

The Sources and Methods of Talmudic and Iranian Studies

This book engages the complex interface between texts and contexts, a long-standing problem in the field of rabbinics. When scholars research ancient corpora such as the Talmud, the word “context” denotes a wide range of possible meanings. For instance, rabbinic literature is fruitfully analyzed, often simultaneously, within interrelated literary, cultural, and sociohistorical contexts.¹ Indeed, academic debates in rabbinics are constantly reinvigorated by the inherent tensions and interdependencies that exist between rabbinic texts and contexts, with scholarly methods falling along a spectrum according to which type of context a given researcher emphasizes.² On this spectrum of approaches, this book on rabbinic culture in Sasanian Iran intentionally foregrounds the ties between Talmudic texts and Sasanian sociohistorical contexts.

In Talmudic studies, there exists a mutual interdependency between source-critical and historical approaches toward the Bavli. As Richard Kalmin and Geoffrey Herman have illustrated in recent books, the continued advancements in Talmudic textual criticism and historical methodologies necessitate a rewriting of the Babylonian Jewish history done by earlier generations of scholars.³ Improvements in source-critical methods offer social and cultural historians of Babylonian Jewry requisite insights into the texts on which they base conclusions. More specifically, source-critical approaches toward the Talmud, including Stammaitic theory,⁴ help to delineate a given sugya’s hermeneutical logic, provenance, and more accurate dating of Tannaitic, Amoraic, and anonymous strata. For historians, the viability of chronological inquiry depends upon this ability to distinguish between datable dicta and geographical origins.⁵ Literary scholarship, in other words, renders historical analysis possible. Yet despite the clear value of text-based

approaches for historians, Talmudists who utilize source-critical methodologies disagree on core questions regarding the formation of the Bavli,⁶ such as: What is the role of the redactors in a given sugya? Should Amoraic or Tannaitic sayings be dated according to the rabbis to whom they are attributed,⁷ or did the editors rework them too thoroughly? And finally, is it the case that anonymous materials are always the products of the later Stammaim or Saboraim?

In engaging these questions, many Talmudists in the past several decades have subscribed to the general theory that through source criticism one can deconstruct a sugya into Amoraic dicta versus the work of later anonymous editors who created dialectical argumentation based upon the earlier traditions.⁸ This theory is perhaps best exemplified by the works of the Talmudists Shamma Friedman and David Weiss Halivni.⁹ For his part, Halivni argues that one can recover Amoraic traditions through careful readings of the texts. Over the course of his career, Halivni has revised his dating of the rabbinic movement, recently placing the Amoraic period circa 200–550 C.E. (marked by a century of decline between 450 and 550 C.E.) and Stammaitic-Saboraic activity circa 550–750 C.E. In this chronology, the final redaction of the Talmud thus straddles the late Sasanian and early Islamic periods.¹⁰ As Halivni's own modifications to the dating of the Talmud show,¹¹ scholars continue to debate the possibilities and ramifications of the separation of memrot from anonymous editorial traditions, a discussion with far-reaching implications for our ability to periodize Talmudic history. For example, taking a radically different position than Halivni on this issue, Yaacov Sussmann contends that the later producers of the Talmud played such a dominant role in how Amoraic materials are presented that the original statements of the Amoraim are transformed beyond recovery. As Adiel Schremer remarks in an important article on the utility of Stammaitic theory for writing history, for Sussmann "separation is impossible."¹² To quote Sussmann in his own words, the author explains that the Geonim and Saboraim altered the structure and meaning of Amoraic statements:¹³

The Talmud of the early Amoraim . . . continued to be discussed by many generations of Savoraim and Geonim, who added new insights about the statements of their predecessors. During the long period of free and open oral transmission, not only were the structure and explanation of the sugyot reworked and frequently changed, but the new understanding necessarily affected the formulation of the sayings themselves. And just as it is not always possible to distinguish between early and late, between *svara* and "later addition," so too the lines between the structure of the sugya and the body of a dictum, between the interpretation of a saying and its very wording, become increasingly blurry.

From this perspective, the recovery of genuine Amoraic statements is problematic. The notion that historians, using literary techniques, can recover Amoraic traditions therefore does not go unchallenged.

More recent scholarship has begun to call into question some of the basic premises upon which Stammaitic theory are based. In a 2014 monograph entitled *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud*, Moulie Vidas proposes that the layered structure of the Talmud does not represent a chronological phenomenon but is rather a “literary gap.” Vidas calls into question the notion that the anonymous editorial traditions were later additions that were “woven around” earlier apodictic statements.¹⁴ On this topic, Vidas concludes as follows:¹⁵

Our ability to separate the words of the Talmud’s creators from the traditions they quote depends on the omnipresent literary distinction in the Bavli between the anonymous literary framework and the attributed traditions embedded in it. Most scholars today believe this distinction reflects the Talmud’s literary history: the dicta were produced first and the *stam* was woven around them by later scholars.

This chapter explores the possibility that this distinction is constructed, that it is a strategy pursued by the Talmud’s creators. The distance between the dicta and the *stam*, I argue, is not simply a reflection of their different provenances. Rather, it may also be the outcome of a particular pattern of organization and technique of differentiation that was maintained throughout the Talmud and even imposed on materials in which it did not exist. We will see in this chapter how the Bavli takes Palestinian texts and divides them into layers, assigning dynamic, narrative, and deliberative material to the anonymous layer and static and apodictic material to the dicta. . . . The gap between the two layers is not the mark of a historical gap that the Talmud’s creators tried to overcome, but a literary gap that these scholars produced.

Unlike Halivni and Friedman, who presume that the layers of the Bavli were natural products of the centuries that passed between earlier sources and later exegeses, Vidas argues that the layers are an intentional literary design that was not simply the product of transmission. This revisionist theory unsettles current judgments regarding the dating of Talmudic texts and, by consequence, our ability to use them historically. The seeming chronological gaps between strata may not be solid foundations upon which scholars should construct historical claims.

In sum, this brief survey of the complicated issue of the implications of Stammaitic theory on the study of history demonstrates how the wide range of scholarly opinions regarding the separation of Amoraic apodictic statements from anonymous editorial traditions reflects poorly on the feasibility of dating texts to precise epochs. With little consensus on these matters, historians are left to contemplate whether a major part of their procedure—namely, the alignment of rabbinic traditions, attitudes, and trends with external historical happenings—is even feasible.¹⁶ In the face of such difficulties, however, it is nonetheless important to bear in mind that temporal or chronological considerations of textual data are but one aspect of historical research, which can instead address questions of cultural or religious development over long periods of time.

In addition to the ubiquitous use of textual approaches toward Halakhah, literary approaches have also been prioritized in the study of Aggadah. For example, both Shamma Friedman and Jonah Fraenkel have in their own ways asserted that the quest for the literary kernel must precede historical analysis.¹⁷ According to this viewpoint, it is not until source-critical questions are resolved that one can use the Talmud for historical purposes, since these types of data are foundational to the task of the historian, who is reliant upon the literary evidence. Fraenkel argued that because rabbinic stories are highly crafted works of literature that were produced separately from the influences of the outside world, a scholar's literary analysis should precede historical interpretation. Fraenkel explains that "the historian of the Talmudic Era cannot begin to use aggadic stories until the literary critic has completed the literary analysis . . . (but) historians are not willing to commit to this procedure."¹⁸ Utilizing literary theory and philology, Fraenkel focuses his attention on the literary features of rabbinic stories, such as parallelism, plot, and narration.¹⁹ Fraenkel was not compelled to connect rabbinic stories to historical events or specific provenances, and accordingly he underestimated the function of society in the construction of traditions.²⁰

There are well-founded reasons why most Talmudists today utilize internal, literary, and exegetical approaches of scholarship. As is well known, the Talmud is first and foremost an exegetical commentary on the Mishnah, produced by rabbis for rabbis. Technical in style, Talmudic law demonstrates a more explicit concern with Jewish traditions than with the gentile world. Its exegetical function lends itself to textual study, inviting its readers to participate in its hermeneutical processes. The fact that the rabbis appear uninterested in the non-Jewish world contributes to the ostensible insularity of the Talmud, raising the specter that Talmudists studying Persian influences on rabbinic culture may care more about such influences than the ancient Jewish sages themselves did. This difficulty of reading the Talmud in its Persian context has undermined our attempts for historical analysis, instead appealing to internal approaches.

TALMUDIC HISTORY AND THE QUEST FOR THE TRUE TALE

Acting as a counterbalance to Talmudists' source-critical orientation, historians of Babylonian Jewry dating back decades have contextualized the rabbis from a variety of perspectives, some more successfully than others.²¹ More specifically, social or institutional histories of Babylonian Jewry are attested, albeit rarely.²² Jewish historians of late antiquity agree that rabbinic sources are challenging to use as documents of social history for Babylonian Jewry,²³ though there have been advances in this area of inquiry. For example, the current research agendas of Kalmin and Herman explore aspects of Babylonian Jewish society using well-

balanced historical and literary models that avoid the reductionist and positivistic pitfalls found in the previous generations of historians,²⁴ including those from the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* school of thought, as well as Jacob Neusner's multivolume work on Babylonian Jewry from nearly half a century ago.²⁵ These prior shortfalls in the study of Babylonian Jewish history have been described by the author of the best synthetic history of Jewish Babylonia,²⁶ Isaiah Gafni, who, trained in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* tradition, laments the flaws of the earlier generations' quest for the purportedly true tale:²⁷

As a disciple of teachers trained in the classical historical-philological methodology established by the luminaries of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, I was weaned on the assumption that the "true tale" (give or take some obvious legendary embellishments) can be uncovered once the text has undergone critical scrutiny. This would entail a careful analysis of the relevant talmudic manuscripts and parallel traditions, language, comparisons with external information of both a literary and physical nature, and the proper insertion of each case into a known historical context. Thus, by establishing something considered fairly close to the original, "authentic," text, we are that much closer to the "things" that these texts describe.

According to this school of thought, the unraveling of the true tale assumes a dependency on the literary elements of a tale whose historicity stems from our recovery, through source criticism, of its authentic or original versions: that is, if we can recover the tale's transmission and geographical origins, then history somehow becomes more discernible. At core, this type of scholarly hermeneutic presumes that the rabbis were reacting to the happenings around them through exegesis or narrative. In a similar vein, the writings of Joseph Heinemann, such as his book *Aggadah and Its Development* (1974) and other works, argue that the rabbis produced what Heinemann calls "creative exegesis" in response to the events of their time.²⁸ He writes that "the Aggadah represents a creative reaction to the upheavals suffered by Israel" and that the rabbis try "to develop new methods of exegesis designed to yield new understandings of Scripture for a time of crisis and a period of conflict, with foreign cultural influence pressing from without and sectarian agitation from within."²⁹ Although Heinemann's lachrymose vision of Jewish history draws too simple a causal connection between texts and history, the notion that rabbinic stories and laws are in some ways responses to historical events as the rabbis experienced them is a reasonable perspective to the extent that such texts are ideologically situated within a general time and space—that is to say, even though Talmudic texts are of limited use for writing history, scholarly attention paid to broader historical contexts can nevertheless help to elucidate those texts' attitudes and cultural contents. It is well known that the rabbis' view of history was not rooted in a desire to understand "what really happened,"³⁰ a feature of rabbinic thought that leaves historically minded scholars frustrated by the

seemingly impossible task of reconstruction. In building upon these past points of view, in this monograph I wish to redefine and revamp the study of Talmudic history³¹ by moving away from an interpretive model whose aim is to try to recover the historicity of evasive rabbinic texts to one that avails itself of non-Talmudic sources and secondary literature that offer a wider frame of reference for understanding rabbinic culture.³² The most productive route out of the pitfalls of historical reductionism, the limits of source criticism, and the search for the true tale is to open up Talmudic studies to Sasanian studies. Above all else, studies of Talmudic culture and history require contextualization and comparison.

EXEGETICAL APPROACHES TOWARD TALMUDIC TEXTS

One influential book in Talmudic studies that emphasizes internal perspectives toward the development of Halakhah is Christine Hayes's *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds* (1997). In this erudite work, which examines legal differences between tractate *ʿAbodah Zarah* in the two Talmuds, Hayes argues that the rabbis' hermeneutical mind-set dominated the production of rabbinic laws. Like the positions of Friedman and Fraenkel with respect to Aggadah, Hayes's method foregrounds the exegetical features of Halakhic texts prior to any attempt at historical analysis. For researchers holding this sort of viewpoint, which is particularly prevalent in the Israeli academy today, scientific critical editions of primary texts are the necessary first step and foundation of research. With respect to the development of Halakhah in *ʿAbodah Zarah*, Hayes maintains that a scholar should grapple with "the canons of interpretation and legal argumentation that have produced" a passage before attempting to interpret its historical or cultural significance.³³ In a relevant passage, reproduced here at length, Hayes summarizes her position on the internal-external divide in Talmudic studies:³⁴

Reductive historical analyses fail to recognize that in the rabbinic world of late antiquity the reading and interpretation of sacred or authoritative texts were real and powerful forces in the construction of culture, and in the generation of halakhic developments—as real and powerful as famines and wars. Rabbinic texts are, certainly formally speaking, fundamentally exegetical. The two Talmuds are more or less a literature of interpretation, development, and analysis of Mishnah. Thus, unless we understand rabbinic reading practices and canons of interpretation, unless we appreciate the degree to which and the specific way in which rabbinic literature is generated and shaped by the reading of other texts, we run the risk of subjecting this literature to reductive historical analysis. Historical forces and events, socioeconomic pressures, and so on may be hypothesized in an effort to account for phenomena that may in fact be partly or fully explained as a response to exegetical stimuli. At the same time, however, one must guard against a kind of exegetical reductionism

that would parody rabbinic texts as the dry and pedantic production of a scholastic elite cut off from (or simply ignoring) the realities of everyday life.

In this passage, Hayes argues that for the rabbis of late antiquity the exegesis of authoritative texts was a historical act in and of itself. Rabbinic interpretive practices were key inspirations in the production of law and culture. The author continues her discussion by insisting that scholars should investigate the exegetical features of Halakhic development before turning to historical interpretations, and by warning against “the dual dangers of reductive historical and exegetical analyses”.³⁵

In sum, any study of talmudic literature, any reading of rabbinic readings, must do justice to the complex exegetical and historical forces that interact in the formation of rabbinic culture of late antiquity—or in that piece of rabbinic culture available to us: the texts in question. In this work, I endeavor to avoid the dual dangers of reductive historical and exegetical analyses. I argue that before we approach a passage of Talmud as cultural or religious historians, we must first understand the canons of interpretation and legal argumentation that have produced the passage before us. Subsequent historical and cultural analysis, if any, will be the more reliable for this approach. Why more reliable? Only with a proper understanding of talmudic strategies of interpretation, argumentation, and rhetoric is one equipped to recognize precisely those places in which these strategies are violated, to spot interpretations of a mishnah or early tradition that diverge from interpretive norms, to sense when a rabbinic reading is a reading against the grain. And it is precisely where the exegetical element is muted or compromised or deformed that the text may be susceptible to analysis in cultural-historical terms.

For Hayes, the quality of historical analysis increases once a scholar parses the exegetical contents of a particular sugya. In the last line of this passage, Hayes claims that it is only after Talmudists determine that the “exegetical element” of a text is “muted” or “deformed”—that is, that it does not follow rabbinic rules of logic or interprets an earlier tradition “against the grain”—that we can then perform cultural or historical analysis. In this outlook, historical analysis of Talmudic law comes into play when scholars who possess “a proper understanding of talmudic strategies of interpretation, argumentation, and rhetoric” are able to determine when Talmudic laws “diverge from interpretive norms.” It is, in other words, in cases when exegetical normalcy is violated that culture becomes reified and open to academic interpretation. For proponents of this exegesis-first persuasion, history and culture are secondary stages of scholarly evaluation.

Although prioritizing hermeneutics, Hayes does not ignore the potential of historical analysis, acknowledging on multiple occasions that everyday life plays a role in the evolution of Talmudic law. The author cites as an example the sale of weapons to non-Jews, as seen in *b. Abod. Zar.* 15b–16a, where Rav Ashi states that

Jews may sell weapons “to the Persians who protect us.”³⁶ Using this and other cases as specimens, Hayes clarifies that she is “not suggesting that the rabbis were hermetically sealed off from events around them.”³⁷ As we saw in the passage cited above, Hayes prudently warns against exegetical reductionism just as she critiques the reductive historical studies of Louis Ginzberg and Gedalyahu Alon.³⁸ In the book’s chapters on extratextual influences on Halakhah, Hayes does not proffer a road map for how scholars can introduce nonreductionist historical methods to avoid the danger of exegetical reductionism, leaving such a project to others. In a sense, the field of Irano-Talmudica fills this need by emphasizing historical context as much as Hayes does hermeneutics, and thus it offers an important supplement needed to counterbalance exegetical studies.

In addition to Hayes’s important book, the research of David Weiss Halivni is also germane to a discussion of the relationship between source-critical and historical approaches toward the Talmud. Halivni’s decades of research on the anonymous editorial strata and his multivolume commentary on individual tractates revolutionized Talmudic research. Halivni’s work reconstructs ur-texts using textual source-criticism, with attention paid to manuscript variants, synoptic parallels, and redactional features. A major concept in Halivni’s work is the forced explanation: that is, instances when the Talmud interprets Tannaitic traditions in ways that do not follow their simple sense.³⁹ Jeffrey Rubenstein describes forced explanations as cases in which “the flow of the Talmudic discourse often does not read smoothly, exhibiting gaps and incongruities between questions and their answers or comments and their referents such that the sequence of statements must be read in a ‘forced’ way in order to be understood.”⁴⁰ According to Halivni, these gaps and incongruities are the natural result of centuries of oral transmission, among other factors. Halivni’s approach implies that there existed an original Talmud composed of what he calls sources, or rabbinic utterances in their original form, and traditions, which were transformed versions of those sayings that were altered in the course of transmission and that later tradents interpreted. His research aims to recover these original sources from our corrupted traditions. From this point of view, distortions in Talmudic logic and strained resolutions are problems that modern scholars explain through recourse to other rabbinic traditions and knowledge of rabbinic hermeneutics.

In one of his writings, Halivni lays out the five stages of analyzing a sugya.⁴¹ The first stage is to read the text alongside Rashi and the medieval commentaries. The second through fourth stages involve determining whether a passage is a case of a forced explanation; if it is not, then there is no problem; but if it is, then several additional steps are needed, including scrutinizing intertextual parallels in the rabbinic corpus. In the final stage of analysis, Halivni mentions the role of historical factors in his methodology which has as its overarching goal the explication of rabbinic hermeneutics:⁴²

Fifth stage: If we find that the text is correct and yet the Bavli's explanation seems forced, then we must assess the reasoning that led the interpreter to offer the explanation in case the cause resulted from historical factors or from the lack of the requisite information.

For Halivni, history is employed in the service of exegesis: a scholar should turn to historical factors in order to explain the exegetes' logic that led to a forced explanation. History is, in other words, utilized in cases of, and in order to resolve, hermeneutical problems and disjunctions. In his autobiography, Halivni says that his emphasis on internal methods is motivated by a dissatisfaction with the lack of attention that rabbinites studying the Greco-Roman context of Palestinian texts pay to the textual features of the Talmud (or what he calls "text-immanent studies"), with Saul Lieberman being an exception; research that elucidates the unidirectional influences of external Greek, Roman, or Arabic cultures on Jewish civilization "induces a sense of inferiority," he writes.⁴³ Halivni's research agenda is therefore in part intended to offset what he deems to be the failure of past studies of rabbinic texts within Greco-Roman contexts. The highly influential author's disaffection with contextual models, however warranted, has moved the field away from the consideration of the Iranian context.

UR-TEXTS, TALMUDIC COMMENTARIES, AND THE PROBLEMS OF WRITING HISTORY

Internally oriented and source-critical approaches toward Talmudic texts presuppose an ideal structure of recoverable ur-texts that were altered or corrupted through oral transmission or the impact of varying historical (gentile) contexts. The presupposition of Talmudic ur-texts is, however, problematic on several fronts and rightly debated.⁴⁴ With respect to contextual investigation, Irano-Talmudists should problematize the logic that naturally flows from methods that prioritize source-critical analysis—namely, that in cases when Talmudists show how the Bavli deviates from or creatively expands upon Palestinian rabbinic precedents, including the Mishnah; and Talmudists trained in Iranian studies trace similarities of these idiosyncratic Babylonian elements, construed as otherwise inexplicable deviations in law, in Middle Persian sources; then what we have are Persian influences on the Talmud, presumably through historical contact. But this logic of analysis falls into one of the traps of comparative inquiry by assuming that there exists an authentic form of legal or narrative traditions that digressed or deviated as a result of the beneficial or polluting influence of the cultural horizon outside the rabbinic academies.⁴⁵

The methods of harmonizing traditions or juxtaposing sources were performed by later Talmudic commentators, including the Geonim (7th–11th centuries C.E.),

Rashi (*fl.* 1040–1105 C.E.), the Tosafists (12th–13th centuries C.E.), as well as some medieval and modern Yeshivot.⁴⁶ In general, the distinguishing feature between the Tosafistic and academic perspectives is that the former is conceptual and presumes ideal structures, whereas the latter is literary and historical. Similarly, for traditional Yeshivot the study of history is a minor concern. On this point, Michael Rosensweig clarifies the differences between the study of Talmud in universities versus in Yeshivot:⁴⁷

The primary goal of academic investigation is to deconstruct the various historical and geographic layers of the talmudic text and to examine the potential role of the historical context. In sharp contrast, traditional *yeshivah* learning is concentrated on the continuing relevance of the substantive topics developed in the Talmud. It evinces little interest in historical issues and regards the different layers of the Talmud as ongoing debate within the integrated whole.

The academic study of the Talmud is thus defined by its dual goals of literary and historical reconstruction. Nevertheless, these divisions between commentarial frames of reference, which carry authority in traditional learning settings, and academic study is not so unambiguous as the quotation above from Rosensweig may suggest. In actuality, as some Talmudists rightly maintain, it is difficult for modern researchers to detach themselves from the outlook that Tosafistic approaches promote.⁴⁸ Some Talmudists today favor conceptual or phenomenological methodologies that share an intellectual heritage with medieval and early modern commentators.⁴⁹ Talya Fishman, citing Robert Brody and Haym Soloveitchik, sums up the “tosafization” of the Talmud as follows:⁵⁰

In short, the “tosafization” of Talmud obscured earlier cultural realities. In Brody’s words, “We are bound by a very specific perspective of the talmudic material—which springs from our talmudic education and draws upon Rashi and the tosafists in particular. It is difficult for us to free ourselves from this perspective.” Or, as Haym Soloveitchik put it, it is difficult to think “in a mode other than Tosafist” when approaching issues of Jewish law.

If turning to the medieval commentaries is, as we saw with Halivni’s first stage of reading a sugya, a governing practice in the academic discipline of Talmudic studies, then it is easy to understand why the study of the Talmud in its Sasanian setting has been slower to develop. Indeed, historians of late antique Persian Jewry must contend with the fact that the early medieval European commentators of the Talmud were geographically, chronologically, and culturally far removed from the Persian world in which the Babylonian rabbis flourished. Further cultivating this trend in scholarship away from Iran and toward medieval commentaries is the unique history of the Talmud as a normative guidebook for Jewish behavior up until today. For historians, the notion of the Bavli as a living⁵¹ guidebook to Jewish behavior is at risk of imposing uniqueness onto a document and the historical

knowledge that flows from it.⁵² As Brody spells out in his definitive history of the Geonim, it is not clear that the Amoraim intended to create the normative canonical work that the Bavli became in subsequent generations. Brody explains the status of the Talmud in the Geonic period as follows:⁵³

We have no way of knowing to what extent, if at all, the “editors” of the Talmud—as distinct from the authors of the legal dicta embedded within it—intended to create a normative legal work rather than an academic or literary corpus. . . . On the face of it, the authors and editors of this Talmud could have hoped at best that their work would be accepted as authoritative within Babylonia and its immediate environs; and even within Babylonia, it is difficult to estimate the degree of influence exercised by the talmudic rabbis over the Jewish populace.

The situation in the Geonic period was fundamentally different. On the one hand, the Talmud was now perceived as a closed corpus. As far as the Geonim were concerned, the Savora'im who preceded them had added whatever finishing touches were needed to the Talmud which they inherited from the Amoraic period. . . . This is not to say that the rule was perfectly observed in practice: a considerable number of glosses crept into the text, as did a modest number of more substantial additions. . . . The ambitions which the Geonim entertained on behalf of the Talmud were probably greater than those of its creators.

As Brody's account makes clear, the status of the Talmud changed from the rabbinic to Geonic eras, a rupture marked by its closing and canonization. Although it is clear that the Geonim transmitted and implemented the Bavli, scholars continue to debate to what extent Jews and rabbis practiced Talmudic laws in Sasanian Babylonia. As a point of comparison, the Zoroastrian priests in ninth- and tenth-century Fārs, working around the same time as the Geonim, were similarly managing comparable transitions from orality to textuality,⁵⁴ though one difference between the Talmud and the Pahlavi corpus is the fact that the Bavli was closed earlier, whereas the writing down and redaction of the Pahlavi sources took final shape in the ninth and tenth centuries. As a consequence of this lateness, both the Talmud and Pahlavi sources are challenging to use for the writing of Sasanian-era history in that the impression of orthodoxy that they leave is anachronistic and does not necessarily reflect the heterogeneous and heterodox qualities of Sasanian religions. Given all these factors, the early medieval influences on the history of Talmudic scholarship impede an accurate rendering of the sociohistorical environment in late antique Jewish Babylonia. Scholars who wish to research the *Sitz im Leben* of the Babylonian rabbis in late antiquity should avail themselves of the sources and secondary literature available for understanding Sasanian society.

What are the ramifications for historical scholarship when one employs analytical frameworks derived from the Talmud's internal discourses and methods, including medieval commentaries? Even if there is no doubt that as scholars of

religion we need to utilize internal and commentarial perspectives in our studies, we must be equally cognizant of the “seductive congruence between analytical and indigenous categories.”⁵⁵ As the editors of a recent volume on anthropology and history in Jewish studies report, “analytical categories derived from normative Jewish discourse” are “limiting,” because “approaches that see Jewish law as the reflection of actual behavior, or even as a set of authoritative ideals, often fail to account for the fact that authority is not an imminent property of canonical texts but rather an emergent effect of the social institutions and practices in which they are embedded.”⁵⁶ According to this perspective, studies of Talmudic texts that fail to explore Jewish Babylonian society and institutions, and their ties to the Sasanian context, potentially misconstrue our understanding of rabbinic authority. Part of what external sources provide are correctives to academic appropriations of rabbinic self-descriptions that are not always grounded in historical actualities.⁵⁷ The use of exclusively exegetical or redactional methods toward Talmudic texts thus wrongly dissolves the link between Babylonian texts and the social situations of their agents, the rabbis of Sasanian Babylonia.⁵⁸ To the detriment of the field, internal methods in Talmudic studies often assume in an unbalanced way that the rabbis’ ties to their past and contemporaneous Jewish traditions were the primary catalysts in rabbinic cultural production and that the social presence of non-Jewish others was of secondary influence. Such internal approaches interpret Babylonian rabbinic Judaism according to a sugya’s similarities and differences with antecedent Palestinian rabbinic sources and other Jewish cultures rather than according to the rabbis’ relationship with the outside world. In doing so, internal approaches toward the Talmud mistakenly yield the logic of historical time and space to the reconstruction of Jewish chains of tradition and, ultimately, intracultural conclusions.⁵⁹ Without attention paid to non-Jewish cultural contexts, endogenous modes of textual analysis cannot account for the influence of Babylonian realities on Babylonian rabbinic culture, instead continuously assigning the continuities and discontinuities in Babylonian rabbinic Judaism to rabbinic Judaism itself. Exemplifying this deficiency, the research methods of Fraenkel and Halivni, for instance, do not account for the broader cultural background of Talmudic texts’ symbols, concerns, or values.⁶⁰ Research on Talmudic culture that does not fully engage non-Jewish contexts brings to light the question whether one is overlooking an essential component in the formation of Talmudic culture without recourse to non-Jewish Sasanian contexts.

Studies of the Talmud that ignore the impact of the gentile world on Babylonian rabbinic culture are also contradicted by the historical evidence emanating from Sasanian Iran. Ancient Iranology documents that Sasanian Mesopotamia, the diasporic exilic homeland for the Jews of ancient Persia, was full of hybridic identities and is thus as ripe for the multicultural turn as other ancient Jewish cultures that scholars have contextualized according to broader landscapes.⁶¹

INSULAR RABBIS IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD?

Studies of Talmudic culture that assume rabbinic insularity from the gentile world stand in stark contrast to the picture of Sasanian culture that the field of Iranian studies paints. Ancient Iranists have proved that Sasanian Mesopotamia was composed of a spectrum of intersecting identities that cut across ethnic, linguistic, social, political, and religious lines.⁶² Late antique Mesopotamia was a multicultural environment replete with elite, subelite, sectarian, and popular movements, all of which intermingled in various social contexts. This diversity dates back more than a millennium before the early Sasanians came to power and inherited a cultural legacy steeped in Akkadian, Achaemenid, Parthian, and Avestan expressions. The eastern provinces of the Roman Empire also play a central role in understanding the culture and society in Jewish Babylonia, especially beginning in the fourth century C.E., as Richard Kalmin maintains in several publications.⁶³ Additionally, such political and military events as the large-scale transference of prisoners to certain regions, as for example those of Shapur I, affected the stratification of populations in Mesopotamia. Indeed, in royal inscriptions the Sasanian monarchy itself praises and promotes the image of the empire as a mixture of citizens.

In the Sasanian era, the fertile region surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates rivers was home to an array of Aramaic-speaking religious groups, including Jews, Mandaeans, and Christians. These groups' writings share linguistic and cultural affinities with one another to such an extent that some scholars have argued that together they may have formed an Aramaic linguistic or cultural koiné. This is especially true in the realm of magic, a topic that I treat in chapter 6 of this book. Each Aramaic group's relationship with the other groups was distinctive, depending on whether they lived as neighbors, shared scriptural writings, spoke dialects of the same language and could perhaps communicate orally, or possessed higher or lower forms of social standing or institutional organization. The Persian Zoroastrian elements in Mesopotamia, particularly near the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon, were equally complex: in spite of the fact that there was a strong imperial presence in the area, there was neither a large Zoroastrian population nor a major fire temple located there.⁶⁴ The Zoroastrian kings and administrative priesthood, ruling from a region inhabited by numerous Aramaic-speaking non-Zoroastrians, were uniquely situated parties in the *mélange* of social and religious groups. It is, as a result, Persian imperial culture that impacts the rabbis more than it is the Zoroastrian religion.

The major centers of rabbinic activity were located near the administrative center of the Persian Empire. The region of *Āsōristān* (Aram. *bēt aramāyē*), a province considered the heart of the empire, had borders proportional to Babylonia.⁶⁵ As the material and literary sources bear out, the population of this area was largely Semitic, with an Iranian administrative class.⁶⁶ Seals of Zoroastrian priests

and other titles exist for Weh-Ardashir, demonstrating the Persian governmental presence near the Jewish sages.⁶⁷ As Geoffrey Herman has concluded, “the administrative divisions of the Sasanian Empire impacted upon the inner-Jewish territorial hierarchy just as this seems to have occurred with the Christians.”⁶⁸ The rabbinic academies in Pumbedita and Nehardea were located approximately fifty kilometers⁶⁹ west of the urban center of the Sasanians’ winter capital, Ctesiphon, where the founder of the dynasty, Ardashir, constructed a palace in the early third century.⁷⁰ Over the course of late antiquity the Sasanians expanded the area of Ctesiphon, leading to the development of various cities and suburbs around the Tigris River.⁷¹ The river separated Weh-Ardashir and Maḥoza, on its western side, from Ctesiphon, which was to its east. Numerous scholars have demonstrated the significance of the proximity to Ctesiphon of Maḥoza, which had large Jewish and Christian populations.⁷² As Yaakov Elman has emphasized in numerous publications, Maḥoza was home to Rav Naḥman and Rava, two rabbis acculturated to Persian norms who were impacted by the culture of the Persian urban elite.⁷³ The city, with its many proselytes according to *b. Qidd.* 73a, was also a central locale for the exilarch.⁷⁴ These broad geographic and ethnic boundaries demonstrate the rationale behind researching further the rabbis in a Sasanian context.

THE LOGIC OF STUDYING THE TALMUD IN ITS SASANIAN CONTEXT

In this chapter I have demonstrated the multiple ways in which Talmudic studies would benefit by adopting ancient Iranology as an analytic category of comparison. Research on the Talmud in its Sasanian context acts as a needed counterbalance to the field’s predilection for source-critical and exegetical approaches. It is, in fact, the very sophistication of Talmudic studies’ collective inquiries on the literary aspects of Talmudic texts—especially when considered in relation to scholarship on Syriac, Middle Persian, or Mandaic literature—that I believe warrants and legitimizes an opening up of the field to questions regarding the impact of the Sasanian context on rabbinic culture. In order to do comparative work, however, our historical methods need to become as refined as our literary ones. Pushing back against the isolationist nature of our sources, one essential contribution that comparative work makes toward understanding social history is that it deemphasizes the normative claims in religious traditions and unlocks new pathways to reconstructing institutions and social structures of one group in light of another. Rabbinic culture and society are in some ways inherently comparative. In sum, it is through contextualization that historians of Babylonian Jewry can eschew the flaws of Talmudic history’s quest for the true tale or historical kernel of ahistorical texts and contribute to a healthier distribution between hermeneutics and history.

Although this book highlights the Persian and Zoroastrian contexts of the Talmud, its goal can be similarly applied to Sasanian Mesopotamia's other religious traditions, especially Syriac Christianity,⁷⁵ Manichaeism, Mandaism, popular magic, and early Islam. It is only once all these sources and contexts are exploited simultaneously that the field of Talmudic studies can arrive at a better understanding of the Talmud in its Sasanian context. Some of these interfaces are certainly more fruitful than others, and each of them poses unique methodological challenges. This book's study of Persian culture is in the end but one fruitful avenue of contextualizing the Talmud in its Sasanian setting, albeit an important one given the Persians' imperial standing.