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Idolatry, God(s), and Demons among the Jews of Sasanian Babylonia

Sasanian Babylonia was a region brimming with the supernatural. In this paper, I shall discuss how the rabbis of this region responded to the pervasive polytheism surrounding them, including the expansive world of demonology, and how they sought to reconcile it with their religious worldview.

According to a number of Second Temple sources, Babylonian Jews, like Jews throughout the ancient world, were staunchly monotheistic. For instance, we hear from a source attributed to Hecataeus of Abdera how the Jews serving in the army under Alexander of Macedon adamantly refused to participate in the reconstruction of a temple to Bel in Babylon.¹ Additional Second Temple works also give this impression, such as the Book of Judith,² and Bel and the Dragon—a work that seems to polemicise against the worship of Bel. Other accounts are less emphatic. For instance, the account of the robber kingdom of the two Jewish leaders Anilaus and Asinaeus, which is recorded by Josephus, thematises the pagan images worshipped by Anilaus's Gentile wife and its disastrous impact on the Jews. Even though Jews are not themselves implicated in idolatry, it might be alluding to, and warning against, inner-Jewish dabbling in such pagan images.³

Rabbinic sources speak of Second Temple Jews and their late antique descendants as having *overcome* what is described as the “inclination” (יצרָה) or impulse towards “alien worship.”⁴ On the basis of these sources, Ephraim Elimelech Urbach, for example, would conclude that “the prevailing view of the Sages in the third century was that the craving for idolatry had been uprooted and removed from Israel already at the beginning of the Second Temple period.”⁵ The most explicit rabbinic

1 Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1.192. See Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974), 38. For doubts regarding the accuracy of the attribution of this episode to Hecataeus, see generally Bezalel Bar-Kochva, *Pseudo-Hecataeus, “On the Jews”: Legitimizing the Jewish Diaspora* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996).

2 Jdt 8:18. For the Persian era, see Rivka Raviv, “Hafsaqat ha-Elilut beYisrael bitqifah haParsit,” *Bekhol Derakhekha Daehu: Journal of Torah and Scholarship* 25 (2011): 83–92, and further references.

3 Josephus, *Ant.* 18.345. On this episode and for further references, see Geoffrey Herman, “Iranian Epic Motifs in Josephus’ Antiquities (XVIII, 314–370),” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 57, no. 2 (2006): 245–68. Here, idolatry is related to a forbidden sexual union. On this linkage, see further below.

4 For the rabbinic term, עבודה זרה, a literal translation would be ‘alien worship’ which I have adopted in cases of ambiguity. The term ‘idolatry’, which is far more common, suggests the existence of a physical object, an idol, which is not always assumed in the rabbinic term.

5 Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1979), I, 22; Ephraim E. Urbach, “The Rabbinic Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in the Light of Archaeological and Historical Facts, I–II,”

ic sources to make this claim appear in *b. Yoma* 69b, a Babylonian rabbinic source which will be examined in detail below, and the Palestinian midrash *Song of Songs Rab.* 7:8. Some rabbinic sources question the degree to which even those Israelites depicted as sinning through the practice of idolatry in the Bible during earlier periods were in fact truly devoted to it. A tradition in the name of Rav, for instance, defends the religious credentials of the Jews prior to the beginning of the Second Temple era. It declares: “The Israelites knew that they were nonentities, and they engaged in alien worship only in order to allow themselves forbidden sexual relations (*b. Sanh.* 63b).” Such an assertion, which reiterates the ancient tendency to equate idolatry with sexual promiscuity,⁶ was reassuring to the talmudic sages in its implication that the ancient Israelites, notwithstanding their sin of idolatry, committed “no cognitive error.”⁷

Saul Lieberman is of a similar view. While observing that the rabbis possessed “a fair knowledge of the rites and practices of idol worshippers and of the various regulations bearing on heathen divinities,”⁸ he asserted that “the Rabbis did not *deem it necessary* to engage in theoretical discussions against” idolatry (*italics mine*).⁹ In his view, they confined themselves to the legal sphere of permitted and prohibited interaction and contact, albeit providing an extensive and detailed tractate containing legal discussion on the subject. He also tended to minimise the direct impact of pagan idolatry on rabbis and Jews in his close studies of “rabbinic polemics against idolatry” and “heathen idolatrous rites in rabbinic literature,” even as he provided and studied many examples of rabbinic *familiarity* with pagan practices.¹⁰

Such an assertion might seem difficult to substantiate. Furthermore, and more generally, it does not clearly distinguish between the situations in Babylonia and Palestine. I wish here to limit my examination to Babylonia. Indeed, studies of Jewish attitudes towards idolatry, pagan deities, and demons in late antiquity, particularly in the rabbinic period, have tended to focus on Palestine, with its rich offerings of literary sources, material findings, and archaeological data alike.¹¹ The Mishnah,

Israel Exploration Journal 9, no. 3/4 (1959): 149–65; 229–45, especially 154: “The consensus of opinion amongst the Sages in the third century was that all idolatrous impulses had been eradicated from amongst the people of Israel as early as the beginning of the Second Temple.”

⁶ For example, Exod 34:16; Lev 20:15; Ezek 6:9, and elsewhere.

⁷ For this phrase, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 23.

⁸ Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission, Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the I Century B.C.E.–IV Century C.E.* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), 115.

⁹ Lieberman, *Hellenism*, 128, *italics mine*.

¹⁰ Lieberman, *Hellenism*, 115–27; 128–38.

¹¹ See, especially, Emmanuel Friedheim, *Rabbinisme et paganisme en Palestine romaine* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 25–67; 109–60; Friedheim, “Sol Invictus in the Severus Synagogue at Hammath Tiberias, the Rabbis, and Jewish Society: A Different Approach,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 12 (2009): 89–128; Emmanuel Friedheim, “Sur l’existence de Juifs polythéistes en Palestine au temps de

Tosefta, and Yerushalmi tractates of *'Abodah Zarah* naturally provide an immense and highly focused collection of material on this topic.¹² Recently, for instance, a chapter on seeing idols in rabbinic sources in Rachel Neis's book *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture* is mainly concerned with Palestine and Palestinian rabbinic sources, noting, in contrast, "the Bavli's relative lack of engagement with the visuality of idolatry."¹³

The situation with regard to Babylonia does indeed differ from Palestine in some respects, and it would appear to be more complicated.¹⁴ Richard Kalmin's study of the talmudic sources concerning "idolatry in late antique Babylonia," for instance, recognises the manifest presence of idols in public places, including cities with a significant Jewish population, within the Roman milieu. This reality, he notes, is often addressed in the Palestinian rabbinic sources and in sources *about* Palestinian rabbis cited in the Babylonian Talmud. Against this, Kalmin registers considerable discussion of idols and idolatry in the Babylonian Talmud, but an absence of explicit cases of actual idols affecting the lives of *Babylonian rabbis* in the Babylonian Talmud. When the Babylonian Talmud provides examples, they invariably feature Palestinian rabbis. He believes there to be a "paucity of idols in Babylonia," and hence that the "rabbinic anxiety" with regard to idols that he has uncovered in his study points to a "puzzling disconnect between reality 'on the ground' in Sasanian Babylonia and the rabbis' experience of the world."¹⁵

Two examples where Babylonian rabbis *do* encounter idols that are provided in the Babylonian Talmud are somewhat ambiguous and thus might not be seen to altogether contradict this impression: the so-called *andarta* in the synagogue of *Shaf Veyatev*, near Neharde'a,¹⁶ and the idol in Bei Torta, a place of unknown location

la Mishna et du Talmud: Une nouvelle approche," *Les judaïsmes dans tous leur états aux I^{er}–III^e siècles: Les Judéens des synagogues, les chrétiens et les rabbins*, ed. Claire Clivaz, Simon Claude Mimouni, and Bernard Pouderon (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 73–116. In these studies, Friedheim has argued for the existence of what he terms "polytheist Jews" in the rabbinic period. See, too, recently, Moshe Simon-Shoshan, "Did the Rabbis Believe in Agreus Pan? Rabbinic Relationships with Roman Power, Culture, and Religion in *Genesis Rabbah* 63," *Harvard Theological Review* 111, no. 3 (2018): 425–50.

¹² In addition, one can mention a significant portion of Sanhedrin chapter 7.

¹³ Rachel Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 196.

¹⁴ See the discussion below on *b. Ber.* 57b and its assumptions about idol worship.

¹⁵ Richard Kalmin, "Idolatry in Late Antique Babylonia," in Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine: Decoding the Literary Record* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 103–20, here 119–20. Compare Daniel Boyarin, *A Traveling Homeland: The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 69–72, who discusses Kalmin's article. Boyarin may, however, be blurring the boundaries between rabbinic Palestine and Babylonia too much in asserting that "Jewish Bavel is doubly located in Iranian Āsōristan and in Palestine at the same time" (71).

¹⁶ On this synagogue and its location, see Aharon Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica in the Talmudic Period* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1983), 290–91.

but probably within the vicinity of Pumbedita.¹⁷ Another case, which Kalmin does not address, is the apparently real and perhaps regular possibility of seeing “Mercury,” for which a particular benediction was mandated (*b. Ber.* 57b). It would appear that we are not actually dealing with *Mercury* here, but with the chief Babylonian god. This is supported by the context of this statement. It features on a list of traditions concerning the city of Babylon and its biblical legacy. In addition, the tradent is a rabbi from this region, Rav Hamnuna, and the tradition is further confirmed by Rav Ashi, also from the region of Babylon in Southern Babylonia. Mercury was not worshipped in Babylonia in this period, nor his Greek equivalent, Hermes, so “Mercury” must merely be the term of reference carried over from the tannaitic sources.¹⁸ It is interesting, nevertheless, that Hermes was early on identified with Nabu, the god traditionally associated with Borsippa, a city adjacent to Babylon, which may mean that this is in fact referring to a specific situation. Either way, Kalmin’s data can likely be accounted for without acknowledging a true *disconnect*. Michael Shenkar, for instance, is probably correct in suggesting that since

the majority of the population of Babylonia in this period seems to have been pagan, and there is evidence that pagan temples and shrines, which undoubtedly contained idols, continued to exist in the Babylonian countryside even into the Islamic period [...] it is likely that the situation with idol-worship in Babylonia was different to the Roman Near East in that, in Babylonia, idols were removed from the public sphere and kept in the temples, in accordance with millennia old Mesopotamian practice. This, rather than a “Sasanian iconoclasm” [...] could be the main reason underlying the paucity of evidence for encounters with cult statues in the Bavli.¹⁹

The examination of rabbinic sources from Babylonia *separately* from Palestinian sources is important and may help to avoid possible misconceptions. For instance, we have a rabbinic statement, “Rav Naḥman said: All irreverence is forbidden apart from irreverence towards alien worship” (אמר רב נחמן כל ליצנותא אסירא בר) מליצנותא דעבודה זרה דשריא *b. Sanh.* 63a–b; *b. Meg.* 25b), to which Lieberman refers in his study of Palestinian rabbinic attitudes. However, in the Babylonian Talmud, the expression itself only appears in the mouths of Babylonian *amoraim*, and it may very well be reflective of the *Babylonian* rabbinic mindset alone rather than a broader rabbinic one. The distinctive religious milieu of Roman Palestine

¹⁷ *b. ‘Abod. Zar.* 43b; *b. Sanh.* 64a. On its location, see the discussion in Oppenheimer, *Babylonia Judaica*, 367.

¹⁸ On Mercury as the generic term for idolatry in rabbinic literature, see Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-fshutah: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta, Part I*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 103.

¹⁹ Michael Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images: The Iconography of Deities in the Pre-Islamic World* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 31. The theory of Sasanian iconoclasm has its own problems, but this is not pertinent here. In contrast, see the new study by Kevin T. van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaean to Šābians of the Marshes* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017). This study proposes that some of the Sasanian rulers were actively attempting to erase idolatry and its temples as part of its argument for the emergence of minor religious cults in the course of the Sasanian era.

against which the Palestinian rabbinic sources are examined needs, naturally, to be matched with a parallel effort to probe and describe the particular religious milieu of the Sasanian realm whence the Babylonian Jewish sources stem.

Pagan Deities in Sasanian Babylonia

Turning to Babylonia and its environs, we see that the proliferation and perseverance of diverse pagan worship throughout the Sasanian era is affirmed in multiple ancient sources, including considerable Christian testimony. For the northern reaches of Mesopotamia or Adiabene, the Syriac Christian literary evidence is particularly valuable. This generally well-informed body of evidence, while confirming enduring pagan beliefs and practices, questions the extent or depth of the officially sanctioned and occasionally aggressive process of Christianisation that this region experienced. The *Doctrine of Addai* (15b–16a), for instance, which dates from fourth- to fifth-century Edessa, has the following declaration:

I see that this city is filled with paganism which is contrary to God. Who is this idol Nebo which you worship, and Bel which you honor? Behold there are those among you who worship Bath Nikal, like the inhabitants of Harran your neighbors, and Tar'atha like the inhabitants of Mabug, and the Nishra like the Arabs, and the sun and the moon, like the rest of the inhabitants of Harran who are like you.²⁰

Likewise, Jacob of Sarug, from the late fifth or early sixth century, in his *memra* “On the Fall of the Idols,” which is devoted precisely to the theme of pagan deities, explicitly identifies Bel and Nabu as Edessan gods.²¹ The fall of Nisibis to the Persians in the second half of the fourth century is judged by the contemporary Ephrem to be a punishment for its tenacious paganism. Likewise, in the fifth century, Isaac of Antioch details extensive and varied pagan beliefs in cities in northern Roman Mesopotamia. One can hardly imagine that the regions of the non-Christian Sasanian empire would have been less infused with pagan deities.

As we cross the border and enter the Sasanian empire, the Persian divine pantheon joins the non-Persian ancient Near Eastern religious scene. This finds expression in both Christian and Jewish (talmudic) sources, some of which will be mentioned below. It would appear, however, that the non-Persian pantheon retained its prominence in the region where the Jews resided. Thus, of all the Gentile names in *b. Giṭ.* 11a, which may be taken to be names with a theophoric element, only one is recognisably Persian: Hormiz. Among the other names on the list, only Shabtai is

²⁰ George Howard, trans., *The Teaching of Addai* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 49. I have slightly revised the translation.

²¹ For a detailed study of the pagan cults in Edessa, see H. J. W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa* (Leiden: Brill, 1980). For studies of Jacob of Sarug's list, see references cited in Drijvers, *Cults*, 37 n. 70.

Semitic, while the others are of uncertain origin. There is also little Christian impact in the incantation texts: only one demon called Mešiḥa (= Messiah, Christ), a demon in the church of Qrabil, according to BM 132947, is mentioned. Evidently, Christ is treated like other deities and is demonised. Furthermore, an explicit reference to pagan sanctuaries and practices found in *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 11b would seem to support the enduring pre-eminence of the Babylonian religious background to the Sasanian period:

מ' רב חנן בר רבא אמ' רב חמשה בתי ע"ז קבועין הן ואלו הן בית בל בבבל בית נבו בבורסיף תרעא שבפמוג צריפא שבאשקלון נשרא שבערביא כי אתא רב דימי אמ' הוסיפו עליהן יריד שבעין ?בל?כי ונתבכה שבעכו איכא דאמרי נתבכה שבעין בכי רב דימי מנהרדעא מתני איפכא יריד שבעכו ונתבכה שבעין בכי אמ' ליה רב נחמן בר רב חסדא לרב חסדא מאי קבועין הן אמ' ליה הכי אמ' אבואה דאימך שקבועין הן לעולם דכולה שתא פלחי לה.

Mar Rav Ḥanan bar Rava said [in the name of] Rav: There are five fixed sanctuaries of alien worship: They are the temple of Bel in Babylonia; the Temple of Nabu in Borsippa; Tir'ata [= Astargatis] in Mabug [= Hieropolis]; Šerifa in Ashqelon, and Nishra in Arabia.

When Rav Dimi came [i.e., to Babylonia from Palestine] he said: They added to them the fair in 'Eyn Bekhi [= Heliopolis] and the brick in Acre—some say: the brick in 'Eyn Bekhi.

Rav Dimi of Neharde'a teaches the opposite order; the fair in Acre and the brick in 'Eyn Bekhi.

Rav Naḥman the son of Rav Ḥisda said to Rav Ḥisda: What is the meaning of "fixed"? He said: "So said the father of your mother: fixed means they worship there all year long."²²

This list, which interestingly lacks reference to any Zoroastrian sanctuary, can be compared to the lists provided in the Syriac sources mentioned above. While those sources focus on *their* neighbourhood of northern Mesopotamia, this list incorporates references to its own neighbourhood of Babylon and Borsippa. It also complements Mandaic sources which evoke Bel, Nabu, and Nishra together, the latter of whom is associated with Kashkar, as Jonas Greenfield has shown.²³ This list can only be understood as a sample, not as a complete or even representative list of the *key* deities in these places. The Syriac sources cited above demonstrate the association of many of these deities with *other* locales. Astargatis and Nishra are prominent in Hatra, for instance, and a Mandaic magic text speaks of Nanaya of Borsippa.²⁴ Many of these deities, then, are found in a number of places.

²² *B. 'Abod. Zar.* 11b. According to MS Paris 1337. One other reflection on Babylonian pagan religious culture is found in the Babylonian Talmud with reference to the Chaldeans (כַּלְדָּאִי), who, despite the vagueness of the sources, might be associated with religious experts in the mould of ancient *Babylonian* stock. They are consistently depicted as astrologers whose predictions are accurate and fulfilled, hence the length of Rav Joseph's rule over the academy in *b. Ber.* 64a and Rav Naḥman b. Isaac's future as a thief in *b. Šabb.* 156b. See also *b. Šabb.* 119a; *b. Sanh.* 95a; *b. Yebam.* 21b. In the realm of astrology, this "science of the times," the Chaldeans are reliable experts.

²³ Jonas C. Greenfield, "A Mandaic Miscellany," in *'Al Kanfei Yonah: Collected Studies of Jonas C. Greenfield on Semitic Philology*, ed. Shalom M. Paul, Michael E. Stone, and Avital Pinnick (Leiden: Brill, Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2001), 1:397–404.

²⁴ Christa Müller-Kessler, "Interrelations between Mandaic Lead Scrolls and Incantation Bowls," in *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical, and Interpretative Perspectives*, ed. T. Abusch and K. van der Toorn (Groningen: Styx, 1999): 197–210.

Pagan Deities in Incantation Bowls

The perseverance of these and other pagan deities is also demonstrated from the texts on Jewish, Christian, Mandaean, and other incantation bowls, Mandaean lead rolls, and similar sources, testimony that is not mentioned in the studies that we mentioned earlier.

Of particular interest here are a number of phenomena of both religious and social significance. Firstly, within these magical artefacts there are extensive references to many of the same deities described as active religious cults in the literary sources, including those of Bel, Nabu, Bat Nikal, Shamash, and others.²⁵ This would suggest a certain correspondence between the religious pantheon reflected in the bowls and the religious scene “on the ground.” This is also somewhat confirmed with respect to the Zoroastrian deities evoked on the incantation bowls and in other texts from this period.²⁶ Hormiz b. Lilwatha/Lilitha in *b. B. Bat.* 73a, for example, would seem to create a demonic caricature of the foremost Zoroastrian deity, as Hormiz = Ahura Mazda.²⁷ Hormiz is explicitly described as a *dew* in a polemical Syriac text from the late Sasanian era.²⁸ Moreover, one must wonder how, or indeed whether one is to distinguish between the deity revered by their Zoroastrian neighbours and his namesake evoked in the Talmud, who is comparable to other Zoroastrian deities mentioned on contemporary magical artefacts. Secondly, one may also encounter deities known from much earlier Babylonian sources, such as Mulit and Dalebat, that are not otherwise reflected in other contemporary sources.²⁹ An addi-

²⁵ For a Jewish text, see Dan Levene and Gideon Bohak, “A Babylonian Jewish Aramaic Incantation Bowl with a List of Deities and Toponyms,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 19 (2012): 56–72, although the readings offered there probably need further study.

²⁶ See Geoffrey Herman, “Jewish Identity in Babylonia in the Period of the Incantation Bowls,” in *A Question of Identity: Social, Political, and Historical Aspects of Identity Dynamics in Jewish and Other Contexts*, ed. Dikla Rivlin Katz, Noah Hacham, Geoffrey Herman, and Lilach Sagiv (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2019), 131–52, especially 140–41.

²⁷ See Reuven Kiperwasser and Dan D. Y. Shapira, “Encounters between Iranian Myth and Rabbinic Mythmakers in the Babylonian Talmud,” in *Encounters by the Rivers of Babylon*, ed. Uri Gabbay and Shai Secunda (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 285–304, here 292.

²⁸ Mār Grigor, 7 (in Florence Jullien, ed., *Histoire de Mār Abba, catholicos de l’orient. Martyres de Mār Grigor, général en chef du roi Khusro Ier et de Mār Yazd-panāh, juge et gouverneur* [Leuven: Peeters, 2015], 50).

²⁹ For the ancient Babylonian background of certain deities, see Wolfgang Fauth, “Lilits und Asarten in aramäischen, mandäischen und syrischen Zaubertexten,” *Welt des Orients* 17 (1986): 66–94. For the Babylonian deities see especially Christa Mueller-Kessler and Karlheinz Kessler, “Spätbabylonische Gottheiten in spätantiken mandäischen Texten,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie* 89 (1999): 65–87; Christa Müller-Kessler, “Dan(h)iš – Gott und Dämon,” in *Assyriologica et Semitica: Festschrift für Joachim Oelsner anlässlich seines 65. Geburtstages am 18. Februar 1997*, ed. Joachim Marzahn and Hans Neumann (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2000), 311–18. Mulit features on a Jewish bowl published in James Nathan Ford and Alon Ten-Ami, “An Incantation Bowl for Rav Mešaršia Son of Qaqay” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 80 (2012), 219–30.

tional point of interest is the considerable degree of borrowing and exchange between the incantation formulae written by the practitioners of diverse religious confessions.³⁰ Thus, Jewish formulae are found on bowls written in Syriac or Mandaic script, and Mandaic and Christian formulae find their way onto bowls inscribed in a clear and elegant Jewish Aramaic hand. Some Manichaean texts found in Turfan also contain what would seem to be Jewish formulae and so reflect this religious atmosphere.³¹ Examples include YBC 2393, a bowl with a Jewish Babylonian Aramaic inscription, that adjures “by Shamesh, and Sin, and Nabu, and Dalebat, and Bel, and Nerig, and Kewan! Oh Great King, Warrior, and oh Mistress of Destruction”³² or “Shamash, the king of the gods” (שמיש מלכא דאלהי) in Moussaieff 163. Mulit appears on a Jewish bowl that mentions a certain rabbi, as well as in Mandaean texts and many others.³³

If we limited ourselves to the Babylonian Talmud alone, we would not be aware of the degree to which pagan deities were present in Babylonia, and more significantly, of their presence in texts written by Jewish scribes. Needless to say, the testimony of the incantation texts may be seen as just the tip of the iceberg, a chance but rather consistent testimony of a rich ancient, but not stagnant, religious diversity. Much of the earlier scholarship on the Jews of Babylonia has tended to marginalise the Jewish sources that deal with incantations. Magic in general, including that practised by rabbis, is sidelined in accounts and is regarded as “popular,” and the magical artefacts are brushed aside as external to the study of Babylonian Jewry.³⁴ These artefacts serve, however, as valuable comparative data for assessing the Babylonian Talmud’s discussions relating to idolatry.

Alien Worship in the Babylonian Talmud

The Jews were always a minority in Babylonia and would naturally have been under the shadow of the local religious deities, and they were often forewarned of such,

³⁰ See Tapani Harviainen, “Syncretistic and Confessional Features in Mesopotamian Incantation Bowls,” *Studia Orientalia* 70 (1993): 29–37.

³¹ For their publication, see Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst, “The Apotropaic Magical Text M389 and M8430/I/ in Manichaean Middle Persian,” *Aram* 16 (2004): 141–60, and see Geoffrey Herman, “The Talmud in Its Babylonian Context: Rava and Bar Sheshakh; Mani and Mihrshah” [Hebrew], in *Between Babylonia and the Land of Israel: Studies in Honor of Isaiah M. Gafni*, ed. Geoffrey Herman, Meir Ben Shazar, and Aharon Oppenheimer (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Centre, 2016), 79–96.

³² בשמיש וסין ונבר ודליבת וביל ונריג וכיון מלכא רבא קרפדנא ומרתא דהרובנא. Julian Obermann, “Two Magic Bowls: New Incantation Texts from Mesopotamia,” *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 57 (1940): 1–31.

³³ Ford and Ten-Ami, “An Incantation Bowl for Rav Mešaršia.”

³⁴ Neusner’s five-volume *History of the Jews in Babylonia* devotes twenty-five pages of the fifth volume to “other Jews, other magicians,” with the addition of a thirty-page appendix penned by Baruch Levine on “The Language of the Magical Bowls,” which is mostly a textual study of earlier

firstly by the prophets in the biblical sources, who also condemned the local gods, Bel and Nabu, along with the kingdom of Babylon.³⁵ Indeed, the Babylonian Talmud itself shows an interest in local idolatry. While discussing the ridicule of alien worship already mentioned, it evokes the names of deities such as those that appear in local toponyms (*b. Sanh.* 63a–b = *b. Meg.* 25b). In one place (*b. 'Abod. Zar.* 53b), there is a discussion of a pagan temple referred to as the “Temple of Nimrod” (בֵּית נִמְרוֹד). Elsewhere (*b. 'Abod. Zar.* 53b), the rabbis debate the status of a local damaged pedestal on which one would stand an idol (בֵּימָסָא פְּגִימָא). As the Talmud discussion clarifies, however, this Temple of Nimrod is already in ruins, abandoned forever by its worshippers. And yet, they encounter more in Babylonia than just the ruins of temples and damaged pedestals! The contemporaneity of polytheism is transparent in another source, *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 55a, which discusses the question of the reality of pagan deities and reveals the complexity of their relationship with these pagan gods and metaphysical forces. Taking its cue from the Mishnah, which relates a debate about pagan gods between the elders of Rome and the rabbis, the Talmud continues to cite discussion between rabbis and Gentiles regarding the reality of idolatry. Most of these sources are in Hebrew, cite tannaim, and would appear to be of Palestinian and tannaitic provenance. The underlying tendency is to deny any reality to the gods. Different assumptions seem to undergird what is related next in *b. 'Abod. Zar.* 55a, which now brings Babylonian rabbis into play, as follows:

א. אמ' ליה רבה בר יצחק לרב יהודה: איכא ע"ז באתרין דכי מינגיב עלמא ולא אתי מיטרא שחטו ליה גברא ואתי מיטרא
 ב. אמ' ליה השתא איכו שכבי לא אמרי לכו הא מילתא הכי אמ' רב מאי דכתי' "אשר חלק יי אלהיך אותם לכל העמים" מלמד שהחליקן בדברים כדי לטרדן מן העולם.
 ג. והינו דאמ' ר' שמעון בן לקיש מאי דכתי' "אם ללצים הוא יליך ולענויים יתן חן" בא ל[י]טמא פתחין לו בא ליטטר מסייעין אותו.

- I. Rava b. Isaac said to Rav Judah: There is (a case of) alien worship in our region. When the world is dry and no rain comes they slaughter a man and rain comes.
- II. He replied to him: Now, if I was dead I would not [have been able to] tell you this matter. Thus said Rav: What is the meaning of the scriptural verse, “the Lord your God has apportioned (*halaq*) to all the nations” (Deut 4:19)? It teaches that he caused them to trip (*hiḥliq*) with words, in order to remove them from the world.
- III. This corresponds with that which R. Simeon b. Laqish said: What is the meaning of the scriptural verse: “He mocks proud mockers but shows favour to the humble and oppressed” (Prov 3:34)? If one comes with the intent to become impure, he is enabled; if one comes to become pure—he is aided.³⁶

readings (Jacob Neusner, *History of the Jews in Babylonia*, vol. 5 [Leiden: Brill, 1970], 217–43; 343–75). In his fourth volume, he had devoted only three pages to magic and the rabbis (Jacob Neusner, *History of the Jews in Babylonia*, vol. 4 [Leiden: Brill, 1968], 347–50).

³⁵ E.g., Isa 46:1.

³⁶ *B. 'Abod. Zar.* 55a, according to MS New York JTS Rab 15.

The diverse responses found in this collection of conversations point away from the previous scepticism regarding the potency of such deities and towards a clear anxiety concerning the claims made by those of pagan religions that they were attaining tangible results in their temples. The conversation between R. 'Aqiba and a certain Zonen, which immediately precedes the source we have cited, works on the premise that “my heart and your heart know that alien worship has no essence” (לבי ולבך (ידע שע"ז לית בה ממש and explains that any result it effects is pure coincidence.³⁷ This, indeed, is the assumption of the sources cited earlier on in this *sugya* and in the Mishnah debate with the elders of Rome. The recovery from malady which takes effect at the moment when a person enters a pagan temple is explained by the divine decree of healing just happening to coincide with the sick person's visit to the pagan temple. Sickness itself takes a vow, which it must honour.³⁸ It falls under God's domain. The Babylonian Talmud's choice to pursue the discussion further suggests its lack of satisfaction with this answer. Rava b. Isaac's remark to Rav Judah points to the effective human sacrifice practised in “our region” in order to bring about rain.³⁹ The focus of devotion whose power is efficacious is local, “in our region,” but the benefit it provides is also local—it serves for the welfare of the entire local population, including the Jews. Rav Judah's reply, prefaced with the dramatic “now if I was dead,” etc., for rhetorical effect,⁴⁰ is cited in the name of the Babylonian amora, Rav. The Talmud compares this answer with a teaching by the Palestinian amora, R. Simeon b. Laqish, which treats the distribution of pagan deities to the Gentiles as a divine device in order to justify their punishment. Punishing the Gentiles is apparently the desired effect, but the pagan deities by which they acquire their measure of iniquity, even if part of God's design, are evidently quite real. The Jewish interlocutor is advised to stay away from them not because they are not efficacious, as the benefits are evident, but rather due to their side effects.

³⁷ There has been some discussion as to whether this Zonen is Jewish or not. I take him to be a pagan, thus providing the drama of the conversation. For discussion, see in particular and with references to earlier scholarship Friedheim, *Rabbinisme et paganisme en Palestine romaine*, 49–52. For an onomastic overview on this name in ancient Palestine, see Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity. Part 1: Palestine 330 BCE–200 CE.*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002, 281.

³⁸ והינו דאמ' ר' יוחנן וחליים רעים ונאמנים רעים בשליחותן ונאמנים בשבועתן. This can be compared with the notion of sickness as something demonic that must be exorcised, as is common in the incantation bowls. See, too, Dov Noy, “The Talmudic-Midrashic ‘Healing Stories’ as a Narrative Genre,” *Koroth* 9 (1988): 124–46, especially 136. For a broad view on the phenomenon and antecedents, see Markham J. Geller, “Akkadian Healing Therapies in the Babylonian Talmud,” *Max-Planck-Institut Für Wissenschaftsgeschichte Preprint* 259 (2004): 1–57.

³⁹ The only significant variant between the textual witnesses for our purposes here relates to the addition of a phrase which relates that the deity appears to them in a dream and instructs them to slaughter a victim. This addition appears in the Vilna and Pesaro print editions, MS Munich 95, and Bazzano Archivio Storico Comunale Fr. ebr 11, but is lacking in the better MS Paris 1337 and MS New York JTS Rab 15.

⁴⁰ Cf. *b. B. Meṣ.* 73b; *b. Šabb.* 152b; *b. Yebam.* 46a.

The Inclination towards Alien Worship

The rabbis, as mentioned, speak of the overwhelming attraction of idol worship in the pre-exilic period and of having already been cured of this temptation in the distant past. Of particular interest is the Babylonian rabbis' remarkable rehabilitation of the Judahite king, Manasseh. Notwithstanding his negative scriptural reputation and his mishnaic damnation, he is portrayed in the Talmud as capable of juggling rabbinic-style expertise in the Torah and idolatry. When challenged about this incongruity, he responds by pleading for our understanding: the temptation was simply too great!⁴¹ This individual entreaty might, indeed, serve to account for the challenge of idolatry that accompanies Israelite history throughout the First Temple period. It is the determination to rid the Jews of their preoccupation with idolatry that spurred the intriguing aggadic exposition of Scripture in *b. Yoma* 69b.⁴² It appears as an expanded re-telling of an episode from the fifth chapter of the Book of Zechariah. This scene, which “is often seen as one of the most bizarre in Zechariah,”⁴³ is as follows:

ה ויצא, המלאך הדבר ב'; ויאמר אלי-שא נא עיניך וראה, מה היוצאת הזאת. ו יאמר, מה-היא; ויאמר, זאת האיפה היוצאת, ויאמר, זאת עינים בכל-הארץ. ז והנה פפר עפרת, נשאת; וזאת אשה אחת, יושבת בתוך האיפה. ח ויאמר זאת הרשעה, וישלך אותה אל-תוך האיפה; וישלך את-אבן העופרת, אל-פיה. ט וישא עיני וראה, והנה שתיים נשים יוצאות ורוח בנפיהם, ולהנה כנפים, ככנפי החסידה; ותשאנה, את-האיפה, ביו הארץ, ובין השמים. י ויאמר, אל-המלאך הדבר ב': אנה המה מולכות, את-האיפה. יא ויאמר אלי, לבנות-לה בית בארץ שנער; והוכן והניחה שם, על-מכנתה.

⁵Then the angel who was speaking to me came forward and said to me, “Look up and see what is appearing.” ⁶I asked, “What is it?” He replied, “It is a basket.” And he added, “This is the iniquity of the people throughout the land.” ⁷Then the cover of lead was raised, and there in the basket sat a woman! ⁸He said, “This is wickedness,” and he pushed her back into the basket and pushed its lead cover down on it. ⁹Then I looked up—and there before me were two women, with the wind in their wings! They had wings like those of a stork, and they lifted up the basket between heaven and earth. ¹⁰“Where are they taking the basket?” I asked the angel who was speaking to me. ¹¹He replied, “To the country of Babylonia to build a house for it. When the house is ready, the basket will be set there in its place.”

⁴¹ *b. Sanh.* 102b, according to MS Yad HaRav Herzog:

אי איתיה ליצרא דע' בשנך? הוה כיסכסתוה כסכסי איכא דאמרי הכי אמ' ליה אי הוית בההוא דרא הוה נקטת שיפולך [שולך] בשקר [בידך] ורהטת.

“If the temptation of alien worship were in your years you would have constantly chewed it up” (translation follows Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* [Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press; Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002], 592: “There are those who say he said to him: If you were in that generation you would have taken hold of the folds in your hands and run [after them/me]). See Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 178.

⁴² See also *b. 'Arak.* 32b; *b. Sanh.* 64a. The Palestinian midrash also speaks of the removal of the inclination to idolatry in *Song of Songs Rab.* 7:8, but its discussion is based on different biblical sources and different rabbis.

⁴³ Edgar W. Conrad, *Zechariah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 116.

The talmudic passage is as follows:⁴⁴

והא כת' ויעמד עזרא הסופר על מגדל עץ אשר עשה לדבר אמ' רב גידל אמ' רב שגידלו בשם המפורש
התם הוראת שעה היתה דכת' ויזעקו בקול גדול אל יי אלה הינו האיי דאחרביה למקדשא וקלייה להיכלא
ואגלינהו לישראל מארעיהו כלום יהבניה נילן אלא לקבולי אגרא לא איהו בענן לא
אגריה בענן.
יתיבו תעניתא תלתא יומי נפל פיתקא מרקיעא דכתיב ביה אמת
אמ' רב חונא שמע מינה חותמו שלהקב"ה אמת
נפק כי גוריא דנורא מבית קודש הקדש'
אמ' להו נביא האיי הוא בהדי דקא נקטי ליה אשתמיט מינתא מני(?)א(?)ה] אזל קליה בארבע מאה פרסי
אמרי הכי ניבי ניקטליה ראמי קלא ומחריב ליה לעלמא
אמ' להו נביא שדיוה בדודא וכסיוה באברא דאברא שאיב קלא ורמו ליה נורא מתחותיהי וקיליוה שנ' "ויאמר
זאת הרשעה וישלך אותה אל תוך האיפה וישלך את אבן העופרת אל פיה".

But it is written: "And Ezra the Scribe stood on the wooden tower which he had made to speak" (Neh 8:4). Rav Gidal sad in the name of Rav: For he elevated Him with the Tetragrammaton. That was in an emergency, as it is written: "And they cried in a loud voice to the Lord, their God" (Neh 9:4). It is he who destroyed the temple and burned the sanctuary and exiled Israel from their land, have you only given it to us so that we receive a reward? We desire neither it, nor its reward do we want! They sat fasting for three days. A note fell from the skies on which was written "truth"!

Rav Huna said: One learns from here that the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He is "truth." It emerged as a fiery young lion from the House of the Holy of Holies.

The prophet said to them: This is it. As they took hold of it a hair fell out from it. Its voice travelled 400 parasangs. They said: How shall we act? We shall kill it. [Otherwise] it will raise its voice and destroy the world. The prophet replied to them. You need to cast it into a pot and cover it with lead that absorbs the sound. And they put fire beneath and roasted it, as it is said: "And he said: This is the wickedness, and he cast it into the *ephah* and he cast the lead stone over the mouth" (Zech 5:11).

The Talmud arrives at this juncture after a discussion concerning the use of the Tetragrammaton outside the temple. A source is summoned that claims that Ezra the Scribe made use of it outside the temple. This is treated as an exceptional circumstance and a story is then provided to describe that very situation. It depicts the expulsion of the urge for idolatry, itself a midrash on the above-mentioned passage from Zechariah.

The mysterious *ephah* in the biblical narrative here, a measure of grain that is usually understood as a basket that can contain such a measure, contains a woman. The woman symbolises wickedness according to the Scriptural verses. Here, it has

⁴⁴ *b. Yoma* 69b. Compare *b. Sanh.* 64b. Cited according to MS New York JTS Rab. 218 (EMC 270). The significant difference between this version together with the earlier textual witnesses in comparison with the later MSS and printed editions is the description of placing the sealed pot over a fire to be roasted before being sent off. See the discussion of this source in Meir Ben Shahr, "Biblical and Post-Biblical History in Rabbinic Literature: Between the First and Second Destruction" (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2011), 249–52, and his examination of the textual variants.

been interpreted as representing the temptation of idolatry, again drawing on the association between idolatry and fornication. Withstanding this temptation is meritorious, but it would be better to have neither the temptation nor the reward. The temptation, personified in the form of a fiery lion, is secured and removed. The Babylonian Talmud does not dwell on the fact that the scriptural verses send this evil to the “Land of Shinar,” a synonym for Babylonia in rabbinic literature. While the temptation of alien worship is sealed in this instance, elsewhere, the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 24a) treats this verse as speaking of the unshackled descent of the highly negative traits of hypocrisy and arrogance to Babylonia.⁴⁵

The Babylonian provenance of this narrative is evident from its appearance in the Babylonian Talmud and the absence of direct parallels in Palestinian rabbinic sources. Its reference to having “exiled Israel from their land” is a nod to the Babylonian exiles who are its audience. The focus on the urge towards idolatry in this Babylonian source and the detailed description of the praxis of its expulsion, presumably based on contemporary local exorcism practices, suggests the relevance and immediacy of the issue to be current rather than historical. The fact that the evil ironically finds its way to Babylonia raises the uncanny deliberation as to whether it had indeed been finally and entirely vanquished, not merely for the Jews in Palestine, but particularly for those in Babylonia. It leaves open the discussion of the extent to which idolatry and the drive towards it had indeed departed in the distant past or whether it was in some way still quite present among them.

Babylonian Jews were very much a part of the complex religious world of Babylonia, accepting many of the assumptions shared by their contemporaries regarding the demonic and the divine. The frequent engagement with themes relating to the supernatural and the divine in the Babylonian Talmud, when read alongside the Jewish magical evidence from Babylonia and other contemporary sources, suggests a degree of anxiety about the fact that the rabbis were grappling with the appeal of a multiplicity of deities and forces present among the inhabitants of Sasanian Babylonia and that they were actively seeking to clarify how their notions of the divine differed from those of their neighbours.

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⁴⁵ See *b. Sanh.* 24a and *b. Qidd.* 49b. Here, they are passed on to Elam in an internal polemic against a major competing region within the Sasanian Empire.

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