

GEOFFREY HERMAN

A Prince  
without a Kingdom

*Texts and Studies in  
Ancient Judaism  
150*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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150





Geoffrey Herman

# A Prince without a Kingdom

The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era

Mohr Siebeck

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זכרון עולם

אמי מורתי

חווה בת משה ומרים

(לבית גריצרשטיין)



## Preface and Acknowledgments

This is a book about the Sasanian Exilarchate. Through a re-examination of the primary sources and scholarship, as well as the integration of comparative sources from Iranian studies and Persian Christianity, it seeks to understand and explain the enigmatic Exilarchate that features in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds. It addresses some of the key historical questions about the Exilarchate, progressing through chapters that concern dating its origins, its location, the source of its authority and its effective powers. It deals with the relationship between the rabbis and the Exilarchs, broaching topics such as the authority of the Exilarchs over the judicial system, rabbinic portrayals of, and responses to the Exilarchate, and the relationship between the Exilarchate and Persian culture. The first two appendices are comprehensive studies of the Geonic sources.

This volume is a revised and expanded translation of my doctoral thesis. The thesis was submitted to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in the autumn of 2005 and approved (*summa cum laude*) in the following spring. It was subsequently awarded the Bernard M. Bloomfield prize for 2007 by the Hebrew University.

The brief discussion of the *hargbed* has been slightly amended on the basis of an article I published in 2009. The discussion of a significant episode (*b. Ber.* 46b) is now based upon a more detailed study that recently appeared in *Zion*. Most of the material on the *Catholicos* which appeared in the original thesis as a separate chapter is here integrated in the relevant discussions on the Exilarchate. Other changes are more minor, but since this volume reflects my on-going thinking on the subject it should be seen as replacing the Hebrew thesis.

A number of articles have appeared recently that are relevant to the subject of this book but have reached me too late for me to relate to their findings here. Of special note are Avinoam Cohen's most recent studies on Mar Zuṭra published in *Sidra* and Shaya Gafni's study on Sherira's epistle published in *Zion*.

This work is the culmination of years of work and intellectual development and this is an opportune moment to take account. My years at the Hebrew University have been many and good. There I studied history, and particularly Jewish history under great historians. My teachers of ancient Jewish

history have included Shaya Gafni, Moshe David Herr, Tal Ilan, Oded Irshai, Yisrael (Lee) Levine, the late Shmuel Safrai, and Danny Schwartz. Among those with whom I have studied rabbinic literature are Robert Brody, Menahem Hirshman, Menahem Kahana, Menahem Kister, and Yaakov Sussman. My ancient language studies have included Greek, Syriac, Pahlavi, and Arabic. My study of Pahlavi and the Zoroastrian religious literature has been with Shaul Shaked, and with James Russell (Harvard), and Ab de Jong (Leiden) the last two while they were in Jerusalem as visiting professors.

Jerusalem is known for its sages, and the resources available extend well beyond the university walls. I was privileged to spend four years in the academic environment of the Hartman Institute studying Talmud with such distinguished pedagogues as Moshe Halbertal, Menahem Kahana, Shelomo Naeh, and Aharon Shemesh. The Jewish National (and University) Library, a veritable treasure-house of Judaic scholarship is also distinguished for the amicability and expertise of its staff. The staff at the *Institute for Microfilm and Hebrew Manuscripts at the Jewish National and University Library*, and the Oriental, Judaica, and General reading rooms are always helpful and make the National Library a pleasant environment for scholarship. It is also a happy duty to express my appreciation to the staff at the HUC library, the Schocken library, the library of the L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art, the Israel Museum library, and the IAA library at the Rockefeller Museum, and the library of Tantur, the Ecumenical Institute for Theological Studies, all in Jerusalem. I would like to thank the helpful staff of the JTS library and the New York Public Library.

Various data bases have considerably facilitated the work with rabbinic material. Among these are the Friedberg Genizah Project; the Talmud manuscript witnesses collected by Yad Harav Herzog, and the Saul Lieberman databank.

The translation and revision of this book I have undertaken in brief moments snatched from my formal commitments at the institutions where I have since been graciously hosted. These include the Jewish Theological Seminary, Harvard University, the Hebrew University, the University of Geneva, Ruhr University in Bochum, and finally Cornell University.

I would like to warmly thank Seth Schwartz for inviting me to publish this work in this series, and Henning Ziebritzki of Mohr Siebeck for kindly accepting it. I would like to thank Ilse König of Mohr Siebeck for her dedicated editorial guidance. I owe a debt of gratitude to Shamma Friedman and David Goodblatt, the two external readers of the original thesis, for their encouraging evaluations. I would especially like to thank Henry Edinger for his devoted editorial help and Ab de Jong (Leiden) who read and commented upon chapter 1.

I wish to also acknowledge some other colleagues, friends and relatives for their support, encouragement, advice, and collegiality over the years, not exclusively related to this study: Aaron Amit, Avri Bar-Levav, Zechariah Edinger, Liora Elias Bar-Levav z"l, Yaakov Elman, Noah Hacham, Kim Haines-Eitzen, Richard Kalmin, Reuven Kiperwasser, David Powers, Shai Secunda, and Dan Shapira. Above all others is Nehama whose sacrifices for my academic pursuits have been considerable.

Jerusalem, May, 2012

Geoffrey Herman



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## Notes to the Reader

The Yerushalmi is cited according to MS Leiden (Academy of the Hebrew Language edition) and the Bavli is usually cited from the best textual witness as described unless otherwise stated. The epistle of Rav Sherira Gaon is cited from the French version.

The translation of rabbinic texts is my own unless noted. All translations from modern Hebrew scholarship are my own.

For the Bavli I have on occasion, sought assistance from existing translations to aid with felicitous language, favouring the Soncino translation, and turning to Michael Sokoloff's masterly *Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic* for individual words and phrases. Citations from Aphrahat's demonstrations are based on Parisot's edition.

The transliteration of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac terms and names follows a middle path, seeking to preserve a fairly accurate transcription of the consonants, including the gutturals, but not employing a fully phonetic transcription. Common biblical names appear in the familiar English form, e.g. Samuel, Judah, Joseph. For Middle-Persian words and names I have followed the conventions for that field.

# Abbreviations

## Non-Hebrew Journals and Series

AB	Analecta Bollandiana
AI	Acta Iranica
AJSR	Association for Jewish Studies Review
AMSL	The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures
AMS	Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum
ANRW	Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt
AO	Archiv Orientalní
BAI	Bulletin of the Asia Institute
BSOAS	Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
CHI	The Cambridge History of Iran
CRINT	Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
EI	Encyclopaedia Iranica
HR	History of Religions
HTR	Harvard Theological Review
HUCA	Hebrew Union College Annual
IA	Iranica Antiqua
IEJ	Israel Exploration Journal
IJ	Irano-Judaica
JA	Journal Asiatique
JAOS	Journal of the American Oriental Society
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JE	Jewish Encyclopedia
JESHO	Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient
JH	Jewish History
JHS	Journal of the Hellenistic Society
JJGL	Jahrbücher für Jüdische Geschichte und Litteratur
JJLG	Jahrbuch der Jüdisch-Literarischen Gesellschaft
JJS	Journal of Jewish Studies
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review
JRAS	Journal of the Royal Asian Society
JRS	Journal of Roman Studies
JSAI	Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam
JSIJ	Jewish Studies Internet Journal
JSJ	Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSNT	Journal for the Study of the New Testament
JSS	Jewish Social Studies

JStQ	Jewish Studies Quarterly
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
MGWJ	Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums
OC	Oriens Christianus
OS	Orientalia Suecana
OT	Oudtestamentische Studiën
PAAJR	Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research
PBA	Proceedings of the British Academy
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
PW	Paulys Realencyclopädia Der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft
REArm	Revue des Études Arméniennes
REJ	Revue des Études Juives
RHR	Revue d'histoire des religions
SCI	Scripta Classica Israelica
SEG	Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum
SEU	Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensa
SHA	Scriptores Historiae Augustae
StIr	Studia Iranica
TAM	Tituli Asiae Minoris
VTSup.	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WZKM	Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlands
YCS	Yale Classical Studies
ZDMG	Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft
ZKT	Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie
ZNW	Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft

### Rabbinic Texts\*

In references to the Talmudic literature, the following abbreviations are used: b. = Babylonian Talmud; m. = Mishnah; y. = Palestinian Talmud; t. = Tosefta. The names of the tractates cited in this book are abbreviated as follows:

<i>AZ</i>	‘Avoda Zara
<i>BB</i>	Bava Batra
<i>Bekh.</i>	Bekhorot
<i>Ber.</i>	Berakhot
<i>Beṣa</i>	
<i>Bik.</i>	Bikkurim
<i>BM</i>	Bava Meṣi’a
<i>BQ</i>	Bava Qamma
<i>Demai</i>	
‘ <i>Eruv.</i>	‘Eruvin
<i>Git.</i>	Giṭṭin
<i>Ḥag.</i>	Ḥagiga
<i>Ḥul.</i>	Ḥullin

---

\* For abbreviations for other rabbinic works see the bibliography.

<i>Hor.</i>	Horayot
<i>Kelim</i>	
<i>Keritot</i>	
<i>Ket.</i>	Ketubbot
<i>Kil.</i>	Kilayim
<i>Mak.</i>	Makkot
<i>Meg.</i>	Megilla
<i>Me'ila</i>	
<i>Men.</i>	Menahot
<i>MQ</i>	Mo'ed Qatan
<i>Nazir</i>	
<i>Ned.</i>	Nedarim
<i>Nidda</i>	
<i>Nega'im</i>	
<i>Ohalot</i>	
<i>Pea</i>	
<i>Pes.</i>	Pesaḥim
<i>Qid.</i>	Qiddushin
<i>RH</i>	Rosh haShana
<i>San.</i>	Sanhedrin
<i>Shab.</i>	Shabbat
<i>Shevi'it</i>	
<i>Shev.</i>	Shevu'ot
<i>Sheq.</i>	Sheqalim
<i>Sota</i>	
<i>Suk.</i>	Sukka
<i>Ta'an.</i>	Ta'anit
<i>Temura</i>	
<i>Ter.</i>	Terumot
<i>Yoma</i>	
<i>Zev.</i>	Zevaḥim

### Other Abbreviations

- DJPA M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, Bar-Ilan University Press, Ramat Gan/The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 2002<sup>2</sup>.
- DJBA M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods*, Bar-Ilan University Press, Ramat Gan/The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 2002.
- IMHMJNUL Institute for Microfilm and Hebrew Manuscripts at the Jewish National and University Library



## Introduction

The Exilarchate was the foremost leadership office of Babylonian Jewry in the Sasanian era.<sup>1</sup> Based in the empire's capital, the Exilarch was the official representative of the Babylonian Jews before the king. Rabbinic literature is the main source of knowledge about the Exilarchate. It provides a colourful portrait of power and wealth, and betrays the Exilarchs' mixed relationship with the rabbis. This book is an historical study of the sources relating to the Exilarchate.

In the Aramaic sources the Exilarch is usually referred to as the *resh galuta* – the 'Head of the Exile'.<sup>2</sup> This title often appears in the construct form [*de-]vei-resh galuta*<sup>3</sup> meaning 'those affiliated with the House of the Head of the Exile'. The 'Exile' or Captivity mentioned here is a term of biblical vintage.<sup>4</sup> It evokes the illustrious biblical antiquity of Babylonian Jewry, a community that traces its origins to the exile of the Judean kingdom after the destruction of the First Temple. It alludes to the special consciousness of the Jewish community of Babylonia – often viewed in rabbinic sources as the quintessential diaspora.

Another title used for Exilarchs is (*de-]vei nesi'a*,<sup>5</sup> meaning 'those affiliated with the House of the *nesi'a*'. This title employs the Aramaic calque on the Hebrew *nasi*. It is often translated as 'prince' yet has more of a monarchical

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<sup>1</sup> The question of the existence of the Exilarchate in the Parthian era is addressed in detail in the course of the book. On the Exilarchate in the Geonic era and beyond see below appendix I, n. 3.

<sup>2</sup> ראש גולה. The form ראש גלותא is found sometimes in early witnesses. A few witnesses (confined to *b. Hul.* 92a, *b. San.* 38a and *b. Hor.* 11b) have this term in Hebrew, ראש גולה.

<sup>3</sup> [ד]בי ריש גלותא. The construct form דב/בי is common in the Bavli and is used in this context to define the determinant as a family, school, party, dynasty, and so on; an alternative possibility is to understand it as a place. Cf. LEWIN, *Igeret*, 83–4 (below in appendix II).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Jeremiah 28:6; 29:1; Ezra 1:11. In the Tannaitic sources, e.g. *m. Mid.* 3:1; *m. Sheq.* 2:4; *m. RH* 2:4. Cf. JUDELOWITZ, *Pumbedita*, 126–8; BEER, *The Babylonian Exilarchate*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> [ד]בי נשיאה. See BEER, *The Babylonian Exilarchate*, 6–9, 227. This title is used to refer to the Exilarch only in the Bavli. It appears in this sense just once in the Yerushalmi (*y. Ta'an.* 4:2 (68a), and perhaps the Babylonian context of that source was not fully appreciated. In the Geonic era it is common.

connotation. It carries the sense of a supreme political leader,<sup>6</sup> implying a certain royal pretention.<sup>7</sup>

## A. A Kingdom without Sources

### I. *Recovering a Lost Kingdom*

A combination of factors has made the Exilarchate a topic of avid interest for scholars. The Exilarchs are linked in the sources to Davidic ancestry and the notion of a princely leadership over a Diaspora community of unparalleled antiquity had great appeal. This stir is evident already in the ancient sources. For modern scholars it was perhaps accompanied by the allure of the oriental and the exotic. Such a leadership might encourage the communities of the diaspora and provide them with a source of pride, “to sweeten just a little for the Israelite nation the bitterness of the exile.”<sup>8</sup> And yet this enthusiasm may have led not a few scholars to step a little beyond the sources.

Scholars have, in fact, constructed an image of ancient Babylonian Jewry that cannot be easily borne by the sources. Babylonian Jewry is perceived as a highly unified and centralized community. Within the region of Babylonia believed to be densely populated by Jews,<sup>9</sup> it has been broadly accepted that the Exilarchate was an institution of tremendous power, and that it ruled the Jewish community of Babylonia autonomously or semi-autonomously.<sup>10</sup> Just

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<sup>6</sup> It is not employed for the Exilarch in the other common usage found in rabbinic literature as the head of a law court.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. GOODBLATT, *The Monarchic Principle*, 290–8; HABAS-RUBIN, *The Patriarch*, 13–37 (with reference to the Palestinian patriarch).

<sup>8</sup> Thus in the majestic prose of S. P. Rabinowitz’s paraphrase/translation of Graetz (*Divrei Yemei Yisrael* 2, 341): להמתיק מעט לבני העם הישראלי את מרירות הגלות. Cf. the ‘panegyric’ for Babylonia, id., 340–341; and see LAZARUS, *Die Häupter der Vertriebenen*, 2: “Ein trostreicher Gedanke!”. For the Geonic era cf. GROSSMAN, *The Babylonian Exilarchate in the Gaonic Period*, 78.

<sup>9</sup> We lack a clear idea of the size of the Jewish population of Babylonia. It is hardly possible to go beyond the hyperbolic and vague statements of Josephus (*Ant.*, 11:5, 2 [134]) and Philo (*Legatio ad Gaium*, 31, [216]) who speak of a countless number of Jews beyond the Euphrates. Cf. Neusner’s estimate of 860,000 (NEUSNER, *History*, II, 246–50), more than doubled in ELMAN “Middle Persian Culture”, 195, n. 3. Cf., too BARON, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 1, 170, 370–2.

<sup>10</sup> JOST, *Geschichte der Israeliten*, 267; GRAETZ, *Geschichte der Juden*, IV, 252: “eine gewisse politische Selbständigkeit, und sie fühlten sich in diesem Lande, wie in einem eigenen Staate”; and in S.P. Rabinowitz’s translation of Graetz (*Divrei Yemei Yisrael*, II, 346), Babylonian Jewry were כעם יושב לבדד ומכלכל בעצמו את עניניו על פי תורת מדינה אשר נתן לו, and *ibid.*, כעין ממלכה וקבוץ מדיני. FUNK, *Die Juden in Babylonien*, I, 34: “Dem Volke gegenüber waren sie allmächtig, ihr Wille war Gesetz, und ihre Befehle wurden von Allen

as Babylonian Jewry has often been perceived as some form of a “state within a state”,<sup>11</sup> or a “Jewish vassal state”,<sup>12</sup> so the Exilarchate was “a kind of miniature Jewish government”.<sup>13</sup> Already at the beginning of the era of *Wissenschaft des Judenthums*, scholars set to work exploring the structure of this institution in greater detail. Their endeavours, however, were rewarded with unsatisfactory results. This imagined Exilarchal “kingdom”, if it *was* a kingdom, was one without a land, an army, and a true citizenship to rule in any real sense.<sup>14</sup> More disconcerting, however, was that this was a kingdom without *sources*, such that are given to successive historical analysis. The scholars now confronted the reality that “the talmuds ... have not told us anything, just a little here and a little there”.<sup>15</sup> It was commonly felt that any self-respecting kingdom should have a detailed line of dynastic succession. Yet the Exilarchs mentioned in the Bavli are described “without method and regime to know the order of their succession as is right and fitting”.<sup>16</sup> Scholars believing that the Exilarchs’ alleged Davidic pedigree was a central component in establishing their status amongst the Jews would discover that there was no significant expression of this lineage in the sources. The ancient redactors of the Bavli were now accused of deliberately suppressing the ‘true’ importance of this

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befolgt”. See HOFFMANN, *Mar Samuel*, 1–2. Beer (*The Babylonian Exilarchate*, 2–3) refers to the “autonomy of Babylonian Jewry that existed for over two thousand years”.

<sup>11</sup> See GRAETZ, *Geschichte der Juden*, IV, 252; JONA, *I Rasce Galutà*, 336. Gezau (*Al Naharot Bavel*, 45), on the other hand, writes as follows: "חוקף ועז נתן לו לעשות משפט עמו בכל עניניהם האזרחיים והדתיים ויהי כראש לכנסיה חפשיה. אמנם כאשר לא היתה לשמרה זאת כל רעיון מדיני, רק לטובת הסדרים בחיים החומרים והמוסריים של היהודים על פי רוח אמונתם ודתיהם, ויהיו גם נאמנים לארץ מולדתם בכל נפשם ומאודם, מלאו חקיה וטיבה דרשו כל הימים, על כן לא נבית על זה כממלכה בתוך ממלכה (שטאאט אים שטאאטע), כי חופש כזה וזכויות כאלה רק לשלום הכללי ופריחת הממלכה יסודתם." For the promoter of Jewish autonomy in the former Pale of Settlement, Shimeon Dubnov, Babylonia provided a suitable historical precedent. Whilst he did not devote a comprehensive study to the topic, he put an emphasis on the almost complete self-rule, of Babylonian Jewry. The descent of the many rabbinic disciples to Babylonia after the defeat of the Bar Kokhba revolt, “introduced an exhilarating spirit into the life of the Jews of Babylon. It imbued them with courage to dream of liberation from the Palestine national hegemony.” (DUBNOV, *History of the Jews*, 149). He declared that the “compact masses of Jews, concentrated in the various cities of Babylon, enjoyed the fullest autonomy” (ibid, 152), and in his view the Exilarch was “a sort of satrap over the Jews” (ibid, 153).

<sup>12</sup> GRAETZ, *Geschichte der Juden*, IV, 247 and further, ibid: “die Selbständigkeit, welche die parthischen und persischen herrscher ihnen ungeschmälert gelassen hatten”. BARON, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 1, 282: “a sort of Jewish vassal prince”.

<sup>13</sup> JUDELOWITZ, *Nehardea*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. LAZARUS, *Die Häupter der Vertriebenen*, 3: “Ein König ohne Königreich, ein Fürst ohne Volk”. Likewise, a similar expression appears at the beginning of Benjamin Disraeli’s historical novel, *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy* (London, 1833) which was translated into German in the same year.

<sup>15</sup> REIFMAN, “Resh-Galuta”, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

lineage for Babylonian Jewry. Already Heinrich Graetz complained about the contemporary sources and derisively leveled an accusing finger at the Talmud itself declaring: “the Talmud, that speaks of all and sundry, surprisingly, apparently deliberately maintains its silence with respect to the Exilarchate”.<sup>17</sup> And even as it seemed clear that the Exilarchs possessed “significant influence over the development of the history of the Jews in Babylonia”,<sup>18</sup> nevertheless, in the contemporary sources we had “only disjointed matters.”<sup>19</sup> Thus it was no longer possible to reconstruct this apparently magnificent, but now *lost* royal dynasty.

Even when the talmuds speak up about the Exilarchate the picture they depict is far from clear. The relationship between the rabbis and the Exilarchs is ambiguous. The range of opinions on the Exilarchate varies from endorsement to apathy and deprecation. Besides this, the sources are apt to be terse and uninformative. When Exilarchs do appear in these sources they tend to remain in the background. With such sources it would be hard to work. As a result the sources did not offer satisfactory answers to many basic questions about the function of the Exilarchs within Jewish society. Early on Jacob Reifman, a 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar, for instance, could summarize his understanding of the evidence as follows:

The job of the Exilarch was to harshly rule over the nation and oppress them with the stick that was given him by the king, that they turn neither to the left nor to the right of whatever the *nasi*<sup>20</sup> says to them, and to punish all who depart from it, but not to teach Torah and commandments and not to instruct the nation whither they should go and how they should act.<sup>21</sup>

Reifman’s description, far from providing a compelling portrait of the Exilarchate, is better appreciated as a patent reminder of the disparate nature of the available sources, since his naïve but succinct summary reflects little more than a kind interpretation of the mixed manner in which the Exilarchate is portrayed in the Talmud.

The rabbinic corpus, then, presents a challenge. There are multiple difficulties before scholars of the Exilarchate, both on account of the paucity of sources and on account of the difficulty in reading them in an accurate, criti-

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<sup>17</sup> GRAETZ, *Geschichte der Juden*, IV, n. 37, 461: “Der Talmud, der von allem und jedem spricht, beobachtet merkwürdigerweise ein, wie es scheint, geflissentliches Stillschweigen über die Resch-Galuta ...”. See, too, *ibid*, 253. The accusation that the Talmud deliberately silences the information on the Exilarchate recurs with other scholars. See, for instance, ZEITLIN, “The Opposition to the Spiritual Leaders”, 20; NEUSNER, *History*, V, 251, 257; GOODBLATT, *The Monarchic Principle*, 278. On the Talmud’s hostility to the Exilarchate see also BEER, *The Babylonian Exilarchate*, 170.

<sup>18</sup> GRAETZ, *Geschichte der Juden*, IV, 253.

<sup>19</sup> GRAETZ, *Divrei Yemei Yisrael*, II, 347.

<sup>20</sup> He is referring to the president of the rabbinic court.

<sup>21</sup> REIFMAN, “Resh-Galuta”, 38–9.

cal and historically useful way.<sup>22</sup> Below, I shall point to ways to cope with these difficulties, but first a review of the earlier efforts by the more important scholars engaged in Exilarchal historiography.

## II. *Satrap, Feudal Prince, Tyrant, Hakham Bashi: Former Models of Exilarchal Leadership*

While indeed, a popular topic already at the beginning of modern scholarship, we should glance back a full millennium, to the Geonic era, for the real beginning of systematic Exilarchal historiography. The first documented effort to present the history of the Exilarchate is probably the medieval chronicle *Seder 'Olam Zuta* (Minor World Chronicle, henceforth *SOZ*). This chronicle contains a dynastic list linking the contemporary office holders in direct succession to the biblical King David and clearly intending to assert that they were the legitimate heirs to the Davidic dynasty. Another attempt to reconstruct the history of the institution can be pieced together through analysis of the writings of the late 10<sup>th</sup> century head of the Pumbedita academy, Rav Sherira Geon.<sup>23</sup> Talmud commentators and chroniclers reflect upon the Exilarchate and its history throughout the Middle Ages. Of particular note are testimonies found in the works of Muslims who are very interested in the institution for reasons of their own.<sup>24</sup>

Modern scholarship on the Exilarchate dates to the works of Isaac Marcus Jost,<sup>25</sup> followed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars Reifman,<sup>26</sup> Avraham Krochmal,<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The topic of the Exilarchate appears, unfortunately, to be filled with far-reaching theories claiming support from various but ultimately dubious sources. Many will be addressed in the course of this book but here is one example. A. Burstein (“Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s Request from Vespasian”, 42) holds that R. Yohanan b. Zakkai requested “the dynasty of the *Exilarch*” from Vespasian, but this was not granted him. In his view, the original source read ‘שושילתא דר-ג’ and the abbreviation was deciphered by the later scribes as רבן גמלאיל. Since this request was not granted, the Palestinian tradition did not preserve this request. However, in reality, R. Yohanan b. Zakkai surely would not have asked for Rabban Gamaliel since he was affiliated with a different chain of rabbinic tradition. On his deathbed, he wished for the coming of Hezeqiah – the *Exilarch*, but ultimately Rabban Gamaliel seized the patriarchate.

Even as history cannot be written without at least a modicum of imagination, as goes the saying of Mommsen (mentioned by BICKERMAN, *Der Gott der Makkabäer*, 11), I have set for myself the task of steering clear of imaginative and speculative reconstructions that drift away from the data, and to carefully sieve through the sources. Judelowitz’s formulation on our topic appears rather apt (*Nehardea*, 85): “we have no interest in this book in investigations and casuistry, only in that which we have found to be explicit, or that which can be proven by our estimation constructed upon the methods which we have proposed for our task”.

<sup>23</sup> These Geonic sources are examined in appendices I and II.

<sup>24</sup> GOLDZIHNER, “Renseignements”.

<sup>25</sup> JOST, *Geschichte der Israeliten*, IV, 267–328; idem, *Geschichte des Judenthums*, esp. 130–132.

S. Galante,<sup>28</sup> Graetz, Nehemiah Brüll,<sup>29</sup> and others.<sup>30</sup> The Exilarchate often figures centrally in their historical studies and surveys of the period. They base their studies almost exclusively on the Talmudic sources, aided by the Geonic evidence.<sup>31</sup>

It was Jost who created the first historical survey of the topic. For him, the Exilarchate emerged as an inner Jewish phenomenon subsequently to be recognized by government authorities. He sees it as a powerful and highly influential political body, administering the lives of the members of the Jewish community. Honoured in a way that recalls the Ottoman Hakhm Bashi, it acted as intermediary between the Jews and the crown. The Exilarch, like a prince, tended to act harshly (“despotisch schaltete”), but the rabbis whom he appointed as judges were able to limit his excesses.<sup>32</sup>

Graetz breathes life into Jost’s dry portrayal and passionately romanticizes Talmudic Babylonia as a whole. It was, indeed, for him the fertile pasture on which Judaism rose to spiritual heights, and he attributes this intellectual achievement to a large degree to the comfortable political and economic conditions enjoyed by the Jews of Babylonia. As Babylonia became a second homeland for the Jews<sup>33</sup> and the ruling authorities allowed them to run their own lives, the Exilarchate stood at the pinnacle of the system of Jewish self-rule.<sup>34</sup> Graetz sees the Exilarch as an oriental feudal prince. And if, as he reluctantly would concede, the deeds of the Exilarchs merited censure from time to time, this was surely the unavoidable part of the reality of any govern-

<sup>26</sup> REIFMAN, “Resh-Galuta”.

<sup>27</sup> KROCHMAL, “Qil’ah devei resh galuta”, 5–68.

<sup>28</sup> GALANTE, “De-vei resh galuta”. He mentions the studies of Graetz and Gezau, but most of all he criticizes Krochmal.

<sup>29</sup> BRÜLL, “Die Entstehungsgeschichte des babylonischen Talmuds als Schriftwerkes”. In this composition there is also discussion of *SOZ*. After the publication of Lazarus’ study Brüll began to review it in his journal, called *Central-Anzeiger* however he died prior to having completed reviewing the entire work.

<sup>30</sup> JONA, “I Rasce Galutà”; GEZAU, *Al Naharot Bavel*, 45–55. Jona (according to Lazarus) relies upon KROCHMAL, “Qil’ah devei resh galuta”. Isaac Halevy, too, in *Dorot haRishonim*, mentions the Exilarchate as necessary for his discussions.

<sup>31</sup> Jost had already included in his work on Jewish history a survey on the Jews of Babylonia, and reserved there the place of honour for the Exilarchate. His description of the Exilarchate is devoid of the feeling that is so present in the surveys of the other (Jewish) historians.

<sup>32</sup> JOST, *Geschichte des Judenthums*, II, 131–2.

<sup>33</sup> GRAETZ, *Geschichte der Juden*, IV, 247: “Babylonien wurde für die jüdische Nation eine zweite Mutter ... und wurde ... ein zweites Vaterland für die Heimatlosen”.

<sup>34</sup> GRAETZ, *ib.* Like Jost he, too, notes that the Exilarch was only *confirmed* by the Persian rulers, but not chosen by them. Cf. too, HOFFMANN, *Mar Samuel*, 1–3.

ment in the world.<sup>35</sup> Graetz, as Jost before him, begins his survey of Babylonian Jewish history with a lengthy introduction on the Exilarch and then brings a series of aggadic stories culled from the Talmud.<sup>36</sup> He progresses chronologically through the generations of the Amoraim, and a sizeable proportion of these stories, too, relate to the Exilarchate.

Most of the other Jewish Enlightenment era scholars, such as Reifman and Krochmal, do not advance much beyond the style of traditional commentary, whether with respect to their methodology,<sup>37</sup> their access to non-rabbinic sources, or their conclusions.

Among the important scholars who worked in the area in the period after Graetz are Felix Lazarus and Salomon Funk.<sup>38</sup> Lazarus published a monograph on the Exilarch under Arsacid and Sasanian rule in Brüll's journal, *Jahrbücher für Jüdische Geschichte und Litteratur*, in 1890.<sup>39</sup> This work, the first monograph on the Exilarchate, was submitted as a critical edition of the portion of *SOZ* that relates directly to the Exilarchate (i.e., from the Return to Zion until the end of the composition),<sup>40</sup> accompanied by a scientific commentary. Lazarus' main contribution is the examination of the versions of *SOZ* that were available to him. He added a discussion of the sources amid broader reflections on the Exilarchate including its origins and history, and providing a historical-talmudic commentary to *SOZ* within the general context of the history of Babylonian Jewry.

An additional sign of progress in understanding the Exilarchate in this period was the integration of non-Talmudic data and greater reference to the broader historical context. Until the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century primarily rabbinic sources had been available. Developments in the fields of Iranology and the study of early Arabic literature from this period onwards soon began to filter into scholarship on the Exilarchate. Lazarus and Funk could now draw upon reliable information on the Persian empire from the rich and brilliant wellspring of Theodor Nöldeke who, in 1879, published his translation of the section of Ṭabarī's *Annals*, *Tarīkh al-rasūl w'al mulūk*, which deals

<sup>35</sup> GRAETZ, *ibid*, 254; Jost had already assured his readership that although "mancher Resch-Galutha missbrauchte diese Stellung zu offenbaren Gewaltthaten, doch kam dergleichen nur selten vor" (*Geschichte des Judenthums*, 132).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Abraham Geiger's criticism against the fourth volume of Graetz's history (*Jüdische Zeitschrift für Wissenschaft und Leben* IV (1866), 146) that he deals with "Geschichten".

<sup>37</sup> In the words of Galante (*ibid*, 35), Krochmal "built his arguments on theories of casuistics" (בנה דבריו על השערות של פלפול).

<sup>38</sup> FUNK, *Die Juden in Babylonien*, esp. I 31–6, but he discusses the Exilarchate throughout the two volumes, and also I, n. 4 (x–xiv): Die Reihenfolge der Exilarchen im dritten Jahrhundert; II, n. 4 (143–5): Aufstand der babyl. Juden unter Mar Sutra II; II, n. 5 (145–6): Huldigungssabbath des Exilarchen.

<sup>39</sup> LAZARUS, *Die Häupter der Vertriebenen*.

<sup>40</sup> I evaluate this edition in appendix I.

with the Sasanian kings.<sup>41</sup> Jewish scholars were now provided not only with a careful and considered study on Sasanian history, but also with an aperture through which relevant Arabic literature could be viewed. Ignaz Goldziher,<sup>42</sup> too, gathered data relating to the Exilarchate from the Arabic literature<sup>42</sup> which would serve Lazarus and Funk well in their work.

In the meantime James Darmesteter, the great French Iranist, during his sojourn among the Parsee community in India, encountered in a composition called *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* (The Provincial capitals of the Iranian Domain), that survived in a Pahlavic manuscript, information on a certain Šīšīnduxt, the daughter of the Exilarch and wife of the fifth century Sasanian king, Yazdgird I.<sup>43</sup> As part of a broad tendency to integrate Jewish with general history scholars seek to fuse, among other things, the Mar Zutra revolt, described in *SOZ*, with the disturbances surrounding the enigmatic figure of the Zoroastrian heresiarch, Mazdak.<sup>44</sup> Funk, like Graetz and his predecessors, elevates the status of the Exilarchate considerably. For instance, even if, with Nöldeke's work before him,<sup>45</sup> he concedes that the Exilarch could not possibly have ranked fourth in importance in the empire,<sup>46</sup> as others had been tempted to conclude on the basis of certain Talmudic sources, nevertheless, he seeks to prove, following a different statement by Nöldeke, and doubtful logic, that the Exilarch belonged to the fourth rung of the nobility.<sup>47</sup>

No significant new detailed studies appeared until the 1960's.<sup>48</sup> Two scholars of very different backgrounds chose Babylonian Jewry in the Tal-

<sup>41</sup> Nöldeke, himself, had already referred explicitly in this work to a number of matters that relate to the history of Babylonian Jewry, including the Exilarchate, see NÖLDEKE, *Geschichte der Perser*, 69.

<sup>42</sup> GOLDZIHHER, "Renseignements".

<sup>43</sup> See DARMESTATER, "La reine Shasyân Dôkht". As the title suggests, he, himself, transcribed the name of the wife from the ambiguous Pahlavi script differently than here.

<sup>44</sup> This is noticeable already with Graetz. See appendix I.

<sup>45</sup> NÖLDEKE, *Geschichte der Perser*, 69.

<sup>46</sup> Jost had already conveyed his doubts about this. See *Geschichte des Judenthums und seiner Secten*, 132, n. 2.

<sup>47</sup> FUNK, *Die Juden in Babylonien*, I, 32–3. Discussion shall follow.

<sup>48</sup> Of the studies written in this period: Wilhelm Bacher wrote a detailed encyclopedia entry ("Exilarch"). Jacob Zuri discusses the relations between the Exilarchate and the academies in *The Reign of the Exilarchate and the Legislative Academies*. He is especially interested in the lifetime of one Babylonian rabbi, Rav Naḥman b. Isaac, but overstates the centralized nature of Babylonian Jewry and the involvement of the Exilarchate in the life of the academies. See also JUDELOWITZ, *Nehardea*, 47–54, and n. 5, 84–5, especially his remarks on 85. An additional study of note is Ezra Spicehandler's unpublished doctoral thesis, written in 1952 as *The Local Community in Talmudic Babylonia, Its Institutions, Leaders and Ministrants*. Spicehandler devotes a chapter to the Exilarchate (esp. 56–62). I am grateful to my friend, Michael Terry, then head librarian of the Jewish division of New York Public Library who attained for me a copy of the thesis.

rudic period as their specialization – Moshe Beer, in Israel, and Jacob Neusner in the United States.

Beer published a series of articles between the years 1962 and 1967<sup>49</sup> and in 1970 a detailed monograph on the Exilarchate.<sup>50</sup> The Exilarchate plays a major role in Neusner's books and articles on the history of Babylonian Jewry in the Parthian and Sasanian era.<sup>51</sup> Both assume that the institution of the Exilarchate was commanding and powerful.<sup>52</sup> Neusner believes that the renewed rabbinic movement subordinated itself to the authority of the Exilarchate which, he assumes, was more ancient and established. Thus, in his view, the rise of the rabbis as a new movement in Babylonia took place under the watchful and suspicious eye of the Exilarch. For him the Exilarch acted as the 'employer' of the rabbis. He imagines that the Exilarchs sought to influence the newly established academies while the rabbis struggled to wrestle their independence from them. Neusner is not the first to describe the relationship between the rabbis and the Exilarchate as confrontational and competitive.

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<sup>49</sup> These articles included an initial general survey on the topic (BEER, "The Exilarchs in Talmudic Times"); A study of the names of the Exilarchs that appear in *IRSG* compared with the Talmudic material (idem, "Exilarchs of the Talmudic Epoch"); and two articles on historical episodes that relate to the subject (idem, "Geniva's Quarrel"; idem, "The Removal of Rabba bar Nahmani").

<sup>50</sup> *The Babylonian Exilarchate in the Arsacid and Sassanian Periods*, Tel-Aviv, 1969. Here he incorporated the results of some of his earlier studies and added new ones. In a second edition that appeared in 1976 he appended corrections, additions, and bibliographical notes. This comprehensive monograph claimed among other things, to describe the institution, "its origins; the sources of its authority; its nature and activities in practice; its contacts with Palestine; and the attitude of the rabbis towards it", and all this "in the days of the Mishna and the Talmud" – BEER, *The Babylonian Exilarchate*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Neusner's studies were collected and published anew in 1986 unchanged, but with the addition of a short introduction (NEUSNER, *Israel's Politics in Sasanian Iran*). They appeared originally as separate chapters devoted to diverse themes, for instance: 'Exilarchate and Rabbinat: Uneasy Alliance' (= *History*, III, 41–94); 'Exilarchate and Rabbinat: Loosening Ties' (= *History*, IV, 73–124). He also discusses the Exilarchate elsewhere but generally the later studies are based on his five volume history. Whilst his studies on Babylonian Jewry appeared before Beer's book, he was familiar with some of Beer's earlier studies and even relates to them – occasionally quite critically. See id. *History*, V, 48–52. In the second volume of this series he acknowledges receipt of corrections to the first volume from Beer. Likewise, Beer in his book had cited in the bibliography the first three volumes of Neusner's *History of the Jews of Babylonia*, but did not refer to them much in the body of his book. See, however, BEER, *The Babylonian Exilarchate*, 59, n. 8.

<sup>52</sup> Beer has a better command of the sources than Neusner. Neusner relies on uncritical editions of the sources, and upon the printed texts and translations of rabbinic sources. With Beer the collation of textual variants of the sources, including those from the medieval rabbinic commentators is in evidence but not systematic. Neusner appears to have neglected the textual witnesses of the rabbinic literature that he refers to. On his difficulties in coping with a text lacking a readily-accessible translation (*SOZ*) see below in appendix I. Cf. ROSENTHAL, "For the Talmudic Dictionary", 56–8.

Neusner, however, through his desire to emphasize that the rabbinic movement was a *new* movement in Babylonia, succeeds in painting a sharper picture than his fore-runners.<sup>53</sup> Beer, on the other hand, emphasizes the integration of the Exilarchs in the rabbinic world.

Notably neither Beer nor Neusner venture too far beyond the proverbial ‘four cubits’ of Jewish sources.<sup>54</sup> Also neither departs too far from the conclusions of their predecessors nor offers very much that is new with respect to the use of the sources.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, despite the difference between Neusner and Beer there remains a patent similarity between the works of these two scholars expressed in their conservative tendency and their non-critical approach to the Talmudic and post-Talmudic sources.<sup>56</sup>

Since Beer and Neusner no new comprehensive studies have been written on the Exilarchate.<sup>57</sup> Isaiah Gafni does touch upon the subject in a few of his articles and books,<sup>58</sup> and David Goodblatt devotes the final chapter in his

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<sup>53</sup> Among his more interesting, but less compelling contributions to the subject, are his hypothesis that the Exilarch was involved in international political intrigue relating to the struggle between the Parthian and Roman empires.

<sup>54</sup> For Beer this contrasts with his other studies that cite and relate to non-Jewish sources more prominently, among which is *The Babylonian Amoraim*; “Notes on Three Edicts”; and “A Reconsideration of Three Ancient Seals from Persia”.

<sup>55</sup> With regard to Neusner’s own evolving approach to historical Judaic scholarship his study of Babylonian Jewry belongs to his ‘naïve’ period. See SCHWARTZ, “Historiography on the Jews”, 101, 109.

<sup>56</sup> The scholarly methodology of these works of Neusner is quite different from his later tendency. He admits to this change in a preface appended to the reprint of the work (1984<sup>3</sup>, 1, XXIV–XXXVI), where he retreats from the methodology employed in his earlier scholarship. Cf. the new introduction to the reprinting of the chapters on the Exilarchate, NEUSNER, *Israel’s Politics in Sasanian Iran*, esp. xii. There is now a French translation of his first volume, *Histoire des Juifs de Babylonie*, t. I. *L’époque parthe*, Paris, 1997. His decision to reprint his books unchanged as a monument to his scholarly past (as he himself formulates it) is odd. Both Neusner and Beer contain speculative chapters. For Beer, for example, see the chapters he devotes to Geniva and Mar ‘Ubqa, and his discussion on the death of Rabbah bar Nahmani. On the latter see the harsh critique in URBACH, “Concerning Historical Insight”.

<sup>57</sup> Just a few years before his death Beer published a new survey on the Exilarchate. However, apart from the odd bibliographical update there is no significant new material or change in methodology, although the more speculative chapters have been curtailed. In 2005 Neusner published a brief encyclopedia entry on the Exilarchate that fully reflected his studies on the topic from 40 years before. See “Jewish Exilarchate”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, dated June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2005 (www.iranica.com.). This highly bizarre entry (not least since it duplicates the entry by I.M. Gafni, “Exilarch”, *EI*, IX, 1999, 126–7!) is written in the style and content of Neusner’s *A History of the Jews of Babylonia*. Only works authored by Neusner are cited in the bibliography.

<sup>58</sup> See GAFNI, *The Babylonian Yeshiva*, 175–95; idem, “The Question of the Antiquity of the Exilarchate in Babylonia”; idem, *Babylonian Jewry and its Institutions*; idem, “Scepter and Staff”; idem, *The Jews of Babylonia*; idem, “Babylonian Rabbinic Culture”; 231–2, 255, n. 21.

book on Jewish leadership in antiquity (*The Monarchic Principle*) to the Exilarchate. But the Exilarch is not the focus of Gafni's studies,<sup>59</sup> and Goodblatt's chapter, which deals with the ideology of the Exilarch against the claim of Davidic lineage – is in effect an appendix to a book that deals with a broader thesis on the nature of Jewish leadership from the beginning of the Second Temple period until the end of the Patriarchate in Palestine.

## B. The Central Concerns

### *I. Defining the Question*

One of the first challenges is to define what we are talking about. What was the Exilarchate? What role did it fulfill? What official or unofficial titles did the Exilarch bear?

Scholars have sought to explain the office of the Exilarchate in diverse ways. Some homilies in rabbinic literature connect the Exilarch to the Davidic dynasty, and the Exilarch is described as a prince or a royal. Was this image embraced by the Jewish community as a whole? Did this alleged Davidic lineage have any impact on the Sasanian kingdom and its own perception of the office? Many scholars have portrayed the Exilarch as a local feudal chief ruling over a given territory.<sup>60</sup> To evaluate this possibility one must explore the meaning of the feudal model in the Sasanian region and its application, and at the same time attempt to identify an area that might have fallen under the jurisdiction of the Exilarch. The connection between the Exilarch and the city of Meḥoza, for instance, is well attested in the sources, however, it is also well known that Meḥoza was a royal city, called Weh-Ardašīr in the Persian sources, and as such it was ruled by a Persian satrap. The name of the satrap of Weh-Ardašīr during the reign of Šābuhr I is even mentioned in a rock inscription at Ka'aba-ī Zardušt. Is it possible to reconcile this knowledge with the notion that the Exilarch might have ruled in Meḥoza or in a given region? And yet, current scholarship on the Exilarchate places the Exilarchs in many other cities as well. In the course of this study I shall probe the Talmudic information about the places where the Exilarch resided and attempt to plot the Exilarchal landscape more precisely.

One could also imagine the Exilarchate as a governmental office. This would of necessity be one that was transmitted through inheritance but such a possibility, in and of itself, is not foreign to Sasanian practice.

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<sup>59</sup> With the exception of an early work, GAFNI, "Leshe'elat qadmutah shel rashut hagola bevavel", and idem, "Scepter and Staff", both rather limited in their scope.

<sup>60</sup> This is, in fact, the view of the majority of scholars, including Graetz (*Geschichte der Juden*, Bd. 4, 252) and Beer.

A further possibility is that he was a religious leader, a supreme religious head, some form of representative leadership of all the Jews against the Sasanian authorities in a way similar to the role of the *Catholicos*, the representative head of the Christians. In order to decide upon a suitable definition the power and authority wielded by the Exilarch must be studied. Indeed, it is unnecessary to be committed to one exclusive model. Moreover it is quite reasonable to suppose some dynamism in the status of the Exilarchate in the course of the Sasanian period. It could belong in a category all of its own.

## II. Comparison and Contextualization

Certain assumptions about the Exilarchate appear to have guided earlier study and are in need of reexamination. For example, the successive existence, survival and continuation of the Exilarchate has largely been taken for granted.<sup>61</sup> Few scholars have treated its history in dynamic terms whereby it needed to strive to achieve its position. More significantly, perhaps, the Geonic sources have been widely treated as reliable for the study of the Exilarchate. Many such Geonic sources relate directly to the Talmudic Exilarchate and they have typically played a central, and on occasion even a pivotal role in fashioning the image of the Exilarchate in the scholarly literature. Although the use of non-contemporary sources is problematic many scholars have relied upon this data without the requisite examination.<sup>62</sup> One central source – *SOZ* – has not been thoroughly analyzed since Lazarus' edition over 120 years ago. An essential prerequisite for the study of the Talmudic Exilarchate is a careful and systematic evaluation of the independent value of these Geonic sources.<sup>63</sup>

The study of the Exilarchate has been largely confined to rabbinic literature. If any significant comparative work has been done, it has been to com-

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<sup>61</sup> All, indeed, attribute Exilarchal power to authority received from the Persian king but do not enter into detail. Neusner has, most explicitly a dynamic picture, in particular, with regard to the relations between the Exilarchate and the rabbis, however, his discussion is subjective. Regarding the stability of the Exilarchate, cf., for instance, the recent theory by Brody ("On the Sources", 93–4) that the records of the dates of death of the rabbis from the two academies were preserved in an Exilarchal archive and his remarks there. See my criticism on this theory below, in appendix II, n. 136.

<sup>62</sup> A considerable proportion of Beer's studies on the Exilarchate, for instance, is based upon acceptance of Sherira's conclusion that Mar 'Uqba *was* an Exilarch. The sources that deal with Mar 'Uqba supposedly illuminate the institution as a whole. In addition, topics from the 'biography' of Mar 'Uqba, such as his functions as a judge or his legal rulings on the calendar are ascribed to the institution as a whole. Doubts in this matter beckon caution. See the detailed discussion on the status of Mar 'Uqba below, in appendix II.

<sup>63</sup> The examination of the Geonic sources is placed in two detailed appendices but the results of this examination inform the entire book.

pare the Babylonian Exilarchate to the Palestinian Patriarchate<sup>64</sup> or the Talmudic Exilarch to the post-Talmudic Exilarch. And yet, with regard to the former, comparison with the Palestinian Patriarch is *a priori* unlikely to contribute to our understanding, with the exception of the realm of image and polemics<sup>65</sup> since the Patriarchate's existence was surely dependent upon a host of variables that have little in common with the Sasanian world. The post-Talmudic Exilarchate certainly has little to enhance our understanding of its Talmudic namesake, since it existed in a completely different historical and cultural constellation.<sup>66</sup>

Integration of the Exilarchate into the wider field of scholarship on the Sasanian Empire has hardly entered scholarly discourse. Likewise, there has been little effort to assimilate our information on the Exilarchate into the urban setting and to take into consideration the Sasanian administrative reality of the region. The reason for this anomalous situation might be sought in the paucity of sources on the Sasanian Empire – a field of research that is, to a degree, on the margins of the mainstream study of classical antiquity. An additional reason is the limited quantity and diversity of sources on Babylonian Jewry. The field is so closely tied to the study of the Bavli that few historians have been drawn to it.<sup>67</sup>

In truth, the lack of a comparative perspective in the Sasanian sphere is not the predicament of Babylonian Jewry, alone. The study of Persian Christianity has also been taught, to a large degree, in a religious, cultural and historical vacuum. The religious texts, themselves, which is most of what we have, are inclined to strengthen this misperception. They reflect what has been referred

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<sup>64</sup> This is widespread: see, for instance, BEER, "Honour and Criticism"; GAFNI, "Scepter and Staff"; idem, *The Jews of Babylonia*, 98ff; COHEN, *The Three Crowns*. Such a comparison is implied by the very combination of topics in GOODBLATT, *The Monarchic Principle*, and is mentioned explicitly (idem, 279–80).

<sup>65</sup> The sources, themselves, already made the comparison. See, for instance, *b. Hul.* 92a.

<sup>66</sup> Thus, the landed estates of the Exilarchs, that are listed by the 12<sup>th</sup> century traveler, Benjamin of Tudela have no connection to the Sasanian era (cf. BEER, *The Babylonian Exilarchate*, 151, n. 7); likewise, the punitive practices (blinding – GIL, "The Exilarchate", 40); or the office of *dayyana de-bava* (GOODBLATT, *The Monarchic Principle*, 287–8, and cf. BEER, *ib.*, 77, n. 73). Only in isolated cases are there signs of possible continuity, such as the synagogue custom described by R. Nathan Habavli, of bringing the scroll of the Law to the Exilarch. But here, too, there is little compulsion to prefer the assumption of continuity over an alternative hypothesis that the custom was 'renewed' in the Geonic era on the basis of the Talmudic source.

<sup>67</sup> Some overlook it. For example, in the collection of essays, *The State of Jewish Studies*, eds., S.J.D. Cohen and E.L. Greenstein, Detroit, 1990, the history of Babylonian Jewry appears only marginally in B.M. Bokser's essay "Talmudic Studies" and not at all in S.J.D. Cohen's essay, "The Modern Study of Ancient Judaism". It is a one page appendix to SCHWARTZ, "Historiography on the Jews".

to as “rhetoric of insularity.”<sup>68</sup> Each religious corpus presents a vision where-by its community is independent and autonomous. Whilst this image is certainly common to the literatures of all the religious communities functioning within the Sasanian sphere it is evidently unsatisfactory. In this study an attempt has been made to better account for the history of the Exilarchate within the local Sasanian context. With this objective in mind the Exilarchate is consistently compared with the leadership of another religious minority within the Sasanian Empire – the central and official leadership of the Persian Christians in this period. That leadership achieved and enjoyed royal recognition for much of the period under consideration. The bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon filled this role, and in the course of time the incumbent was known by the title ‘Catholicos’.<sup>69</sup>

A comparison of the Exilarchate and Catholicate in the Sasanian era has not been undertaken before in any meaningful way.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the comparative study of Babylonian Jewry and Persian Christianity has more typically been shunned equally by historians of the Eastern Church and of Babylonian Jewry.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> DE JONG, “Zoroastrian Religious Polemics”, 58.

<sup>69</sup> See FIEY, *Jalons*, 66–69.

<sup>70</sup> However, cf. BARON, *A Social History*, 195. This is not so for the Geonic period. Jacob Mann, for instance, constantly refers to the parallel situation with the Catholicoi to reinforce his conclusions in his series of studies, “The Responsa of the Babylonian Geonim as a Source of Jewish History”, in *JQR*, e.g. vol X, 1919–1920, 150, 336–7. Indeed, as is known, Syriac sources such as Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus record direct evidence for Jewish history in the Geonic era beyond the topic of the Exilarch. In general there is little attention to Syriac writings with relation to Talmudic history. See however (a selection): F. Gavin, *Aphraates and the Jews*, Toronto, 1923; RICHTER, “Über die älteste Auseinandersetzung”; NEUSNER, *Aphrahat and Judaism*; idem, “Babylonian Jewry and Shapur II’s Persecution”; GAFNI “Nestorian Literature”; KOLTUN-FROMM, “A Jewish-Christian Conversation”. NAEH, “*Heruta*”; BECKER, *Fear of God*. On the other hand, the Jewish Patriarchate of Palestine has been compared favourably with the role of the bishop. See LEVINE, “The Status of the Patriarch”, 32. Cf. IRSHAI, “The Priesthood in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity”, 99–100.

<sup>71</sup> Minimal reference to Babylonian Jewry is typical of scholarship on Eastern Christianity. Labourt appears to have received some Jewish information through the channel of Graetz (e.g. *Le Christianisme*, 7–9, 16) and Nöldeke (ib., 43), indicating a certain, if not penetrating awareness of the neighbourliness of the two communities. Nor is his approach to the subject free of prejudice – see *ibid*, 43. M. Kmosko’s long introduction to the Acts of Simeon bar Sabaē, does consider some Talmudic sources for the purposes of his subject. Cf., too, PIERRE, *Les Exposés*, I, 87–9. And cf. NEUSNER, *History*, IV, 26, n. 2 concerning WIESSNER, *Untersuchungen zur Syrischen Literaturgeschichte*; BECKER, “Beyond the Spatial and Temporal Limes”, 382. The common interest, where it exists, tends to focus on the works of Aphrahat. The scholars of Babylonian Jewish history have not generally systematically compared the Talmudic information with what was going on with their immediate Christian neighbours. And when Beer did, for instance, compare the Catholicos to the Exilarch on (only) two occasions, in both cases his analysis was flawed. In the first instance, he

The need for such a comparison seems, however, to be almost self-evident. Even a most preliminary examination will reveal common attributes between the Exilarchate and the central leadership of the Christians.<sup>72</sup> Many others become apparent upon further study. Examples include a common geographical location in the same metropolis close to the royal palace; a single leadership over a religious community; formal governmental confirmation of the position; a certain tension between the daughter religious community and the mother or center, the ‘west’ (Palestine for the Babylonian Jews; Antioch for the Christians); holding periodic synods for the important members; a theological assertion of primacy aimed at providing internal legitimacy; and the protection of those appointed by them. Finally, an alleged biological bond to Davidic descent infuses not only the Exilarchal tradition but also emerges in the patriarchal lists of the catholicoi.<sup>73</sup> As the only example apart from the Jews of a religious minority community in the Sasanian Empire<sup>74</sup> with some form (or rhetoric) of a centralized leadership and for which there is a substantial body of testimony,<sup>75</sup> the comparison of various aspects of this leadership with the Exilarchate is particularly enlightening. Thus, we can learn about the relationship between the leadership of the Christians and the Persian king and its powers and authority over the Christian subjects.

This comparison has an added value. It serves to release ourselves from the bonds of the direct sources – the rabbinic sources – and to construct a rea-

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evinced the Letter of Appointment for the Catholicos from the 11<sup>th</sup> century and aspired to learn from it about the earlier (Talmudic) period. See BEER, *The Babylonian Exilarchate*, 54–56, and criticism in GAFNI, *The Jews of Babylonia*, 98, n. 35. The second case related to the mid-fourth century CE demand by Šābuhr II’s for the collection of the double head tax from Simeon bar Sabaē, the bishop of Seleucia. On this see below, in chapter 5. Neusner’s efforts at contextualization in his *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* are a little better but his summaries of the history of Persian Christianity tend to feature *alongside* the main Jewish narrative with little attempt at integration.

<sup>72</sup> A statement of similarities between the Exilarch and Catholicos has already appeared in PIERRE, *Les Exposes*, I, 89: “Le *Catholicos* of Séleucie et l’exilarque s’affirment tous deux descendants de David; ayant gardé des liens avec la Palestine, ils sont jaloux de leur autonomie et affirment même leur prépondérance. Ils se trouvent tous deux dans la capitale, comme fonctionnaires impériaux, sous la surveillance directe du roi de rois ...” He found the similarities between the situation alluded to in Aphrahat’s 14<sup>th</sup> demonstration and the description of the “Geniva affair”, as described by Neusner (and Beer, and others) striking.

<sup>73</sup> See further below in chapter 2.

<sup>74</sup> Manichaeism also appears to have advocated a rigid centralised hierarchy, however, the source material for the Sasanian empire is insufficient for meaningful comparison.

<sup>75</sup> The primary sources will be considered below. For scholarly studies on the Sasanian Christian community Labourt’s *Le Christianisme* maintains pride of place. See FIEY, *Jalons*; CHAUMONT, *La Christianisation*. Other studies will be noted where relevant. See the important classical work on the Nestorians by the 18<sup>th</sup> century scholar, Joseph Simon Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, and by J.A. Assemani, *De catholicis seu patriarchis Chaldaeorum et Nestorianorum*, Rome, 1775.

sonable alternative perspective on the Exilarchate. At the same time we can assess the credibility of existing models that have been based entirely on the Talmudic (and Geonic) data.

In addition to the new directions and emphases offered, this study can benefit from the utilization of the results of new discoveries and new research. One notable example is the ‘discovery’<sup>76</sup> of an additional manuscript of tractate *Neziqin* of the Yerushalmi in the library of the Escorial palace, in Spain. An important *lectio varia* in this textual witness relates to the appointment of Rav as an *agoranomos* (market-supervisor) by the Exilarch.<sup>77</sup>

New studies are bound to lead to new readings of old sources. Some of the studies relate directly to the topic at hand. To name just a few examples, the critical edition of the third chapter of *Lamentations Rabba* prepared by Paul Mandel has helped put an end to discussion on theories that have relied upon a corrupted version of the midrashic text.<sup>78</sup> The thorough analysis of the cycle of traditions on the burial of Huna, by Shamma Friedman, of primary importance for the study of the Exilarchate, necessitated the reexamination of the material and also offered a salient methodology to be applied elsewhere.<sup>79</sup> An article by Robert Brody contributed directly towards a better understanding of the Geonic sources on the Exilarchate.<sup>80</sup>

### III. The Sources and their Interpretation

The primary and contemporary sources that can be used for studying the Exilarchate are drawn exclusively from the Talmuds and midrashic compilations, especially the Bavli. Sources on the Exilarchate are unevenly distributed in the Bavli, clustering in places. This suggests an interest in the Exilarchate at the redactional level.<sup>81</sup> There may have existed collections of sources that dealt with the Exilarchate, occasionally highly critically, or sub-

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<sup>76</sup> On this manuscript see ROSENTHAL-LIEBERMAN, *Yerushalmi Neziqin*.

<sup>77</sup> See chapter 5.

<sup>78</sup> MANDEL, *Midrash Lamentations Rabbati*. See chapter 2.

<sup>79</sup> FRIEDMAN, “Le-Agada ha-historit”, 146–63.

<sup>80</sup> BRODY, “On the Sources”.

<sup>81</sup> We shall note, in addition, that the Exilarchate is not mentioned in the ‘special tractates’ of the Talmud, (*Nedarim*, *Nazir*, *Temura*, *Me‘ila*, and *Karetot*), and it is known that these tractates were not studied in the Geonic academies, at least, from the days of Rav Yehudai Gaon, and maybe even earlier (see EPSTEIN, *A Grammar of Babylonian Aramaic*, 15). Their language is close to Geonic Aramaic and according to Epstein they are later than the other tractates (*ibid*, 16), and there are some who hold that they were redacted in a different geographical region. See BRODY, “Sifrut haGeonim”, 283, and discussion and references there, and cf. the recent discussion in MORGENSTERN, *Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, 14–5 on the language of the ‘special tractates’.

versively, and these collections served as an important segment in constructing the relevant *sugyot*.<sup>82</sup>

The Yerushalmi is the second rabbinic corpus of importance in which a quantity of primary sources on the Talmudic Exilarchate can be found. The unusual value of these testimonies is on account of their relative antiquity. While some Yerushalmi traditions have parallels in the Bavli, and apparently originated in Babylonia, there are also traditions that appear to have been composed in Palestine, and might have been authored by a circle of Amoraim of Babylonian ancestry.<sup>83</sup>

Talmudic scholarship has, in recent decades, provided many tools for those engaged in Talmudic history which may aid and facilitate the critical manipulation of the rabbinic corpus.<sup>84</sup> Notwithstanding the continued absence of critical editions of almost all of the Babylonian Talmud and related rabbinic literature, the way to search manuscript variants – whether from manuscripts or Geniza fragments of the Talmud, or from the indirect witnesses such as the writings of the *Geonim*<sup>85</sup> and post-Geonic medieval Talmud commentators – has become easier. Furthermore, the process of sorting through the various witnesses that enables the scholar to evaluate the textual variants has become an indivisible part of research.

While this is first and foremost an historical study, it seeks to be sensitive to redactional issues within the Talmuds and subjects the sources to source critical analysis.<sup>86</sup> It strives to strike the right balance between fundamentalist skepticism and critical positivism when analyzing such complex sources as the Bavli.<sup>87</sup> The stories and more anecdotal (aggadic) material, which have

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<sup>82</sup> Such collections would seem to be found in *Giṭṭin* (7a; 14a–b, 31b; and 67b–68b); *Shabbat* (54b–56b); *Sanhedrin* (5a; 37b–38a), *Qidushin* (70a–b); and the end of *Horayot*. See, too, *b. Ber.* 46b; 49a, 50a.

<sup>83</sup> See below in chapter 3.

<sup>84</sup> For an up-to-date survey see HEZSER, “Classical Rabbinic Literature”.

<sup>85</sup> Regarding the Geonic Talmud text (and its creation) see BRODY, “Sifrut haGeonim”, and FUCHS, *The Role of the Geonim*.

<sup>86</sup> On the rabbis’ lack of interest in historiography, in the classical sense of the term, see HERR, “The Conception of History among the Sages”; GAFNI, “Concepts of Periodization”; SCHWARTZ, “From Alexandria to Rabbinic Literature”. See also SCHÄFER, “Zur Geschichtsauffassung”. The use of rabbinic literature for historical study has been discussed and debated extensively in recent years. See, for instance, the collection on this topic in NEUSNER, *Judaism in Late Antiquity*. On Talmud redaction concerns cf. FRIEDMAN, “Pereq ha-Isha Rabba”; SCHREMER, “Stammaitic Historiography”; BRODY: “The Anonymous Talmud and the Words of the Amoraim”. The importance and utility of the careful and thorough study of the Bavli *sugyot* is clear from the studies that have been published. The consequences for the history of *halakha* and history are evident. See, for example, WALD, BT *PESAHIM*, 211–39.

<sup>87</sup> From the perspective of literary analysis a noteworthy challenge has been from Jonah Fraenkel. He claims that historians had not accurately defined the literary genre that lay be-

been the mainstay of historical discussion of Babylonian Jewry since Jost, is read in light of the critical scholarship. It examines closely the literary aspects before exploring any potential historical contribution.<sup>88</sup>

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fore them. It was a genre of the ‘artistic aggadic story’. Fraenkel rejected the contribution of the historical context for interpreting the issues and declared that “a ‘literary’ story must be interpreted from within itself. See FRAENKEL, “Response”. On this challenge presented by Fraenkel to the historical use of rabbinic sources see NEWMAN, “Closing the Circle”. In the wake of Fraenkel’s challenge, and of the criticism deriving from affiliates of the Neusnerian school, doubts have arisen about our ability to portray the history of the Jews of Babylonia, and many have confined their treatment of the sources to a literary perspective. See RUBENSTEIN, *Talmudic Stories*, 4–5, 209; SCHWARTZ, “Historiography”, 109; MEIR, *Rabbi Judah*, 19. Cf. Goodblatt’s early defense against the challenges presented by Neusner (GOODBLATT, “Towards the Rehabilitation of Talmudic History”). See BAUMGARTEN, “Rabbinic Literature”, 34, n. 68, on the apposition between stories and history. The reliability of the Talmudic attributions of statements to rabbis are assessed on a case by case approach, each with its own contextual merits. For discussion on this issue see, for example, NEUSNER, *Reading and Believing*; idem, *Making the Classics*, 1–13, 19–44; idem, “The Documentary History”; idem, “Evaluating the Attributions of Sayings”; idem, “Are there Reasons”; GREEN, “What’s in a Name”; KRAMER, “On the Reliability of Attributions”; KALMIN, “Talmudic Portrayals of Relationships”; idem, “Rabbinic Attitudes Towards Rabbis”; idem, *Sages*, 2–15; STERN, “Attribution and Authorship”; idem, “The Concept of Authorship”; COHEN, *Ravina*. Source criticism in Neusner’s studies in the 1970s (e.g., NEUSNER, *Development of a Legend*; idem, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees*) contributed towards undermining confidence in the attributions, and more generally the confidence in scholars’ ability to write historical biographies on rabbinic figures. See lately, however, the discussion in GOSHEN-GOTTSTEIN, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, 1–18. On the development and influence of Neusner’s studies see SCHWARTZ, “Historiography”, 100–2.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Fraenkel id., “one who expositis the aggadic story must choose and distinguish between the path of the historian and the path of the literary scholar (and in my humble opinion the difficult and important work of the historian in the analysis of the artistic aggadic story begins *after* [emphasis in the original] the scholar of literature has finished his work”. Shamma Friedman also dealt with the junction where history and literature converge, the “historical aggada”, as he dubbed it. He was interested in stories documented in both the Yerushalmi and the Bavli. Each Talmud has a different version of the “event”. For the historical reconstruction of the “event” he concluded that “while it is indeed hard to prove with respect to any aggadic datum that it reflects a historical fact, even if such a conclusion is very reasonable ... one can note the opposite, that is, a considerable likelihood that there is *no* historical basis for information that is only to be found in the expanded parts of the Bavli, and especially when it is possible to trace the literary factor for that expansion.” He therefore recommended to the historian: “Before you seek out the historical kernel ... you should seek out the *literary kernel* and base your historical study on it”. FRIEDMAN, “Le-Agada ha-historit”, 122. It would seem that it is not only with respect to the history of Palestinian Jewry that one may suspect the Bavli’s expansions. Indeed, the advantage of the Palestinian tradition for occurrences in Palestine is broadly accepted in scholarship. See, for instance, SAFRAI, “Ancient Historiographical Palestinian Sources”, 73. Cf. MEIR, *Rabbi Judah*, 14–5. But wherever there is a parallel in the Yerushalmi for an aggadic event, even if it depicts an event that occurred in Babylonia, it should be preferred on account of its earliness. This is in opposition to a vintage scholarly approach. See, for instance, JUDELOWITZ, *Nehardea*, 84: והמעשים אשר קרו בבבל, כמוכן, עלינו

Since a sizeable proportion of the rabbinic traditions concerning the Exilarchate are precisely such aggadic sources, the close analysis of these traditions, in line with the methodological directives noted above, their relationship to other rabbinic sources, their deconstruction, and an effort to garner new meanings for the historical understanding of the Exilarchate, forms the bulk of this study.

The sources that deal with the Catholicos are mostly written in Syriac, and some works have survived only in Arabic translation. Many of these were composed during the Sasanian era, some as early as the fourth and fifth centuries. There are homilies, synod proceedings, correspondence, chronicles, and various hagiographical works (martyrologies).

There is an abundance of sources on the Catholicos from the 5–7th centuries. Of particular note are the synod proceedings of the Persian church, called by the editor, Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale*<sup>89</sup> and the important chronicles such as the Chronicle of Seert, edited by Addai Scher.<sup>90</sup>

Dealing with the literature on the Catholicos has its own methodological issues. One must grapple with concerns of the tendentiousness, polemical aspects, and the credibility of these sources. These matters will be addressed in due course. The Catholicate, however, has a decided advantage over the Exilarchate as far as the balance of the sources goes. Only a little of what can be said about the Exilarchate derives from sources that were close to it, and nothing from the Talmudic era has reached us directly from the ‘desk’ of the Exilarchate. Almost the opposite is true, however, with respect to the Catholicate. A large collection of synod proceedings stems directly from the circle of the Catholicos and reflects its interests.<sup>91</sup> It is much harder to find uncompro-

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ואף שנוכל: GALANTE, “De-vei resh galuta”, 36. להשען ביתר שאת על הבבלי מאשר על הירושלמי. לאמר כדברי המהר”ץ חיות דמאורע הנעשית בבבל, עדות הבבלי מאומתת יותר מן הירושלמי... Historical reconstructions have often been based on the identity of the *personae* that appear in these *aggadot*. But on *aggadot* in the Bavli that deal with Palestinian characters – particularly Tannaim, that are not historically reliable and cannot be accepted literally for the reconstruction of Talmudic history see, for instance, GOODBLATT, “The Story of the Plot”; MEIR, *Rabbi Judah*, 15.

<sup>89</sup> On the date see below.

<sup>90</sup> This anonymous chronicle was composed in Arabic in the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century at the latest, but used much earlier sources. See C.F. Seybold, (review of *Histoire Nestorienne*), *ZDMG* 66 (1912), 743. Some have sought to ascribe the composition to the ninth century writer, Išo’denah of Basra. See NAUTIN, “L’auteur”; FIEY, “Išo’dnāh et la Chronique de Seert”; GERO, *Barsauma of Nisibis*, 7. On the relationship between the Chronicle of Seert and the ecclesiastical history of Daniel bar Maryam see DEGEN, “Die Kirchengeschichte”. The other main chronicles of relevance include the *Ecclesiastical History* by Bar Hebraeus and *Kitāb al-majdal*. The 14th demonstration by Aphrahat is of great importance and is considered in some detail below. The Acts of Mari are also relevant.

<sup>91</sup> The collection was edited between the years 776–790 CE. See CHABOT, *Synodicon*, 309, n. 2. Cf. GERO, *Barsauma of Nisibis*, 2, notes 5–6. The latter proposed that the collec-

mising criticism of the Catholicos, but certain characters are singled out for reproach. Since the sources on the Catholicate are rich for the period when documentation for the Exilarchate is sparse, and these two institutions seem to have had much in common, it might be possible to use the Christian evidence to fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge about the Exilarchate. On the other hand, the sources for the early history of the Catholicate are not contemporary and the historical problems associated with their interpretation increase.

Evidence relating to the Sasanian Empire is extensive and varied and cannot be described in detail here.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, the special importance of the sigillographical evidence deserves note for its contribution towards the study of Sasanian administrative geography and the monumental rock inscriptions for clarifying various matters relating to the ruling Sasanian hierarchy and bureaucracy.

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tion was first composed in the period of Timothaeus, the eighth century Nestorian patriarch, but a pre-existing collection was used and updated that ended with the synod of 676 CE. The oldest manuscript for this work, MS Alqosh, has yet to be examined properly. See *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> For an up-to-date survey of the primary sources see CERETI, "Primary Sources". Discussion and references to this issue will be addressed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 1

# The Sasanian Empire and the Exilarch

The aim of this chapter is to set the scene, outlining the Sasanian context in which the Jews of Babylonia lived. It will describe the geo-administrative structure of Sasanian Babylonia, and offer an overview of the major historical events and developments that defined this period. More relevant to the Exilarchate will be the review of the bureaucratic and social structures of the Sasanian Empire, and the final section that surveys the relationship between religion and state. While this chapter treats the Sasanian Empire as a whole, it will naturally tend to focus on Babylonia.

## A. Administration and Geography

### *I. The Limits of the Empire*

The Sasanian Empire extended from the Euphrates in the west to the far reaches of central Asia in the east; and from the Caucasus in the north to Mesene in the south. Expanding and contracting in the course of the 430 years of its existence, during periods of exceptional military achievement it would stretch still further: to the Nile, to Ethiopia and to Yemen in the south; and in the west it would stunningly, for a short-lived historical juncture, encompass Antioch, Jerusalem, and Egypt, wetting its feet in the Bosphorus at Chalcedon.

The empire was traditionally divided into four parts reflecting the directions of the compass. The western division (*Xwarwarān*) included, at least in the third and fourth centuries, Mayšān<sup>1</sup> (Mesene), Asūristān (Bēt Armāyē), Nod Ardaxšīragān (Adiabene), and Arbāyistān (Bēt Arbāyē).<sup>2</sup> Asūristān, however, had a special place of honour in the empire. Though ethnically diverse with Persians probably remaining in the minority it would be designated, at least in the reports of later Arab geographers, as the very “heart of

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<sup>1</sup> Also written as Mayšūn.

<sup>2</sup> See GIGNOUX, “Les quatre régions administratives”. Cf. Ka’ba-ī Zardošt, line 2. See HUYSE, “Die dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I.”, 19–21.

*Eranshahr*” – the Iranian sphere.<sup>3</sup> The tremendous economic importance of Asūristān as the perpetual bread-basket of near-eastern antiquity and its privileged political status hosting the winter capital of the empire, gave this designation a degree of veracity. The borders of Asūristān were very similar to the boundaries of Babylonia, as described in the contemporary Jewish sources.<sup>4</sup> The northern border stretched from Alat to Tikrit. In the west the Euphrates marked the border, and in the east the Nahrwan canal<sup>5</sup> – a vertical strip to the east of the Tigris. In the south the border was equivalent to a line drawn between Al-Ḥira to the northern part of the lakes of Wasit of the Muslim period.<sup>6</sup>

## II. Administrative Geography<sup>7</sup>

Asūristān, like other territories of the Sasanian Empire, was divided for administrative purposes into many provinces. The largest administrative unit

<sup>3</sup> دل ایرانشهر (DE GOEJE, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, VI, 234, 1. 15), attributed to Qudāma and Ibn Jafar; Ibn Khordādbēh, 28; cf. Yāqūt, I, 147; II, 176,9. The term *Ērānshahr* and its meaning for the early Sasanians has been the subject of a detailed study by GNOLI, *The Idea of Iran*.

<sup>4</sup> On the borders of Babylonia see FUNK, *Die Juden in Babylonien* II, 326–31; OBERMEYER, *Die Landschaft Babylonien*, 71–90. The principle Talmudic source for this topic is in *y. Yev.* 1:6 (3b) and its parallel in *b. Qid.* 71b. The use of בית ארמיא for Asūrestān is found in the Syriac sources, but is also documented in the Bavli. In the Arabic literature we find the term سواد (*sawād*). The term عراق (*‘Irāq*), which itself is Persian in origin, is not equivalent to Babylonia since it also includes Mesene. Cf. however the magic bowl below, n. 6.

<sup>5</sup> See OBERMEYER, *ibid.*, 79. The version attested in the Yerushalmi here is significant. According to MS Leiden: *y. Yev.* 1:6 (3b) נהר וואניי ; *y. Qid.* 4:1 (65c) נהריואני. It appears here as one word (!) as it also does in Geonic testimony. See OBERMEYER, *ibid.*, 79; cf. OPPENHEIMER, *Babylonia Judaica*, 305.

<sup>6</sup> For a description of the boundaries of Babylonia see Mas’ūdī, *Tanbīh*, 34, 38 (ed. DE VAUX, 57–8, 61). A different, distinctly local perspective of the proximate geographical scene might be gained from the Jewish magical literature. A Jewish bowl plots out the principal regional divisions with reference to demons as follows: רוחי בבל וערב רוחי אירג ומישן רוחי פרס והידקל נהרה. See S. A. Kaufman, “Appendix C: Alphabetic Texts” in *Excavations at Nippur, Eleventh Season*, ed. Meguire Gibson, Chicago and London, Oriental Institute of Chicago, 1975, 151–2. Comparably a Mandaean bowl, that reflects a Jewish author, refers to ודיייה DA5, lines 7–8. ‘Huraaye’ might refer to Al-Ḥira.

<sup>7</sup> The best standard work on this topic is GYSELEN, *La géographie administrative*. Unfortunately, our knowledge of the administrative divisions of the Sasanian Empire is fragmentary and uneven so providing even a basic outline of the formal structure of Sasanian administrative geography is not a straightforward task. We have more sources and therefore a more complete picture for the latter part of the Sasanian era than for the earlier third and fourth centuries. The terminology used in the sources to describe the administrative divisions is also not completely uniform. This summary attempts to account for most of the data.

was either an *ōstān*<sup>8</sup> governed by an *ōstāndār*,<sup>9</sup> or alternatively a *šahr* governed by a *šahrab* (satrap). Sigillographic testimony suggests that a province would have been either one or the other.<sup>10</sup> The status of a province might, on occasion, change,<sup>11</sup> and the head actually be a local ruler, as is documented in a number of cases.<sup>12</sup> In the Arabic sources the largest unit was also called a *kura* (كورة)<sup>13</sup> and in the Syriac sources – *atra* (ܐܬܪܐ).<sup>14</sup> Each province possessed a capital (*šahrestān*).<sup>15</sup> *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, an eighth century Middle-Persian composition, provides a list of the provincial capitals reflecting the late Sasanian era. It lists only two such capitals in Asūrestān proper: Ctesiphon and Babylon.

The provinces were further subdivided, each subdivision termed in Pahlavi, *tasūg*, [*tasok*, طسوج].<sup>16</sup> Additional terms existed that relate to the adminis-

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<sup>8</sup> This word is used in the sense of province/geographical district in Manichaean Middle-Persian and Inscriptional Middle-Persian. Cf. SHAKI, “A Few Unrecognized Middle Persian Terms and Phrases”, 95–9. According to its usage in Armenian it can mean crown land. See HÜBSCHMANN, *Armenische Grammatik*, 215; Cf. Yāqūt, 40.

<sup>9</sup> On the *ōstāndār* see GYSELEN, *ibid.*, 38. Two *ōstāndārs* are mentioned in the Bavli, of Mesene (*b. Qid.* 72b) and Kashkar (*b. Giṭ.* 80b). Gyselen (*ibid.*, n. 60) notes them only through Christensen and unfortunately appears unaware that they appear in the Bavli, as Nöldeke already noted, (*Geschichte der Perser*, 448) and others. These are amongst the earliest mentions of the office. That of Kashkar is mentioned in the period of Rav Naḥman bar Rav Hisda, a rabbi from the first half of the fourth century.

<sup>10</sup> This conclusion is at present somewhat tentative. See GYSELEN, “L’administration ‘provinciale’ du *naxwār*”, 36–7. She adds in this article the *naxwār* but states that the conclusion remains very tentative, relying, as it must, on findings that are by their very nature most fragmentary.

<sup>11</sup> The seal of a *šahrab* is documented for Mesene, whilst, the Bavli, as noted, mentions an *ōstāndār* for Mesene.

<sup>12</sup> See GYSELEN, *ibid.*, 39–40.

<sup>13</sup> A term presumably derived from the Greek, *χώρα*.

<sup>14</sup> See Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 814, and NÖLDEKE, *Geschichte der Perser*, 3, n. 2. It appears that the term אַתְרָא has a freer application in the Bavli and does not cover the boundaries of the Sasanian administration; but the topic requires further examination.

<sup>15</sup> For editions; MARKWART, *A Catalogue of the Provincial Capitals of Ērānšahr*; DARYAEE, *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*.

<sup>16</sup> Etymologically – a quarter. It is also termed (apparently in Pārs) *nahang*. See PERIKHANIAN, *The Book of a Thousand Judgements*, 190–1. Ibn Khordādbeh (28) and Mas’ūdī (*Tanbīh*, 40) translate *tāsūj* as ناحية, a quarter. According to Yāqūt (41) it is a part of a *rustaqa* (see the following note). This word is probably attested in the Bavli where we find אַרְסָא as a land tax. See PERIKHANIAN, *ibid.*, 390–1, and bibliography there. An alternative etymology for אַרְסָא is found in the lexica, e.g. SOKOLOFF, *DJBA*, 508, but his suggestion of deriving its etymology via metathesis from τάρσις seems unlikely in view of the fact that not only is the form אַרְסָא consistently found in the earlier and better textual witnesses of the Talmud and Geonim but also supported by its form in Syriac and Arabic.