells how and why Narseh ousted his grand-nephew from power. With his rival still

a minor, and a strong party, including great officers of state and nobility, favoring a more puissant personality, Narseh, heir to the memories of his father's greatness, was called to take the throne. After protracted negotiations, civil war broke out. Narseh had been in Persian Armenia, where he held office as *Vazurg Armenan Shah*, King of Armenia Major. He moved to Gazaca, in Atropatene, and then toward Babylonia, through the Paikuli pass, where he met his supporters and was proclaimed king of kings. He said, in Herzfeld's translation,

From the feudal chiefs and the Grand Vizier and the Great Ones and the Nobles, an envoy came to us, that the King of Kings graciously from Armenia Major to Eranshahr might return, and the majesty and the Empire and his own throne and the royalty of the ancestors from the Gods might receive ...<sup>1</sup>

Narseh ordered the name of Bahram I to be chipped off the Bishapur inscription, and substituted his own. Apparently for two decades he had regarded himself as Shapur's rightful heir. Frye comments, "Presumably a *modus vivendi* between the great feudal lords and the King of Kings had been forged in such a way that a new allegiance to the house of Sasan was accepted by all."<sup>2</sup>

Full of vigor and ambitious to restore the glory of the Sasanian dynasty, Narseh was indeed true heir of Shapur. But conditions proved very different. He found the Armenian situation intolerable, and precipitated the war which was bound to come. He invaded Syria while Diocletian was preoccupied in Egypt, and seized the often-disputed territories of Armenia, Osrhoene, and Syria. In 297, Galerius, called from Illyricum, forced Narseh back toward Carrhae, but was ambushed and defeated. A year later, re-enforced by new legions, Galerius marched into Armenia Major, the population of which was hostile to the Persian occupiers, and there routed Narseh completely. He captured a huge booty, including the wives and children of the king of kings, a grand humiliation. Master of Armenia once again, he moved southward into Mesopotamia and then Babylonia, taking Seleucia-Ctesiphon. He may have revived the hope of Trajan—and before him, Alexander—permanently to establish a new Roman foothold in the heart of the Iranian empire, but Diocletian reverted to the more realistic policy of Hadrian. He treated the captives with honor. Narseh renounced his ambition of western conquest, and sent an envoy, Appharban, to plead

<sup>1</sup> E. E. Herzfeld, *Paikuli* (Berlin, 1924), I, 97. Compare W. B. Henning, "A Farewell to the Khagan of the Aq-Aqatārān," *BSOS* 14, 1952, 517-8.

<sup>2</sup> *Heritage of Persia* (N.Y.-Cleveland, 1963), 208.



for joint recognition of each power as coordinate of the other. Narseh met with an imperial secretary and concluded peace, surrendering Mesopotamia, and acknowledging the Roman protectorate over Armenia, which was enlarged eastward. Five provinces east of the Tigris were ceded to Rome, and Nisibis was probably established as the sole recognized center for international trade between the two empires. Thus Rome grasped control of the main entrepôt of the rich trade between the West and India and China, taking the lucrative imposts Persia had formerly enjoyed. This last clause was accepted under protest. Rome found herself at the end of the third century in much the same powerful position she had enjoyed at the outset. Shapur's victories thus proved in the long run ephemeral. Rome now held eastern, as well as western Mesopotamia, and had all of southern Mesopotamia and Babylonia at her feet. Iranian power had been driven back to the plateau, from which it had emerged in the Parthian expansion of 140 B.C. Deeply shamed, Narseh had the grace to abdicate in the favor of his son Hormizd II (301-309), whose reign passed uneventfully.<sup>1</sup>

So the very slight value of early Sasanian reforms became apparent. Effective leadership made all the difference, as under the Arsacids. Central administration did not relieve the king of kings of the obligation to propitiate powerful nobles, and severely limited his options when great lords of state chose to rebel. The person of the emperor was still required on the battlefield, and major campaigns upon both eastern and western frontiers could not be simultaneously sustained. Even the Sasanian dynasty itself proved no more stable than had the Arsacids', with succession to the throne disputed by force when feasible. Though

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<sup>1</sup> An extended account of Narseh's wars will be found in William Seston, *Dioclétien et la Tétrarchie. I. Guerres et Réformes (284-300)*, (Paris, 1946), 160-83. Seston surveys the primary sources, and provides a full narrative. See also W. Ensslin, *Zur Ostpolitik des Kaisers Diokletian* (Munich, 1942, Sitzungsberichte d. Bayer. Akad. d. Wiss.); H. Mattingly, "The Imperial Recovery," *CAH* XII, 321-2, 335-6; Louis Dillemann, *Haute Mésopotamie Orientale et Pays Adjacents*, (Paris 1962), 209-12, for a description of the trans-Tigrene provinces. The political history of this period is discussed in the following: George Rawlinson, *Seventh Great Oriental Monarchy* (London, 1876), 101-37; Frye, *Heritage*, 198-224; N. Pigulevskaja, *Les Villes de l'État Iranien* (Paris, 1963), 96; R. Ghirshman, *Iran: Parthians and Sassanians* (Paris, 1962), 294; E. E. Herzfeld, *Archaeological History of Iran* (London, 1935), 76-80; M. Sprengling, *Third Century Iran* (Chicago, 1953) 40-43, 57, 64; A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen, 1936), 220-9; Jean Gagé, *La Montée des Sassanides* (Paris, 1964), 379-86; G. Allon, *Toldot HaYehudim b'Erez Yisrael* (Tel Aviv, 1956), II, 197-9; Nöldeke, *Tabari*, 42-52. On Roman strategy see also David Oates, "The Roman Frontier in Northern 'Iraq," *Geographical Journal*, 122, 1956, 190-99.

a good start had been made in the right direction, Ardashir and Shapur had achieved not the lasting empire to which they had aspired, but merely an ephemeral glory. One wonders, therefore, how it was that Ardashir and Shapur, and Shapur II later on, proved so much more successful than the intervening emperors. I think the obvious answer is partly to be located in the enthusiasm and vigor of the founders of a new dynasty, and of a reformer, both ambitious and still sufficiently astonished by success to undertake ever greater projects. The annual razzias of Ardashir and Shapur, culminating in major campaigns from time to time, found no counterpart under Bahram II and Narseh, the former being goaded, rather than inspired to fight, and both of whose campaigns were mainly defensive in intention, and restorative in design. A second obvious factor was the earlier weakness of Rome, which coincided with the renewed strength of imperial Persia. Shapur's successes were also Roman defeats, and the limited achievements of Ardashir would lead one to suppose that Shapur enjoyed particular, negative advantages, which his successors, like his father, never knew, namely a weak and preoccupied opposition, treachery in the enemy camp, and a defeatist spirit. For Shapur, a fortunate succession would have meant only retaining his substantial gains, preserving his patrimony for a later generation, but not advances into the west, for he had never really attempted to found permanent rule beyond the Euphrates. Even in the heart of his empire, his hopes were thwarted. It was Rome which had the opportunity to establish herself in the east, on the Tigris, and thus keep her enemy open to new incursions whenever she chose to make them.

For the Jews, as we shall see, these years of invasion and unrest proved not especially trying. Although Seleucia-Ctesiphon was taken twice, by Carus in 283, and again by Galerius in 298, we hear few echoes of Jewish suffering on that account, nor is there a hint that Jewish settlements were destroyed, or even very much disturbed. The Romans were not particularly interested in ruining the territories they conquered—unlike Shapur a half-century earlier—but rather in teaching the Sasanian chancery the lesson that the settlement of 260 could not stand, but that of 284 and again of 298 could be enforced quite effectively. It was important for that purpose to take the capital city and humiliate the emperor, in order that the final settlement, magnanimous for such a complete victory, would be respected for many generations. But no purpose would be served in wreaking unnecessary destruction, and the Romans did not do so. The Pal-

myrenes' destruction of Nehardea served a perfectly useful economic purpose, as we have noted,<sup>1</sup> but the Romans, having no equivalent intention, left the Jews alone. Nonetheless, the cultural and social history of Jewry in this period must be seen against the background of unsettled and difficult conditions. Formerly, the Sasanians were able to keep the peace in Babylonia, and took some slight interest in Jewish public opinion because of the needs of their western campaigns. Shapur had supposedly told Samuel that he had never killed a Jew, and Samuel had warned the Jews not to mourn for the death of their co-religionists in the great siege of Caesarea-Mazaca, in 260. Hence the tolerant and accomodating policy of Shapur proved at least congruent to both domestic and foreign policy. Now, by contrast, the Sasanians' hold on Babylonia proved weak, and consequently their government of the region was less effective, although because of the requirements of defensive wars, they became ever more eager to enforce the collection of taxes. Iranian foreign policy did not demand the enthusiastic participation of the Jews, who could prove of no use, as they had in Parthian times, and whose value in defending Babylonia was inconsequential for an army that did not include members of the minority communities. On the other hand, foreign politics did mitigate the impact of religious persecution, as we shall see. For brief periods, of course, the Jews in Babylonia came under Roman domination, but the Romans did not retain the territory for a sufficient period to establish an administration, or to look into the domestic affairs of local groups. So the Jews lost whatever little significance they had retained in Ardashir's and Shapur's times. Great evens transpired, but the Jews were wholly bystanders, and very occasionally, one may suppose, accidentally suffered from them. More than ever, they turned their attention away from the campaigns of the hour, and saw the rapidly changing fortunes of one royal party or another, or of one empire or another, as irrelevant to the great issues of their community. Under the second Shapur, as under the first, things were very different. But for a time, the Jews could not have cared very much what happened so long as they were left in peace. For the most part, they were—by the Iranian state. The Mazdean church was another matter.

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<sup>1</sup> Vol. II, p. 49.

## II. KARTIR, MANI, AND PAPA. JEWISH-CHRISTIANITY

The priest Kartir, who had been called merely *Herpat* in the time of Shapur I, dominated the Mazdean state-church under his successors, until the advent of Narseh.<sup>1</sup> Before Shapur's death, he had risen to the post of chief of the Magus-estate, but remained submissive to the tolerant policy of the great emperor. After Shapur's death, however, Kartir used his power to reverse it. A major political-religious figure under the Bahrams, he may well have taken part, Sprengling holds, in the intrigues that must have been involved in passing over Narseh in favor of Bahram I. This would account for his enormous influence in their time. In consequence he was able to undertake a vigorous program to eliminate 'foreign' minorities. Called "Soul-Savior of Bahram," and thus chaplain to the king of kings, he worked, in Sprengling's words, "to make Iran a good Mazdayasnian empire according to his lights, to raise the standing and glory of his church ... In short he is the founder and creator of the Sasanian Mazdayasnian state church ..." His civil functions now outweighed the religious ones. His definition of the faith in the Kartir inscription was unoriginal and uncomplicated. His chief interest lay in the propagation of the cult, rather than in exploring ethical, legal, or theological questions. A political prelate, he elaborately described the sacred fires he created. Narseh completely reversed his anti-Manichaean policy, and, Widengren most reasonably suggests, the anti-Jewish one as well. Narseh had two motives. First, he tried to abolish all marks of the reigns of his predecessors, proclaiming himself direct heir of Shapur. Hence reverting to Shapur's liberal religious-cultural policy would have conformed to his broader purpose. Second, in his struggles with the Romans under Diocletian, he may have hoped by ending the repressions to win the sympathy of the Egyptian Manichaeans, intending in the Parthian manner to make trouble for his enemy by stirring up unrest in the rear. This hypothesis, proposed by Seston, has much to recommend it.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See especially M. Sprengling, *Third-Century Iran: Sapor and Kartir* (Chicago, 1953), 37-69; also, Herzfeld, *Archaeological History*, 76f.; Geo Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans* (Stuttgart, 1965), 261-77; R. C. Zaehner, *Zurvan, A Zoroastrian Dilemma* (Oxford, 1955), 38-9; and his *Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (London, 1961), 187-8; Pigulevskaja, *Villes*, 236, and vol. II, pp. 14-19. On the establishment of fire-temples, see now J.-P. de Menasce, *Feux et Fondations Pieuses dans le Droit Sassanide* (Paris, 1964, *Travaux de l'Institut d'Études Iraniennes de l'Université de Paris*, 2)

<sup>2</sup> W. Seston, "Le Roi Sassanide Narsès, Les Arabes, et le Manichéisme," *Mé-*

Kartir's most notable success was his participation in the martyrdom of Mani in 276/277.<sup>1</sup> One recalls<sup>2</sup> that he boasted about his "opposition" to Jews, Sramans, Brahmans, Nasoreans, Christians,<sup>3</sup> Maktiks, and Zandiks (=Manichaeans). While Hormizd I may, like Shapur, have favored the last-named, Bahram I did not. He called Mani to vindicate himself, accusing him of neglecting his duties to the court. Henning translates the account as follows:

His [Bahram's] first words to the Lord were, "You are not welcome." The Lord replied, "What wrong have I done?" The king said, "I have sworn not to let you come into this country," and in anger, he spoke thus to the Lord, "Eh! What are you good for, since you go neither hunting nor fighting? But perhaps you are needed for this doctoring and this physicking? And you don't even do that!" The Lord replied thus, "I have not done you any wrong. Always have I done good to you and your family. Many and numerous were your servants whom I have [freed] of demons and witches. Many were those whom I have made rise from their illnesses. Many were those from whom I have averted the numerous kinds of ague. Many were those who were at the point of death, and I have revived them."<sup>4</sup>

This text purports to be an eyewitness account by Mani's interpreter at court, and hence may provide historically valuable information. If so, it is striking that he assumed the correctness of Bahram's belief that his rightful task was to heal, and replied accordingly. He said nothing about being "the seal of prophecy" or offering a message to unite the empire and complete the revelations of Zoroaster, Jesus, and Buddha, but claimed that he had exorcised devils and healed sickness. Mani was

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*langes Syriens offerts à M. René Dussaud* (Paris, 1939), 227-34. See also Frye, *Heritage*, 208. On Kartir and the Jews, see Geo Widengren, "The Status of the Jews in the Sassanian Empire," *IA* 1, 1961, 129-31.

<sup>1</sup> Christensen, *L'Iran*, 190-7; Zaehner, *Dawn*, 186-7; *Zurvan*, 38-9; Widengren, *Religionen*, 274-83; Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *La Religion*, 280-2; Otakar Klima, *Manis Zeit und Leben* (Prague 1962), 360-400; Henri-Charles Puech, *Le Manichéisme, Son Fondateur, Sa Doctrine* (Paris, 1949), 49-57; Nöldeke, *Tabari*, 47; and, most recently, Geo Widengren, *Mani and Manichaeism* (London, 1965) 37-42. In the Manichaean homilies, Mani is accused of "teaching against our law," an offence against God and punishable by death. Widengren points out that Kartir may not have had so central a part in the persecution of Mani as he later claimed.

<sup>2</sup> KZ 1. 9-10, cited in vol. II, p. 18. See also Kurt Rudolph, *Die Mandäer* (Göttingen 1960), p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> See *Chronique de Séert* (Paris, 1908, *Pat. Or. IV*), 238-9, the Christians suffered in the time of Mani's downfall, and compare Vööbus, cited below p. 10, 3, 162. See also M.-L. Chaumont, "Les Sassanides et la Christianisation de l'Empire iranien au III<sup>e</sup> siècle de notre ère," *RHR* 165, 1964, 165-202.

<sup>4</sup> W. B. Henning, "Mani's Last Journey," *BSOS* 10, 1939-1942, 941-53.

condemned to death. His followers, who possessed substantial writings of the prophet, fled from Babylonia after Šiš, or Šišin, Mani's disciple and successor, was crucified. They became especially influential in Northeastern Iran.

After the deportations of Shapur in 260, Christianity became well established in Babylonia; in this period appeared the first known *Catholicus*, Papa bar Aggai (247-326), at the end of the third century. A disciple of Mari, Papa was recognized by the Mesopotamian and Syrian Churches, and represents the first tie between Babylonian Christianity and the west. He faced considerable opposition, however and was deposed and replaced by Simon bar Sabba'e (326-341) who was ignored by the western fathers. By the turn of the fourth century, churches were found in many of the villages and towns of the region from Armenia<sup>1</sup>, whose monarch, Trdat, was converted before 300 by Gregor Lusavorič, Adiabene, and Kurdistan, southward to Susa and the Persian gulf. We do not know how successful, if at all, were Kartir's persecutions between 273 and 293. Though churches were destroyed, we have slight record of martyrs during these years.<sup>2</sup> The inner life of the church, so ably described by Arthur Vööbus,<sup>3</sup> stressed asceticism, and led to autochthonous monasticism. From the times of Addai, the church strictly observed the demand that the Christian should possess little in this world. Calling themselves "sons and daughters of the covenant," Christians saw themselves, like Manichaeans, as warriors in a struggle in behalf of God, much in the tradition of first-century Jewish sectarianism. By this time, too, Marcion had found followers in Iran, whose belief in the value of celibacy, fasting, and poverty provided additional impetus for the ascetic emphasis of the orthodox group. Vööbus holds that the third-century marked the full development of ascetic trends in the Persian church, producing a heightened sense of the church as a covenanted community along monastic lines. However widespread the ascetic strain, it was only

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<sup>1</sup> On Jews in Armenia, see below, pp. 339-354.

<sup>2</sup> See especially J. Labourt, *La Christianisme dans l'Empire Perse* (Paris, 1904), 17-23; Widengren, *Religionen*, 274-80; Christensen, *L'Iran* 261-2; Felix Haase, *Alichristliche Kirchengeschichte* (Leipzig, 1925), 104-6; and compare Paulus Peeters, "La 'Passionnaire d'Adiabène,'" *Analecta Bollandiana* 43, 1925, 261-325. See Chaumont, *op. cit.*, p. 198-199.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient. A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East. I. The Origin of Asceticism. Early Monasticism in Persia* (Louvain, 1958), I, 1-169 *passim*.

after 350 that the monastic movement took root in Adiabene, the first foundations being dated from that time.<sup>1</sup>

We know little about the relations between Jews and Christians. On the one hand, as we shall see, the virtuosi of each group stressed the need to keep apart. The rabbis were quite outraged in particular by the conversion of Jews to Christianity. On the other, reading the same Scriptures, and perhaps forced together in Kartir's day by common tribulations, the people may have seen things differently. We have an account, dating from the sixth century, of how a local holy man by the name of Sergius wrecked the synagogue of a village in northern Mesopotamia after long disputations with the Jews. The Jews lamented bitterly, and turned to the Christians, who supported them, and accused Sergius of wishing to disturb the peace. Sergius outwitted them all by quickly building a chapel on the site of the synagogue, whereupon the Jews, "reinforced by those in whose territory they were settled" burned down the saint's huts.<sup>2</sup> What is striking in this account is not the enmity of the holy man for the Jews, but the friendship of the ordinary Christians, whom the hagiograph accuses of being in Jewish pay. We do not know whether a similar situation prevailed two centuries earlier.<sup>3</sup> In the time of Shapur II, the Christians underwent severe persecutions, which may have embittered relationships, for later Christian writers accused Jews and Manichaeans of stirring up Persian animosities against the Christians. Sozomen accuses Babylonian Jews of involvement in the arrest of Simon bar Sabba'e. J. B. Segal rejects the allegation.<sup>4</sup> In any event, by this time, Iran held a large Christian population, in part because of conversion, in part because of the deportations of Shapur forty years earlier.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne. Contribution à l'Étude de l'Histoire et de la Géographie Ecclésiastiques et Monastiques du Nord de l'Iraq* (Beyrouth, 1965), II, 822, "Aucune trace ne subsiste de fondation antérieure à la seconde moitié du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle." The most ancient foundations are those of the Greek ascetics exiled under Valens (364-378), a second group apparently fleeing from Egypt, and, possibly, a locally organized foundation, in the same period.

<sup>2</sup> John, Bishop of Ephesus, *Lives of Simeon and Sergius*, in *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, translated and edited by E. W. Brooks, *Pat. Or.*, 17, 1, 1923; 18, 4, 1924; 19, 2, 1926; quotation from 17, 1, 90-93.

<sup>3</sup> See Nöldeke, *Tabari*, 68-9, n. 4.

<sup>4</sup> "The Jews of North Mesopotamia," in *Studies in the Bible presented to M. H. Segal*, Vol. XVII, *Publication of the Israel Society for Biblical Research*, ed. by J. M. Grintz and J. Liver, (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 50-1. We shall return to this matter in volume IV.

<sup>5</sup> Addai Scher with J. Périer, *Histoire Nestorienne Inédite (Chronique de Séert)*, *Pat. Or.* 4, 1908, I, 223, "Dieu gratifia ces Romains de l'affection des Perses ..."

*Jewish-Christianity*: The attention paid by rabbinic sources to *minim* in this period far exceeded that in the earlier one. It has frequently been thought that *minim* were Jewish-Christians, and if so, the considerable advance of Christianity into Babylonia at this time would explain the deepening concern of the rabbis. It is reasonable to suppose that most Babylonian *minim* were now Jewish-Christians of some sort. The following suggest so:

R. Naḥman in the name of Rabbah b. Abbuha said, "There are no *minim* among the nations that serve the stars." But behold we see them! Then I should render it, "The majority of star worshippers are not *minim* ..."

(b. Ḥul. 13b)

R. Naḥman said, "The Scroll of the Torah written by a *min* should be burned."

(b. Git. 45b)

R. Naḥman said, "Whoever is as skilled in replying to *minim* as R. 'Idit should do so, but not otherwise." A certain *min* said to R. 'Idit, "It is written, 'And to Moses he said, Ascend to the Lord' (Ex. 24.1). Ascend to *me*, it ought to say. [Hence the Godhead is divided.]" He replied, "That is Metatron, whose name is the same as his master's, as it is written, 'For my name is in him' (Ex. 23.21)." "If so, we should worship him!" "It is written, 'Do not rebel against him'—Do not exchange me for him." "But if so, why is it said, 'He will not pardon your transgression' [i.e. because he has not the authority to do so.]" He replied, "We believe that even as a messenger [PRWWNK]<sup>1</sup> we would not accept him, as it says, 'And he said to him, If *your* presence does not go' (Ex. 23.15)."

(b. Sanh. 38b)

Two sayings of R. Sheshet are germane to the problem:

R. Sheshet used to say to his attendant, "Turn me any way [for prayer] except east, not because the Shekhinah is *not* there, but because the *minim* prescribe turning to the east."

(b. B.B. 25a)

R. Sheshet was blind. Once all the people went out to see the king, and R. Sheshet arose and went with them. A certain *min* came across him and said, "Whole pitchers go to the river, but where do the broken ones go to?" He replied, "I will show you that I know more than you." The first troop passed by and a shout arose. Said the *min*, "The king is

<sup>1</sup> Messenger, see 'Arukh, VI 415-6, precursor, IX, 338, From Pahlavi, *parvān*; also Drower and Macuch, *Mandaic Dictionary* s.v. Paruanga, p. 363, messenger, guide, redeemer, savior.



coming.” “He is not coming,” replied R. Sheshet. A second troop passed by and when a shout arose, the *min* said, “Now the king is coming.” R. Sheshet replied, “The king is not coming.” A third troop passed by and there was silence. Said R. Sheshet, “Now the king is indeed coming.” The *min* said to him, “How do you know it?” He replied, “Because earthly royalty is like the heavenly court, for it is written, ‘Go forth and stand upon the mountain before the Lord ... And behold the Lord passed by ... and after the fire a still small voice’ (I Kings 19.11-12).” When the king came, R. Sheshet said the appropriate blessing. The *min* said to him, “You say a blessing for one whom you cannot see?” What happened to that *min*? Some say his companions put his eyes out, and others say that R. Sheshet cast his eyes upon him and he became a heap of bones. [Var: R. Sheshet gave him something and a flame broke forth and consumed his eyes.]<sup>1</sup>

(b. Ber. 58a)

R. Naḥman’s first saying, which appears in the same source in his own name, would lead us to infer that most, if not all, *minim* were Jews. The term clearly does not refer to idolaters as such, but to Jews who believed or behaved in ways the rabbis did not approve, probably Christians. It is in the spirit of R. Yoḥanan’s saying, that the pagans were blameless, merely preserving their ancestor’s practices, while the *minim* diverged from those of their [Jewish] forefathers. It is quite correct, therefore, to say that the majority of pagans were not *minim*, and one should suppose that most of the *minim* were Jewish-Christians. Burning a Scroll of the Torah written by a *min* leads to a less unequivocal conclusion, for others might conceive that the magical value of such a Scroll would make it worthwhile for anyone so inclined to copy and possess one. On the other hand, the issue is, Is such a Scroll sacred, as one merely copied by a gentile would not have been, and the answer, that it was not, suggests that some thought to the contrary, because

<sup>1</sup> Rabbinowicz, *Dig. Sof.* I, 326, says that all the manuscript evidence supports the reading of *min*, and not Sadducean, as well it might since the Sadducees were not found after the second century. On this passage, see also M. Avi-Yonah, *Bimei Roma uVizantion* (Tel Aviv, 1946), 118-20. Bacher, *op. cit.*, 76, says that the “Sadducee” of this passage is a Manichaean. See also 78, n. 12, “Schescheth scheint zu den Manichaern in polemischen Beziehungen gestanden zu haben,” citing the saying that the “Minim” pray to the east. But as we shall see, (below n. p. 14, n. 1), it was a well-known and commonplace Christian practice. The Scriptural debates reveal knowledge of more than the Pentateuch, or of Genesis alone, which is just about all that Mani and his followers knew. See also M. Kadushin, *Worship and Ethics* (Evanston, 1964), 102, on the “blessing against the minim” in Babylonia. In the uncensored version of b. Shabbat 104b, R. Hiṣda refers to the Stada-ben Stada tradition. On Jewish-Christians in the Kartir inscription, see also Chaumont, *op. cit.*, pp. 194-195.

of the Jewish origins of the *min*. The third saying, very much in the spirit of such encounters, in which Scripture was made the battleground for conflicting theologies, has numerous parallels. The polemic, against accepting forgiveness from any except the Lord himself, would be particularly appropriate if directed against a Jewish-Christian Christology, such as that of the Epistle to the Hebrews, which held that Jesus was a Messenger, the Messiah in the classical Jewish sense, but not the God-man of gentile Christianity. While we have references to Palestinian Jewish sectarians following a similar practice, it was the Christians who faced the east in prayer.<sup>1</sup> These particular *minim* were therefore Christians. R. Sheshet's dispute with the *min*, on the other hand, reveals only the classical rabbinic polemic, that the rabbis' knowledge of Scripture endowed them with more than ordinary power, and tells us nothing whatever about the group, if any, to which that particular heretic belonged. R. Nahman's warning not to dispute with *minim* if one is not especially adept at it tells us that the *minim* offered powerful biblical arguments, and that some Jews, engaging in disputations, must have been won over. The bulk of the evidence points to Jewish-Christians, but there are still grounds to doubt that all *minim*<sup>2</sup> had adopted that, from the rabbinic viewpoint, heretical position.

It seems clear that *minut* was a more serious problem now than it had been in early Babylonian Jewish history.<sup>3</sup> Both the Jewish and the Christian data suggest so, for, unlike earlier times, there was great

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Jonathan Z. Smith provides the following note: On the Christian practice of praying to the East see especially the classic study of F.-J. Dölger, *Sol Salutis: Gebet und Gesang im christlichen Altertum* (Liturgiegeschichtliche Forschungen, 4-5, Münster, 1925). The best treatment, both giving texts and attempting to relate the practice to "heterodox" Judaism, is E. Peterson, "La croce e la preghiera verso l'oriente," *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 59 (1945), 52-61 reprinted as "Das Kreuz und das Gebet nach Osten," E. Peterson, *Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis* (Freiburg, 1959), 15-35.

<sup>2</sup> As to the Mandaeans, see Kurt Rudolph, *Die Mandäer*, 51-4. The bitterness between Mandaeans and Jews was strong. But did the rabbis see Mandaeans as *minim*? I see no reason to think so. On the similarities between the Essenes and the Mandaeans, see Rudolph, 223-7. The preference of the Mandaeans for light in general, and for the sun in particular, is well-known. As to the sun, see E. S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran, Their Cults, Customs, Magic, Legends, and Folklore* (Leiden, 1962), 75-8. But I am unable to find the requirement to *pray* facing the sun, though the bier-weavers must work facing it, despite the importance of sun-symbolism in Mandaean religion. It was, on the other hand, a normal Christian practice, so I doubt that a *min* was other than a Jewish convert to Christianity. See also R. T. Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (Clifton, 1966) pp. 332, 178, 157, 200 n.

<sup>3</sup> On *minim* in the synagogue of Sura, see b. Ber. 12a, cited below, p. 237.

concern with the problem on the Jewish side, and it was precisely at the end of the third-century that the bishopric of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was founded. How shall we account for the conversion of what seem to have been significant numbers of Jews to Christianity at just this time? I should suppose that there were several sources of converts. First of all, the Christians of Adiabene, most of whom were originally Jews, may have supplied some of the *minim* to which these and other sources refer. I am much impressed by Asahel Grant's arguments in favor of northern Israelite (=Adiabenean) origins of the Nestorians.<sup>1</sup> Since the rabbis knew full well that the ten tribes had been exiled to the Khabur valley, they may have regarded an Adiabenean Christian as a Jewish apostate, or *min*. But I think that a chief source of converts must have been Babylonian Jewry itself, for the data we have considered make it clear that the rabbis were contending with a local, and not imported problem. Regarding *minut* as the worst possible sin,<sup>2</sup> the rabbis clearly had a serious problem on their hands. Some Jews must have found that the rabbis' interpretation of the Torah was less convincing than that of the Christians, who claimed, as did the rabbis, to provide an authoritative account of what Scriptures meant. The masses of Jews may well have held to the pre-rabbinic folk-Yahwism, associated with the Temple, the Scriptures, and worship of the Lord alone. Now the extensive rabbinic interpretations of the Scriptures, the claim of a new guild of religious leaders to possess a sole monopoly to direct the life of the community *and* the increasingly effective execution of that claim, the requirement to separate from easy intercourse with neighbors of generations for fear of assimilation of pagan practices, the modification of centuries-old customs—these must have seemed to some Jews quite in excess of what Scripture required. It is of course conjectural, but not groundless, to suppose that such Jews turned in reaction against the growing influence of rabbinic Judaism to renounce it altogether in favor of what seemed to them an equally valid, and perhaps more acceptable, alternative offered by the competing party. At the same time, one may recall that the rabbis of the earlier generation had laid great stress upon the eschatological consequences of right action. If Israel would keep the law, the decrees of the pagan nations would be annulled, and that very nullification would constitute the advent of the Messianic day. What had happened after two generations of keeping

<sup>1</sup> Asahel Grant, *The Nestorians* (N.Y. 1841), provides a strong, if philologically primitive case, see in particular pp. 153ff. See below, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> As in the story in b. A.Z. 17a, the woman did everything evil, *even minut*.

the law as the rabbis said? Jews saw further incursions into Babylonia, further successes for pagan regimes, but no Messiah. As after the destruction of the Second Temple, numerous Jews found their way outside of the Jewish community, so now after the catastrophe of 262-3, when the rabbinical academy in Nehardea itself was destroyed, and in the aftermath of the disappointments and persecutions of the following decades, some Jews must have come to question the rabbinical interpretation of Scripture by merely measuring it against the rabbinical interpretation of history—to be sure, ignoring how the rabbis assessed the success of their reforms.

A third factor seems to me not excluded by the first two. If, as we shall see, the rabbis behaved in a manner likely to offend significant classes of Jews, one may suppose that such Jews would, in consequence, turn to the competing and equally Scriptural alternative offered by the Christians. I refer specifically to those lower class Jews who, for not paying the head-tax, were enslaved to him (including rabbis) who paid it for them. Such slaves found in rabbinical doctrines only contempt for the Jewish slave, and no compassion whatever for the circumstance that had resulted in his present unhappy condition. One can hardly suppose that the slave or his family would not therefore react in a negative way to the rabbis' claim to be authoritative expositors of Scripture. Nor would the slaves have been the sole group to reject the Amoraic viewpoint and to adopt another one instead, for one may suppose that in this period numerous other Jews would have rejected the rabbis' form of Judaism for one reason or another. The very Jewish qualities of Nestorian Christianity, the later concern of Aphraates to distinguish between Judaism and Christianity, the need of the oriental fathers to reconsider, time and again, the issues long ago settled in the West by the followers of Paul—these facts suggest that the Iranian church was constituted in significant measure by Jewish converts, and if so, one must look at the factors that, from a worldly viewpoint, entered into their abandonment of the Jewish community of the day. The chief of these, I should think, was the strong reaction of some individuals, groups, and classes, against the growing influence of the rabbinical academies. Seeing the rabbinical and Christian parties as competing mostly about the interpretation of Scripture,<sup>1</sup> at least some Jews clearly opted for the latter, in consequence of which *minim* reappear as a significant problem for Jewry.

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<sup>1</sup> See vol. I, pp. 166-9, and vol. II, pp. 23-24.

## III. "EITHER IN YOUR SHADOW OR IN ESAU'S"

In this period, as we have seen, the Jewish community of Babylonia met with two external threats, the Roman occupations of 283 under Carus and of 298 under Galerius, and the persecutions instigated by Kartir in the time of Bahram I and Bahram II. The unrest accompanying Roman incursions may be reflected in the view of R. Naḥman that Babylonia [=Nehardea] is to be compared to a frontier town,<sup>1</sup> and, more obviously, in the following:

R. Mattena raised the question, "When Rome appoints a Kalend and there are towns in its vicinity subjected to her, is it forbidden or permitted to transact business in those towns?"

(b. A.Z. 8a)

Such a question is particularly pertinent to the situation of a temporarily occupied region, in which Roman troops would have celebrated their festival in the towns they held, while nearby towns, without a garrison, would not do likewise. R. Mattena's question presupposes either the setting of a frontier, or an irregular occupation. Assuming that it reflects a contemporary, Babylonian venue, one should conclude that he had the latter situation in mind.

Kartir's threat to Jewry ought to have proved more serious. With his fellow Magi, he had gained sufficient power to arrange the judicial murder of Mani, whom the former emperor had protected, and apparently, if the *Nestorian History* preserves accurate information, at the same time to destroy Christian churches. The Christians protested that they were different from the Manichaeans, and should not share their fate. As to the Jews, Kartir's clear reference to the persecution and expulsion of foreign denominations, including the Jews, would lead us to suppose considerable trouble. The Jewish sources do not tell us much about it, however, and before the Kartir inscription was properly interpreted, no one thought upon the basis of Talmudic evidence alone that in the time of the Bahrams' the Jews were not living in peace. Now, by contrast, Widengren calls Kartir, "the most redoubtable enemy the religious minorities, and hence also the Jews, ever possessed in Sassanian times."<sup>2</sup> The only clear and unequivocal

<sup>1</sup> b. B.Q. 83a, it is permitted to breed a dog in a town adjoining the frontier, and R. Joseph b. Manyumi in R. Naḥman's name declared that Babylonia, meaning Nehardea, was such a town, and see b. 'Eruv. 45a.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Widengren, *IA* 1, 130-1; vol. II, pp. 14-19; and Chaumont, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

evidence of what, if anything, Kartir's persecution meant to the Jews, is the following:

Rabbah b. bar Ḥana was ill. Rav Judah and [other] rabbis<sup>1</sup> came to visit him. They asked him, "If two brought a bill of divorce from abroad, do they need to declare that it was written and sealed in their presence or not?" He replied, "They do not need so to declare, for if they stated, 'In our presence he divorced her,' would they not be believed?" Meanwhile a certain Magus [ḤBR'] came and he took the lamp from before them. He [Rabbah b. bar Ḥana] exclaimed, "Merciful Lord! Either in thy shadow or in the shadow of the son of Esau!"

(b. Git. 16b-17a)

It seems incongruous that so slight an inconvenience—the removal of a lamp, presumably on a Zoroastrian festival—should have elicited such anguished despair. In Rav's time, the Persians were believed to have destroyed synagogues. In Kartir's, they denied the Jews the use of a lamp. And yet, this is the only evidence I have found which *unambiguously* and openly testifies to "persecutions."<sup>2</sup> We should also note the following far less probative contemporary data:

'And let the king appoint officers' (Est. 2:3). What was the reason [for the humiliation of the Persian women, who were taken to the king and rejected]? Rav Huna said, "Because they used to ridicule the daughters of Israel as ugly, whom no one would want to look upon, therefore they came to this calamity."

(Est. R. 5.3.)

'The Jews had light and gladness, joy and honor' (Est. 8:16). Rav Judah said, "Light is Torah, and so it is said, 'For the commandment is a lamp, and Torah is light' (Prov. 6:23). Gladness refers to a feast day, and so it is said, 'And you will rejoice in your festival' (Deut. 16:14). Rejoicing is circumcision, and so it is said, 'I rejoice at thy word' (Ps. 119:162). And honor refers to *tefillin*, and so it states, 'And all the peoples of the earth will see that the name of the Lord is called upon thee, and they shall revere thee' (Deut. 28:10)."

(b. Meg. 16b)

Rabbinical comments upon Esther earlier seemed to refer to contemporary difficulties<sup>3</sup> and so one may conjecture that here too, the

<sup>1</sup> Or, Rabbah

<sup>2</sup> See She'iltot 42 at the end. Compare b. Shab. 45a, Sanh. 74b. See also W. Bacher, *Die Agada der Babylonischen Amoräer* (Frankfurt a/M., 1913), 87-8. Bacher rightly rejects Graetz's emendation of Rabbah b. bar Ḥana to Rabbah b. Ḥana, hence placing the incident at the beginning of Ardashir's reign, rather than in the time of the Bahrams. He notes that Rabbah and Rav Judah could not be dated at such an early time. Abraham Krochmal, *Perushim veHe' Arot le-Talmud Bavli* (Lvov, 1881), 221-2, seems quite unaware of these difficulties.

<sup>3</sup> Vol. II, pp. 57-64.