

# Introduction

## RABBIS AND DEMONS

Though of their names in heavenly records now  
Be no memorial blotted out and rased  
By their rebellion, from the Books of Life.  
Nor had they yet among the sons of Eve  
Got them new names, till wandering o'er the Earth,  
Through God's high sufferance for the trial of man,  
By falsities and lies the greatest part  
Of mankind they corrupted to forsake  
God their Creator, and the invisible  
Glory of him that made them, to transform  
Oft to the image of a brute, adorned  
With gay religions full of pomp and gold,  
And devils to adore for deities.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Politicians and scholars will be studying the twists and turns of the 2016 presidential campaign for decades. Reading the reporting on the election cycle, I was struck by the appearance and reappearance of demonic discourse in the national conversation. Voters across the political spectrum accused politicians from the opposing party of being possessed by demons. Gordon Klingenschmitt, a former navy chaplain and one of Republican candidate Ted Cruz's most celebrated supporters, claimed

Epigraph: John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 1, lines 361–73, in *The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1899), 107.

that President Barack Obama was demonically possessed.<sup>1</sup> Radio host Alex Jones described Hillary Clinton as “an abject psychopathic demon from hell.”<sup>2</sup> While two figures may be dismissed as a statistically insignificant minority, a Public Policy Polling poll of Republican voters in Florida in October 2016 found that “40 per cent of Donald Trump’s supporters believe his White House rival Hillary Clinton is an ‘actual demon.’”<sup>3</sup> This rhetoric was not restricted to the Republican Party: Alec Ross, a former Clinton adviser, called Trump a “vulgar, demented, pig demon,” and one Bernie Sanders supporter explained her resistance to Hillary Clinton by claiming, “She’s the devil.”<sup>4</sup>

The appearance of demonic discourse in politics is matched by huge popular interest in demons. In 2015 alone, more than twenty horror movies were released in the United States that featured a malevolent demonic being.<sup>5</sup> Since 2010, hundreds, if not thousands, of English-language novels with a demonic hero or antihero have been published.<sup>6</sup> While demons have become “naturalized” in our popular cultural discourse, demons are associated with fringe elements in the political sphere and dismissed. For some mainstream Americans, demons may have lost the very real sense

1. His book *The Demons of Barack H. Obama: How the Gift of Discerning of Spirits Reveals Unseen Forces Influencing American Politics* (CreateSpace, 2012) is self-published on Amazon. See also Trudy Ring, “Ted Cruz’s Newest Anti-LGBT Pal: ‘Exorcist’ Gordon Klingenschmitt,” *Advocate*, 11 April 2016, [www.advocate.com/election/2016/4/11/ted-cruzs-newest-anti-lgbt-pal-exorcist-gordon-klingenschmitt](http://www.advocate.com/election/2016/4/11/ted-cruzs-newest-anti-lgbt-pal-exorcist-gordon-klingenschmitt).

2. Liam Stack, “He Calls Hillary Clinton a ‘Demon.’ Who Is Alex Jones?,” *New York Times*, 13 October 2016.

3. Lucy Pasha-Robinson, “Four in 10 Donald Trump Supporters Think Hillary Clinton ‘Is an Actual Demon,’” *Independent*, 31 October 2016, [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-elections/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-demon-poll-republican-voters-beliefs-a7388546.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-elections/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-demon-poll-republican-voters-beliefs-a7388546.html). See also Public Policy Polling, “Clinton’s Florida Lead Continues to Grow,” press release, 14 October 2016, [www.publicpolicypolling.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PPP\\_Release\\_FL\\_104161.pdf](http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PPP_Release_FL_104161.pdf).

4. Sarah Knapton, “Donald Trump Is a ‘Vulgar, Demented, Pig Demon’ Says Hillary Clinton’s Ex Adviser,” *Telegraph*, 30 May 2016, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/30/donald-trump-is-a-vulgar-demented-pig-demon-says-hillary-clinton/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/30/donald-trump-is-a-vulgar-demented-pig-demon-says-hillary-clinton/); Tré Goins-Phillips, “She’s the Devil: Sanders Supporters Open up about What They Really Think of Clinton,” *Blaze*, 19 April 2016, [www.theblaze.com/news/2016/04/19/shes-the-devil-sanders-supporters-open-up-about-what-they-really-think-of-clinton](http://www.theblaze.com/news/2016/04/19/shes-the-devil-sanders-supporters-open-up-about-what-they-really-think-of-clinton).

5. “Horror Movies 2015,” IMDb, created 5 January 2015, updated 25 March 2019, [www.imdb.com/list/ls073680122/](http://www.imdb.com/list/ls073680122/).

6. As can be seen by browsing Goodreads.com for the tag *demon* or *demons*.

of presence that they had in earlier periods of human history. Yet they remain a fascinating fiction.

Our fascination with demons represents neither a radical change in outlook nor a devolution to primitive beliefs. Rather, it reflects a range of demonic discourses that have continually existed in some form or another with varying degrees of prominence in different periods and places, in response to varied cultural stimuli.<sup>7</sup> Current claims that particular leaders or groups are possessed by demons or are working with demons suggest that demons continue to be meaningful as modes of group identity formation and policing.

In fact, demons and demonic discourse remain an important lens through which to understand the beliefs, values, and modes of identity formation of cultures modern and ancient. Belief in demons was woven into the social and religious fabric of the late antique Mediterranean world. Although belief in how and when demons manifested varied across ancient religious and ethnic groups, most people shared a belief that visible and invisible intermediary beings existed and could affect the human world. Belief in demons was neither fringe nor associated exclusively with one economic or social class. Demons were a shared yet deeply contested element of the religiously and ethnically diverse world of late antiquity.<sup>8</sup>

This book explores how belief in demons manifested within one religious group in one particular place at one particular time. The Jewish rabbis of late antique Sasanian Babylonia, like other religious groups in late antiquity, believed that the world was full of seen and unseen demons who had a very real presence in people's lives. In rabbinic texts, demons act upon and interact with late antique Jews, rabbinic and non-rabbinic alike. The Babylonian Talmud is filled with stories about rabbinic encounters with demons as well as with laws that regulate and integrate demons into the rabbinic intellectual system. Demons are alternately depicted as dangerous and capricious beings, passive neutral figures, legal actors subject to rabbinic law, and positively marked students and teachers of

7. I adopt the idea of "live" discursive trends from Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 42.

8. See Rachel Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 106 n. 95.

rabbinic traditions. They challenge rabbinic authority at the same time as they uphold it.

#### RABBIS IN SASANIAN BABYLONIA

The rabbis were a Jewish scholastic elite that emerged in the long aftermath of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E.<sup>9</sup> By the third century, the rabbinic world was split between two locations: Roman Palestine and Sasanian Babylonia. These two communities shared inherited texts, values, culture, and language, but their literatures also reflect their different geographic and cultural milieus.

Between the second and seventh centuries, the rabbis produced the major works of classical rabbinic literature: in Roman Palestine, the Mishnah and Tosefta (second-to-third-century C.E. legal anthologies), the homiletical and exegetical midrashim (sing. midrash), and the Palestinian Talmud (Yerushalmi); and in Sasanian Babylonia, the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli). Originally composed and transmitted orally, rabbinic literature is characterized by its multivocal, anthological nature.<sup>10</sup> Classical rabbinic literature reflects the richness and dynamism of rabbinic life in the more than four hundred years of its compositional history.

Unlike their Palestinian colleagues, the rabbis of Babylonia primarily produced a single great work of literature that survives to this day, the Babylonian Talmud. Yet this work contains narrative, exegetical, homiletical, legal, and jurisprudential elements. Scholars debate a *terminus ante quem* for the Babylonian Talmud. It seems likely that it was largely collected and organized before the seventh century C.E., though editorial activities may

9. On scholasticism and my use of the term to describe the rabbis of Babylonia, see the discussion in chap. 2.

10. Yaakov Elman, "Order, Sequence, and Selection: The Mishnah's Anthological Choices," in *The Anthology in Jewish Literature*, ed. David Stern (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 75; Steven D. Fraade, "Rabbinic Polysemy and Pluralism Revisited: Between Praxis and Thematization," *AJS Review* 31, no. 1 (2007): 1–40. I use the term *anthology* here not to de-emphasize the compositional and redactional work of the editors of these texts, but to emphasize the editors' work of creative juxtaposition of earlier texts to create a dialectical whole.

have continued for another hundred years.<sup>11</sup> This text is a vital piece of historical evidence, both for late antique Judaism and for the complex religious world of late antique Babylonia.

Late antique Babylonia was part of the Sasanian province of Āsōristān. The Sasanian dynasty came to power in 224 c.E. and ruled until 650 c.E. At its height, the Sasanian Empire stretched from modern-day Armenia to Tajikistan and from Kazakhstan to Yemen.<sup>12</sup> Though the Sasanian Empire spanned diverse regions and religious groups, the ruling elite was Zoroastrian, members of a religious system first developed on the steppes of ancient Iran in the first millennium B.C.E.<sup>13</sup> Zoroastrianism's reputed

11. For specific arguments about dating the composition and redaction of the Babylonian Talmud, see Yaakov Elman, "The World of the 'Saboraim': Cultural Aspects of Post-Redactional Additions to the Bavli," in *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammaim) to the Aggadah*, ed. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 384; David Weiss Halivni, *The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud*, trans. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Shamma Friedman, "Wonder Not at a Gloss in Which the Name of an *Amora* Is Mentioned': The Amoraic Statments and the Anonymous Material in the Sugyot of the Bavli Revisited," in *Melekheth Mahshevet: Studies in the Redaction and Development of Talmudic Literature*, ed. Aharon Amit and Aharon Shemesh (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2011), 101–44; "Pereq Ha-isha Rabba Ba-Bavli: Be-Ẓiruf Mavo Klali al Derekh Heker Ha-Sugya," in *Texts and Studies: Analecta Judaica*, ed. H. Z. Dimitrovsky (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1977), 277–321. For an alternative theory of identifying and dating the anonymous materials of the Talmud, see Robert Brody, "Stam Ha-Talmud ve-Divrei Ha-Amoraim," in *Iggud: Selected Essays in Jewish Studies*, ed. Baruch J. Schwartz, Abraham Melamed, and Aharon Shemesh (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2008), 1:213–32. Richard Kalmin, "The Formation and Character of the Babylonian Talmud," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4:840–76. In this book, I follow Elman in dating the bulk of the composition of the Babylonian Talmud to before the mid-sixth century, but I recognize that redactional and glossing activities continued for several hundred years afterward.

12. For a history of the Sasanian Empire, see A. Shapur Shahbazi, "Sasanian Dynasty," in *Encyclopædia Iranica Online* (2005), [www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sasanian-dynasty](http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sasanian-dynasty); Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009); Josef Wiesehofer, *Ancient Persia: From 550 B.C. to 650 A.D.* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996); Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris in association with the Iran Heritage Foundation, 2008).

13. Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1, *The Early Period* (1975; Leiden: Brill, 1989); William W. Malandra, "Zoroastrianism. I. Historical Review up to the Arab Conquest," in *Encyclopædia Iranica Online* (2005), [www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zoroastrianism-i-historical-review](http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zoroastrianism-i-historical-review); Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "Zoroastrian Dualism," in *Light against Darkness: Dualism in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and the Contemporary World*, ed. Armin Lange et al. (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 55–91.

founder, named Zarathustra in Avestan and Zoroaster in Greek, taught a fundamental opposition between a good god, Ahura Mazdā (Ohrmazd in Middle Persian), and an evil god, Aṇra Mainyu (Ahriman in Middle Persian). As we will see, as part of this dualistic lens, Zoroastrianism had its own elaborate demonology enacted through myth, ritual, and law.

The Sasanian Empire was also home to rabbinic and non-rabbinic Jews, Christians of different theological bents, Manichaeans, Mandaeans, and followers of other indigenous ancient Near Eastern religious traditions. The Sasanian province of Āsōristān had a significant population that continued to observe in some form the rituals and beliefs of ancient Mesopotamia.<sup>14</sup> The Sasanian Empire's general stance was one of religious toleration, and religious minorities developed in conversation and competition with one another.<sup>15</sup> They produced their own religious laws

14. See discussion in chap. 5.

15. Regarding the Sasanian Empire's stance of toleration, some scholars have argued that an outlier here may be the tenure of the Zoroastrian religious leader Kertir, whose inscription boasts that he suppressed non-Zoroastrian religious minorities in the empire. For more on this inscription within its historical context, see Oktor Skjærvø, "Counter-Manichean Elements in Kerdīr's Inscriptions. Irano-Manichaica II," in *Atti Del Terzo Congresso Internazionale Di Studi "Manicheismo E Oriente Cristiano Antico," Arcavacata Di Rende-Amantea 31 Agosto-5 Settembre 1993*, ed. L. Cirillo and A. V. Tongerloo (Leuven, Belgium: Brepols, 1997), 314-42; Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "Kartir," *Encyclopædia Iranica Online* (2011, 2012 updated online), [www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kartir](http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kartir). For scholarship complicating this assessment, and arguing that any such persecutions were either minimal or entirely fictitious, see Richard E. Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 26; Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 122-38. Payne argues instead that Sasanian society should be understood through "a model of the differentiated, hierarchical inclusion of religious others rooted in Zoroastrian cosmological thought" (26). For discussions of specific religious communities in Sasanian Iran, see J. P. Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. E. Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 3(2):924-48; Adam Howard Becker, "Martyrdom, Religious Difference, and 'Fear' as a Category of Piety in the Sasanian Empire: The Case of the Martyrdom of Gregory and the Martyrdom of Yazdpaneh," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2, no. 2 (2009): 300-336; Robert Brody, "Judaism in the Sasanian Empire: A Case Study in Religious Coexistence," in *Irano-Judaica II: Studies Relating to Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture Throughout the Ages*, ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer (Jerusalem: Yad Izak Ben-Zvi and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1990), 52-62; Richard N. Frye, "Minorities in the History of the Near East," in *A Green Leaf: Papers in Honour of Professor Jes P. Asmussen*, ed. W. Sundermann et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 461-71; Manfred Hutter, "Manichaeism in the Early Sasanian Empire," *Numen* 40, no. 1 (1993): 2-15; G. Widengren, "Manichaeism and Its Iranian Background," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. E. Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 3(2):965-90; Erica

and narratives, had politically powerful religious leaders, and created communities which were adaptive while also being invested in policing their own religious boundaries. The rabbis thrived in this world, developing scholastic frameworks to shape and transmit their communal identity, and creating a rich corpus of rabbinic culture and thought.

## RECEIVING RABBINIC DEMONS

This book examines late antique rabbinic identity formation and cultural interactions through the lens of the rabbis' thinking about demons. It analyzes and contextualizes those Talmudic texts that are directly or indirectly about demons. Given the pervasiveness of demonic discourse in a range of areas of rabbinic thought, this project might seem obvious. Until recently however, many readers of the Talmud have largely ignored or dismissed rabbinic discourse about demons. This dismissal has been part of larger Jewish conversations about normativity, rationalism, authenticity, and antisemitism that have emerged at particular historical moments.

No reader comes to any text a blank slate. Our experiences of reading are always informed by our own life experiences, our families and communities, and the history of textual interpretation. Readers of the Babylonian Talmud have had their experiences conditioned in part by centuries of religious commentary and codification, which both passively and actively downplayed the Talmud's demonic discourse.<sup>16</sup>

The most famous medieval opponent of demonic discourse was Maimonides (c. 1135–1204 C.E.). Maimonides, however, followed the approach first set out by his intellectual forefather, the North African commentator R. Isaac Alfasi (acronym Rif), who lived c. 1013–1103 C.E. Rif compiled an early code of Talmudic law, *Sefer Ha-Halakhot*. To create his compilation,

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C. D. Hunter, "Aramaic-Speaking Communities of Sasanid Mesopotamia," *ARAM* 7 (1995): 319–35; Simcha Gross, "Empire and Neighbors: Babylonian Jewish Identity in Its Local and Imperial Context" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2017).

16. Much of this historiographical discussion can be found in Sara Ronis, "Intermediary Beings in Late Antique Judaism: A History of Scholarship," *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, no. 1 (2015): 96. For a succinct survey of medieval and early modern Talmudic interpreters' approaches to the Talmud's demons, see Natan Slifkin, *Wrestling with Demons: A History of Rabbinic Attitudes to Demons* (self-published online, 2011).

Rif made a series of judgments about Talmudic passages and included only those that he determined were legal in nature and normative.<sup>17</sup> In his construction of normative law, Rif left out rabbinic stories, biblical interpretation, and even legal passages on topics he felt were nonnormative, including demons.<sup>18</sup> Barry Wimpfheimer argues that this (medieval) move imposed a classificatory system external to the Talmudic text itself, an imposition which calls “attention to the ways authoritative texts are sometimes marginalized through interpretation.”<sup>19</sup>

Maimonides expanded this outlook on demonic nonnormativity into a broader moral stance, railing against superstitious people who “are seduced by [talismanery] with great folly, and with similar things, and think that they are real—which is not so . . . and these are things that have received great publicity amongst the pagans, especially amongst the nation which is called the Sabians . . . and they wrote works dealings with the stars, and witchcraft and incantations and calling upon spirits, and horoscopes and demons, and soothsaying in all their forms.”<sup>20</sup> In his desire to cast rabbinic literature in a rationalist light, Maimonides explained that demons were really just people who were missing a rational soul; a so-called demon was actually just “an animal in the form and likeness of a person, but with the power to cause all kinds of harm and innovate new evils, which other creations do not have.”<sup>21</sup> For Maimonides, the only real demons were irrational humans.

17. Barry S. Wimpfheimer, *The Talmud: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 113.

18. See for example, *Sefer Ha-Halakhah* on b. *Pesachim* 109b–112a, which Rif condenses into two paragraphs with only a single brief mention of the demonic ideas that underlie the Talmud’s concerns about demons.

19. Barry S. Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 4–5.

20. Moses Maimonides, *Commentary to the Mishnah, Avodah Zarah* 4:7. Translation from Slifkin, *Wrestling with Demons*, 7. See Avishur Ravitzky, “Maimonides and His Disciples on Linguistic Magic and ‘the Madness of the Writers of Amulets,’” in *Jewish Culture in the Eye of the Storm: A Jubilee Book in Honor of Yosef Ahituv*, ed. Aviezer Sagi and Nahem Ilan (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meukhad, 2002), 431–58; Gad Freudenthal, “Maimonides’ Philosophy of Science,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 134–66; Yuval Harari, “Leadership, Authority, and the ‘Other’ in the Debate over Magic from the Karaites to Maimonides,” *Journal for the Study of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry* 1 (2007): 79–101.

21. Maimonides, *The Guide to the Perplexed* 1.7.



Rif, Maimonides, and their successors were largely successful in decoupling Talmudic demonology from normative Jewish law and thought. Although groups such as the medieval Ḥasidei Ashkenaz, fifteenth-century Spanish Kabbalists, and the sixteenth-century female pietists of Safed created elaborate demonologies of their own, these demonologies were only superficially related to the earlier rabbinic construction of demons found in the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>22</sup>

The modern reader of the Talmud is also shaped by nineteenth- and twentieth-century academic discourses on the Talmud's nature, historicity, and social location. Judaism first became a subject of academic study in the nineteenth century. The German Jewish scholars who were part of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the scientific study of Judaism) School insisted—to the Jewish community and to the broader public—that Judaism deserved to be studied in German universities. Their work was political, intellectual, and deeply theological—they made their case in part by presenting a Judaism that was just as “rational” and “spiritual” as Protestant Christianity.<sup>23</sup> These scholars downplayed elements of Jewish tradition—legal, ritual, and “irrational”—that did not fit this nineteenth-century German model of religion.<sup>24</sup> Angels, demons, miracles, and popular religious practices were dismissed as “primitive,” or as foreign and inauthentic to true Judaism. In 1866, the Hungarian rabbi and scholar Alexander Kohut described rabbinic demonology as “an alien product,

22. See Joseph Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1968); Rachel Elijor, *Dybbuks and Jewish Women in Social History, Mysticism and Folklore* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2008); Jonathan Garb, “Mysticism and Magic: Objections, Doubts, Accommodation,” *Mahanayim* 14 (2002): 97–109; Moshe Idel, “Jewish Magic from the Renaissance Period to Early Hasidism,” in *Religion, Science, and Magic in Concert and in Conflict*, ed. Jacob Neusner et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 82–117; J. H. Chajes, *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 117.

23. On the work of the scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, see Michael A. Meyer, “Two Persistent Tensions within Wissenschaft Des Judentums,” *Modern Judaism* 24 no. 2 (2004): 105–19. On their relationship to the modern academic study of Judaism, and a critique of Meyer's scholarly reconstruction, see George Y. Kohler, “Judaism Buried or Revitalized? *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Nineteenth-Century Germany—Impact, Actuality, and Applicability Today,” in *Jewish Thought and Jewish Belief*, ed. Daniel J. Lasker (Beer Sheva, Israel: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2012), 27–63.

24. These scare quotes are my own; each of these terms has a long historiography and their usage requires caution and care.

obtained through contact with the Persians and the Medes in the exilic period.”<sup>25</sup> German historian Heinrich Graetz echoed this approach in 1893. Graetz faulted the Talmud for containing “the various superstitious practices and views of [the Talmud’s] Persian birthplace, which presume the efficacy of demoniacal medicines, of magic, incantations, miraculous cures, and interpretations of dreams, and are thus in opposition to the spirit of Judaism.”<sup>26</sup> Such scholars dealt with what they saw as an irrational and primitive rabbinic demonology by dismissing it as a foreign corruption; they assumed that the rabbis must have included it in their sacred corpus either because they had themselves been corrupted, or in order to placate the credulous common folk.<sup>27</sup>

The only reason that the author of this book could have been academically trained in ancient Judaism is that, over a hundred and fifty years ago, the scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* were successful in making the case that Judaism was worthy of study in the secular academy. But their early rejection of rabbinic demonology set a course for modern scholarship that ignored the parts of Jewish tradition that may have seemed primitive or awkward to nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, we cannot overlook the role of antisemitism in framing the way that twenty-first century readers have encountered Jewish texts. In the face of rising antisemitism in the 1930s and 1940s, American Jewish scholars such as Joshua Trachtenberg worked explicitly to decouple demons from normative Judaism. This move was an important part of a critique and undoing of historical antisemitic tropes that associated Jews with demons, devil-worship, and Satanism. As Trachtenberg wrote in 1944, “not a human being but a demonic, diabolic beast fighting the forces of truth and salvation with Satan’s weapons, was the Jew as medieval

25. Alexander Kohut, *Ueber die jüdische Angelologie und Daemonologie in ihrer Abhängigkeit vom Parsismus* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1866), 7. Translation my own.

26. Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, 5 vols., vol. 2, *From the Reign of Hyrcanus (135 BCE) to the Completion of the Babylonian Talmud* (1893; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967), 633.

27. See also Ludwig Blau, *Das altjüdische Zauberwesen* (Strasbourg: K. Trübner, 1898).

28. See more extensive discussion of this period of study and its impact on understandings of the Talmud, in Ronis, “Intermediary Beings,” 98–99.

Europe saw him.”<sup>29</sup> In response to the power of these antisemitic beliefs, Trachtenberg reaffirmed that demonology and magic across historical periods were foreign to normative Judaism and were instead primitive and universal “folk” beliefs.<sup>30</sup>

Demons were largely written out of both normative Judaism and Jewish studies as part of specific cultural conversations in particular times and places: the medieval Maghreb, nineteenth-century Germany, and the West in the 1930s and 1940s. These acts of interpretation were meant to affirm Judaism to its supporters and to defend it from its detractors, with varying results. But these rejections of rabbinic demonology as non-normative, foreign superstition continue to lead many readers today to overlook the important roles that demons play in the Babylonian rabbinic imagination.

Overlooking rabbinic demonology has real consequences for understanding rabbinic literature and the rabbis as a movement. Examining the skittishness of many academics to engage in critical scholarship about demons, the religious studies scholar Bruce Lincoln notes that, “as the result of such skittishness, our understanding of many cultures and historic eras remains impoverished, for some of the best minds of numerous peoples were devoted to demonology.”<sup>31</sup> In the Babylonian Talmud, the very same “best minds” who created rabbinic literature’s legal, ethical, and

29. Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944), 18. Indeed, this is not only a bygone concern. A cursory google search for the words *demons* and *Talmud* when I first began exploring this topic in 2012 yielded a substantial number of links on the first three pages of results to antisemitic websites of various kinds. With renewed academic interest in demonology over the last ten years, the results are now much more scholarly in nature.

30. *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Behrman House, 1939), 1–10; *The Devil and the Jews*, 11–31. For context for Trachtenberg’s life, see Sefton D. Temkin, “Trachtenberg, Joshua,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 20:79. For more on Trachtenberg’s positionality, see Melissa Margaret Aubin, “Gendering Magic in Late Antique Judaism” (PhD diss., Duke University, 1998), 18–42. Aubin, on p. 36, has noted that Trachtenberg’s “emphasis on folklore was [also] meant to counter Christian claims about Judaism’s supposed legalistic sterility.” This tendency backfired, as Trachtenberg’s work has been adopted and deployed in the furtherance of antisemitic tropes in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. See, e.g., Henry Makow, “Covid, The Devil & the Jews,” 14 September 2021, <http://henrymakow.com/the-devil-and-the-jews.html>.

31. Bruce Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 33.

theological complexities devoted much time to imagining and regulating the demonic.<sup>32</sup> In the last thirty years, spurred on in part by Gershom Scholem's work in valorizing and valuing Jewish magical and mystical traditions, scholars have finally begun the process of reinscribing demonology into late antique Jewish religion and thought.<sup>33</sup>

In this book, I ask what rabbinic literature, ancient Judaism, and late antique religions look like when demons are reinscribed into them: How did the Babylonian rabbis think about demons? How did demons function in late antique rabbinic theology? How were demons deployed in the construction of the rabbis as a powerful religious elite in late antique Sasanian Babylonia? What broader cultural conversations can be recovered by examining rabbinic discourse about demons? How might demons be a powerful force or framework to "think with" in the late antique world?

I argue that the rabbis' understanding of demons was important to their construction of themselves as a religious and scholastic elite in a complex world. Demons were a particularly rich locus for rabbinic interaction with the diverse cultures and traditions in Sasanian Babylonia; using demons as our test case, we can see the wide range of ways the rabbis used demons to think through contested issues of law, behavior, identity, and belief. Ultimately, the rabbis used all the tools in their respective legal and narrative toolboxes to construct their own belief in demons while their belief in demons helped construct the rabbinic movement.

## THEORIZING DEMONS

This study of demonic discourse in the Babylonian Talmud stands at the intersection of three distinct fields of modern scholarship: the study of religion and magic, the social-scientific fields of anthropology and ethno-psychiatry, and the study of the Babylonian Talmud in its cultural context. I use these three intersecting fields to understand how rabbinic demonol-

32. Ronis, "Intermediary Beings," 95.

33. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941); David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). My thanks to Jordan Rosenblum for suggesting I take into account Scholem's importance to the scholarly trajectory.

ogy functioned within its larger religious intellectual system and within the lives of those rabbis who participated in it.

### *Magic and/or Religion*

Within religious studies, demons have been studied largely within the context of magic. Melissa Aubin, Kimberly Stratton, and Randall Styers have all done thorough work in laying out a scholarly historiography of the study of magic; I offer only a small window into the subject here.<sup>34</sup>

In the nineteenth century, scholars in the nascent fields of religious studies and anthropology began to examine magical practices and beliefs.<sup>35</sup> These scholars proposed a range of ways to distinguish magic—in its essence and in its performance—from religion, whether in terms of the goals of practitioners, the details of rituals, or the social and communal contexts in which it was performed.<sup>36</sup> As in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which was part of this broader trend, demons were classed as magical and understood as primitive “superstition,” distinct from a more civilized “religion” that looked very much like Protestant Christianity.<sup>37</sup>

In 1937, British anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard published his groundbreaking study of the Azande people of north-central Africa, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. In it, he criticized existing scholarship for understanding magic through a lens which held up nineteenth-century Western religiosity as the pinnacle of religious practice against which all other religious practice must be judged and found want-

34. Readers who are interested in learning more are encouraged to read Aubin, “Gendering Magic in Late Antique Judaism”; Kimberly B. Stratton, *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 109–143; and Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

35. Of course, religious leaders had distinguished between these two terms in conversations within a specific religious community for centuries. For discussion of the Christian distinctions between religion and magic, see Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, 109–143; Karen Jolly, “Medieval Magic: Definitions, Beliefs, Practices,” in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 1–72.

36. See extensive discussion of these scholars in Aubin, “Gendering Magic in Late Antique Judaism,” 26–61; Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, 1–38; Styers, *Making Magic*.

37. Particularly ironic given the importance of demons to early Christian writings in the New Testament and monastic literature.

ing. He argued that magic needed a new definition informed by sensitivity to the self-understandings of its practitioners.<sup>38</sup> With this publication Evans-Pritchard initiated a scholarly approach that sees magic as socially and culturally constructed, rather than static and easily identifiable.<sup>39</sup> As a result, some scholars have recognized that calling something *magic* is itself an ideological act.<sup>40</sup> What “we” (white, male, and rational Christians) do is religion, what “they” (men and women of color, white women, the “primitive,” non-Christians) do is magic.<sup>41</sup> As religious studies scholars have begun to recognize the ideological nature of the label *magic*, they have also called into question both the utility of distinguishing between religion and magic and the act of dismissing rites labeled magical.

Jewish studies scholars have followed this trend, moving from early phenomenological accounts of magic in Judaism to more rhetorically nuanced studies of magic that reckon with the ideological and discursive functions of informant claims that certain behaviors or individuals are magical—or demonic—in nature.<sup>42</sup> Most scholarship on late antique Jew-

38. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 1–17.

39. For more on Evans-Pritchard’s impact on the study of magic, see Aubin, “Gendering Magic,” 86–89. Of course, there are still scholars conducting phenomenological studies of magic. See, e.g., H. S. Versnel, “Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic-Religion,” *Numen* 38, no. 2 (1991): 177–97, whose approach is partly followed by Yuval Harari, “What Is a Magical Text? Methodological Reflections Aimed at Redefining Early Jewish Magic,” in *Officina Magica: Essays on the Practice of Magic in Antiquity*, ed. Shaul Shaked (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 91–124.

40. Stratton, *Naming the Witch*, chap. 1, n. 41.

41. Although almost a truism today, the phrase “what we do is religion, what they do is magic,” is often associated with John Gager. See, e.g., John Gager, “The Social Place of Magic in the Graeco-Roman World,” paper presented at the Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins, Williams Hall, University of Pennsylvania, 5 October 1976 (with minutes available at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/psco/archives/psco14-min.htm#b1>). I have been unable to identify its earliest use.

42. In his recent work, Yuval Harari has argued that the sociological, cultural studies, gender studies, and comparative religion approaches have

replaced the traditional scholarship that sought to subordinate the discourse as a whole to one factor within it: the halakha, and to examine it in light of the halakha, alone. The nullification of the essential dichotomy between religion and magic in Jewish studies, part of a more general trend in the study of religion in recent decades, and replacing it with an approach that sees them as parallel and complementary ritual power systems has brought about an important change. It has diverted the focus of discussion about the rabbis’ attitude toward magic and magicians (and especially sorceresses) from the ideological to the social. Here, the main concern is

ish magic and ritual power to date has focused on the Jewish communities of the Roman West.<sup>43</sup> Not enough work has been done on the specific character and function of demons in the rabbinic community of the Sasanian East.<sup>44</sup>

Informed by my awareness of the socially constructed and culturally

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the rabbis' aspiration to acquire a monopoly over knowledge and power and the removal of competition—ideological, ritual, and societal, by labeling such competitors as illegitimate (“The Sages and the Occult,” in *The Literature of the Sage*, ed. Shmuel Safrai et al. [Assen, Netherlands: Royal van Gorcum, 2006], 521).

In my own work on demons, I argue that demons are not part of a system parallel and complementary to religion and halakhah; instead, they are very much a part of the halakhic system itself and thus part of normative religion for the rabbis.

43. Scholars of ancient Judaism have examined manifestations of demonology in the Dead Sea Scrolls, *Heikhalot* literature, and the late antique Roman Empire as a whole. On Second Temple demonology, see Philip S. Alexander, “The Demonology of the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls after Fifty Years: A Comprehensive Assessment*, ed. Peter W. Flint and James C. Vanderkam (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 331–53; Esther Eshel, “Demonology in Palestine during the Second Temple Period” (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1999). For demons and magic in *Heikhalot* literature, see Michael D. Swartz, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). For demons and magic in the late antique Roman Empire, see Gideon Bohak, “Jewish Myth in Pagan Magic in Antiquity,” in *Myths in Judaism: History, Thought, Literature*, ed. I. Gruenewald and Moshe Idel (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2004), 97–122, 143–226; and his *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

An important parallel project is that of Mika Ahuvia, whose PhD dissertation, “Israel among the Angels—A Study of Angels in Jewish Texts from the Fourth to Eighth Century C.E.” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2014) and subsequent book explore the essential roles of angels in Jewish exegetical, homiletical, and liturgical texts, as well as in Jewish material culture.

44. One factor contributing to this oversight may be the problem of access, as many scholars of ancient Judaism are trained in Greek, Latin, and Roman history, and thus may more easily study the Palestinian materials in their broader cultural context. Another factor may be the scholarly distance between understandings of magic and understandings of the Babylonian Talmud. On the one hand, many scholars of magic and its relationship to organized religion are hesitant to use the Babylonian Talmud as evidence, both because of linguistic difficulties and because of broader methodological concerns. On the other hand, for the reasons outlined above, scholars who are rigorously trained in Talmudic methodology often dismiss magic as nonnormative and thus irrelevant in the modern context.

Two recent excellent exceptions to this claim are Avigail Manekin Bamberger, “An Akkadian Demon in the Talmud: Between Šulak and Bar-Širiqa,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 44 (2013): 282–87, and Richard Kalmin, *Migrating Tales: The Talmud's Narratives and Their Historical Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), which examine a single incantation and longer Bavli narratives, respectively. Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires: Yetzer Hara and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), also touches on the demonic as part of a larger discussion of the nature of sin and the evil inclination in rabbinic thought, though his concept of the demonic