

## TRANSLATION

### THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF BABYLONIA\*

by *ISAIAH GAFNI*

Babylonian Jewry maintained a unique position among the Jewish communities of the Second Temple period. It was the most ancient community and the largest one outside the boundaries of the Roman Empire. This uniqueness produced results not only in the political sphere, but also in the distinct cultural and social development of Babylonian Jewry, since the community was outside the direct sphere of influence of Hellenistic-Roman culture, a force which exerted an influence not only on other diaspora centers but also on the national center in Eretz Israel. This position enabled it to develop a unique Jewish environment in the ancient world. Within the course of time, Babylonian Jewry and its institutions will not only take up the reins of world Jewish leadership, but will also spread its teaching to every corner of the Jewish world. The Babylonian Talmud will stand ultimately as the cornerstone of normative Jewish existence for generations.

As we shall see, both the Parthian and Persian kingdoms directly contributed to the development of the Jewish community, each one, however, in its own particular manner.

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ישעיהו גפני, יהדות בבל ומוסדותיה בתקופת התלמוד; מרכז זלמן שזר להעמקת התודעה ההיסטורית היהודית, החברה ההיסטורית הישראלית, ירושלים, תשל"ה.

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After the conquest of Judea in 586 B.C.E., great numbers of Jews for the first time reached Babylonia. Within a short time, they succeeded in integrating themselves into the flourishing economic life of the area. We have, however, no definite information concerning the history of the Jews under the Achemenids (until 331 B.C.E.) and our knowledge of the Hellenistic-Seleucid period following it (323-140 B.C.E.) is also very fragmentary.

Of particular importance to our subject is the character of the Parthian kingdom which succeeded the Seleucid dynasty in Babylonia, for during this period the Jewish community began to form the patterns which would serve it for hundreds of years.

## THE PARTHIAN PERIOD<sup>1</sup>

The Parthian dynasty was founded by King Arsaces I (*circa* 248 B.C.E.). The kingdom originated in the territory called Parthia (Parthava), east of the Caspian Sea, and expanded at the expense of its neighbor on the West, the Seleucid Empire. In fact, the consolidation of the Parthian kingdom parallels that of the Hasmonean state, both taking advantage of the disintegration of the Hellenistic kingdom and the pressure exerted on it by Rome, to strengthen their respective positions and add territory to that already possessed. The Seleucids attempted to retrieve their territories, but the failure of Antiochus VII Sidetes, who interestingly enough was aided by a Jewish army under John Hyrcanus, to take Mesopotamia and Babylonia put an end to the aspirations of the crumbling Hellenistic Empire to overcome Parthia (129 B.C.E.).

The Parthian kingdom continued to consolidate itself, although after the death of Mithridates II, the 'Great' (123-87 B.C.E.) it was attacked by Armenia and by Rome. Tigranes, King of Armenia invaded both Babylonia and Eretz Israel (83 B.C.E.) and during his rule many Jews were exiled from Eretz Israel to Armenia. The Parthian King Phraates III (69-57) managed to retain most of his territory, although during his reign there would begin a struggle whose effects were destined to be felt in the East for hundreds of years. During the reign of Orodes I (57-37) the Romans conquered Mesopotamia, although under Crassus they later suffered a crushing defeat at Carrhae (53 B.C.E.), opening the way for Parthian expansion at Rome's expense. In 40-39 B.C.E. the armies of Parthia reached as far as Eretz Israel and restored the Hasmonean monarchy, under Antigonus. Although shortlived, this attempt did, however, sink deep into Jewish consciousness and for generations the Parthian kingdom and later the Persian kingdom would serve as a focal point for speculations concerning the coming redemption of Israel and the fall of Rome. Wars between Rome and Parthia became, indeed, a regular occurrence in the East.

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1. On the history of the Parthian kingdom see: *Cambridge Ancient History IX*, ch. 14 pp. 574-613 and literature cited there on p. 947 ff. See also: N. Debevoise, *Political History of Parthia*; R.N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, ch. 5: The Adaptable Arsacides; on the Jews in Parthia see: G. Widengren, "Juifs et Iraniens à l'époque des Parthes," *Vetus Testamentum*, supplement IV, Leiden 1947; J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, Vol. I.

In the first two centuries of the common era, Rome crossed swords with the Parthians, sometimes attempting to invade Parthia and sometimes over territory outside of the Parthian empire. Trajan, in 116 C.E. succeeded in taking Mesopotamia and even in penetrating Babylonia, but was forced to retreat due to pressure caused by revolts in the conquered territory, revolts often aided by Jews. Upon his ascension, Hadrian returned the conquered areas to Parthia. Roman pressure upon Parthia, however, did not cease, and internal dissension further weakened the Arsacids. Artabanus V eventually succumbed to a revolt by a Persian family of princes and priests, and thus was founded a new Empire and dynasty, the Sassanian kingdom of Persia.

The development of the unique character of the Jewish community might be further understood, however, through a brief analysis of the internal structure of the Parthian kingdom. This empire differs both from its Achemenid predecessor and its Sassanian successor in that it never was a unified empire under strong central rule but rather a weak confederation of vassal states whose loyalty to the Parthian sovereign was not always beyond question. The reasons for this are manifold beginning with the origin and character of the Parthian tribes, essentially migratory in nature, and ending with their inability or lack of desire to establish their kingdom on foundations which would have united it, such as the establishment of a single state religion. To some extent there existed recognition of the Iranian gods and a certain fostering of Zoroastrianism, but not to the degree of the Achemenids or Sassanians. Hellenistic culture also served as a counter influence on the Parthian kings. Although their Hellenism may have only been a superficial legacy from the Seleucid period, nevertheless it testifies to the lack of any definite political and cultural directions on behalf of the Parthian rulers, who seemed to excel only in their ability at amassing great military forces at propitious moments, while at other times often sinking in the quagmire of internal court intrigues. This marked feudal nature, although tending to weaken the kingdom as a whole, served as a unifying and strengthening factor for the individual ethnic groups within the empire, allowing them to cultivate national autonomy as long as the sovereignty of the Parthian ruler was officially recognized.

Moreover, if these groups developed political or military might, they might offer their services to the king in his attempts at subduing rebellious vassals. Here it would seem, lies the secret of the successful development of the Jewish community in Babylonia. This feudal regime allowed Babylonian Jewry to live according to its unique mode of life, with a minimum of external interference and, thus, if the Jews gained power, the Parthian rulers would be interested in cultivating friendship with them in exchange for support on two fronts: the external one, against Rome and the internal one, against satraps and rulers harboring dangerous aspirations.

An excellent example of this special relationship can be seen in one of the few references which we have in the works of Josephus to the history of Babylonian Jewry during the Second Temple period. In *Antiquities XVIII* (310-379) a story is told of two Jewish brothers from Nehardea, Asinaeus and Anilaeus, who set up a

pirate state within Babylonia.<sup>2</sup> After they had defeated in battle the local Babylonian satrap, the Parthian ruler Artabanus III decided to seek their friendship "to use the prowess of the brothers as a curb to ensure the loyalty of his satrapies, for some of them were in rebellion and some were considering whether to rebel; and he was on the point of marching against them." The Jewish kingdom survived approximately fifteen years (20-35 C.E.) and with its fall, thousands of Jews suffered from a backlash of both Babylonians and Greeks, and many were forced to flee to the Jewish fortresses Nehardea and Nisibis. From this story we learn of the great number of Babylonian Jews and their concentrations in certain cities, facts repeated several times by Josephus. He stresses, for example, that because of the strength of the Jews in Nehardea and Nisibis, they used to deposit there the *shekalim* (two drachm coins) which were collected for the Temple and "these cities were their bank of deposit. From there, these offerings were sent to Jerusalem at the appropriate time." We also learn from this story about the internal politics of the kings of Parthia and the delicate balance of power among the Babylonians, Greeks and Jews. The second of Josephus' reports on Babylonian Jewry regarding the conversion of the rulers of Adiabene (Antiquities XX 17-69) reveals a similar picture. The fact that the Parthian king and assorted pretenders sought the support of the small kingdom whose rulers had become Jews, certainly added to the prestige of Babylonian Jewry.

There is no doubt that Babylonian Jewry shared the animosity of the Parthians towards Rome. During the Great Revolt, the kings of Adiabene sent re-enforcements to the defenders of Jerusalem who excelled in bravery (War II 520, VI 356). The place of the Jews in the rebellion against Trajan has already been dealt with,<sup>3</sup> and regardless of the causes of the revolt,<sup>4</sup> it is certain that there also existed an inherent feeling that Parthian rule was preferable to Roman rule. It is not surprising, therefore, that such sentiments were expressed at the time of the Parthian-Persian dynastic change. The Talmud hints more than once at the fears of the Sages when the Sassanians gained ascendancy, and when Artabanus V, last of the Arsacid rulers died, the *Amora* Rav (Abba ben Aivu, also known as Abba Arikha) announced: "The bond is snapped." (Avodah Zarah 10b).

## BABYLONIAN JEWRY IN THE PARTHIAN PERIOD

Any attempt to describe the cultural history and intellectual development of Babylonian Jewry under the Parthians would suffer from a paucity of sources. During the course of time, however, the existence of this hiatus in Babylonian Jewish history was forgotten and when Babylonian Jewry obtained primacy in the

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2. On this event see Neusner, Vol. I p. 51 n. 1. See also A. Schalit, "Evidence of an Aramaic Source in Josephus' Antiquities of the Jews," *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute*, IV (1965) pp. 163-188.

3. See G. Alon, *A History of the Jews in Erez Israel in the Mishnaic and Talmudic Periods* (Hebrew) Vol. I pp. 250-255. See also literature cited in Neusner, Vol. I pp. 70-71.

4. Schalit in *Tarbiz* 7 (1936) p. 79 thinks that the entire Jewish effort in the revolt was to defeat Rome in the East and West and establish the messianic kingdom. The failure of Trajan was construed as the beginning of messianic redemption.

Jewish world the lacunae were filled in. Thus an anachronism was created whereby Babylonian Jewry was said to have maintained a prime position even in Second Temple days and to have brought Torah to Erez Israel even in early generations, an idea already appearing in the Babylonian Talmud (Sukkah 20b), later on in various Geonic works<sup>5</sup> and even in modern accounts of Jewish history.<sup>6</sup> This approach is accompanied by another idealization whereby Babylonian Jewry, not subject to the evil decree of the Roman government, was able to devote itself more completely to a life of productive Torah culture. Although it is incorrect to minimize the importance of the differences between the Babylonian and Roman regimes, a factor no doubt in the unique make-up of Babylonian Jewry, it is important also to realize that Babylonian Jewry was also subject at times to certain external pressures during the Second Temple period, and even more so under the rule of the Sassanians, especially in the fifth century.

As for the Second Temple period, it is impossible to assemble even isolated facts in order to piece together a picture of Babylonian Jewry. Certainly the exile of the ten tribes and the exile of Judah brought to the area many Jews and, indeed, later generations identified their settlements with lands near Babylonia: Halwan, Hamadan, Adiabene, Ginzak<sup>7</sup> etc. Similarly, among the Rabbis, the word 'golah' (=exile) became synonymous with Babylonia. From Josephus, who deals with Babylonia only indirectly, at least one important fact comes to the fore: the Jews of Babylonia "are countless myriads whose number cannot be ascertained."<sup>8</sup> His words are confirmed by Philo who describes how Petronius, the viceroy of Syria during the days of Gaius Caligula feared to place an idol in the Temple of Jerusalem, among other reasons, because of the great power and influence of the Jews in Parthian Babylonia (Legatio ad Gaium 216). It is certain also that the number of Babylonian Jews grew as a result of many acts of proselytism, a topic dealt with at length by the Babylonian Talmud. (Kiddushin 73a et al.). The most famous case of course was that of Adiabene mentioned above. The interesting aspect of the story is not only the conversion and the positive results for the Jews of Erez Israel, but the very

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5. See, for example, the words of Pirqoi. b. Bavoi, published by B.M. Lewin, *Tarbiz* 2 (1931) pp. 395-396 which entered also Midrash Tanhuma, Noah as part of the homily on the praise of the Torah. The unique place of Torah scholars from Babylonia in the Second Temple period is stressed also by Rab Sherira Gaon in his *Letter* pp. 73-74 (ed. Lewin).

6. See especially Y.I. Halevi, *Dorot Harishonim* Section 1 Volume III p. 72. Halevi expounds a theory of Babylonian spiritual equality with Erez Israel beginning already in Second Temple times, and in some cases, particularly in the study of Torah, even a superior position. Halevi's approach is a reaction against those historians who sought to minimize the antiquity of Babylonian Jewish scholarship. See, for example, I.H. Weiss, *Dor Dor Ve-Dorshav* (Hebrew) Vol. III p. 12a ff. The Babylonians also claimed to be of a better family pedigree than their counterparts in Erez Israel. See Kiddushin 71a et al.

7. Kiddushin 72a; Yevamot 16b. For the boundaries for the Jews outside of Babylon proper see: G. Widengren, "The Status of the Jews in the Sassanian Empire," *Iranica Antiqua* Vol. 1 (1961) pp. 117-120 and the literature cited there. As for the geography of Babylonian Jewry, see especially J. Obermeyer, *Die Landschaft Babylonien im Zeitalter des Talmuds und des Gaonats*, Frankfurt 1929.

8. Antiquities XI 133; cf. Antiquities XV 14, 39.

fact that there were Jews circulating in the Parthian empire who persuaded its inhabitants "to worship God after the manner of the Jewish tradition." Josephus, however, dealing only on occasion with Babylonia,<sup>9</sup> cannot serve us as a substantial source for the history of Babylonian Jewry.

No literary work of Babylonian Jewry in the Parthian period has reached us and it is, therefore, difficult to determine their cultural-spiritual condition. After the books of Ezekiel, Daniel and Esther, it would seem that we possess no other literary remnant of Babylonian Jewry in the Temple period, excepting perhaps the Book of Tobit (and perhaps also Susanna). The situation is a little different in the didactic-halakhic sphere for here, at least, Babylonians are found. We might be able to point to Hillel, one of the most important Pharisees of the Temple period, as a representative of Babylonian Jewry and its Torah as some historians indeed tried to do,<sup>10</sup> although it is also possible to question the extent to which we can learn from this about the condition of the study of Torah in Babylonia. After all, most sources do not mention Hillel's early days in Babylonia, but stress the fact that he served Shemiah and Avtalyon, i.e. studied in Eretz Israel.<sup>11</sup>

Only towards the end of the Second Temple period does a rabbinic personality in Babylonia appear who is recognized and respected by the Sages of Eretz Israel. To Judah b. Bathyra, the Sages of Eretz Israel sent: "Peace be with thee, R. Judah B. Bathyra, for thou art in Nisibis yet thy net is spread in Jerusalem." (Pesahim 3b). It appears that this sage is the founder of a dynasty of important scholars among the few *Tannaim* known to us in Babylonia. After the Bar-Kochba rebellion, several sages from Erez Israel went to Babylonia "to learn Torah from R. Judah b. Bathyra in Nisibis." (Sifre Deuteronomy 80, ed. Finkelstein p. 146). It appears that he is the grandson of R. Judah b. Bathyra I. It is possible that the leadership in Nisibis under R. Judah b. Bathyra served as a primary rabbinic authority in Babylonia; thus it appears, at least, from the story of Hananiah, Nephew of R. Joshua (see below). The academy at Nisibis is even included among the most important academies of the Tannaitic period. The verse "justice, justice shalt thou follow" is expounded by the Tannaim: "Thou shalt follow an eminent *Beth Din*" (=Court), and after the famous academies of Eretz Israel, the list includes "after R. Judah b. Bathyra to Nisbis." (Sanhedrin 32b).

Another court in Babylonia, whose existence is not in doubt is the court in Nehardea. R. Akiva is known to have travelled there to proclaim a leap year (Mishnah Yevamot 16:7).<sup>12</sup> As the order of the calendar was a prerogative of Erez Israel, the

9. For example: the reception of Hyrcanus II in Babylonia, Antiq. XV, 14; the settling of Babylonian Jews in the North of Eretz Israel during the days of Herod, Antiq. XVII 23-25 cf. Josephus, Vita 54 on the "Babylonian Jews" in the North.

10. See Halevi, Dorot, Section I, Volume III, pp. 47-72; Volume V pp. 662-704; Section II pp. 162-252.

11. Another Tanna whose origins stem from the Parthian kingdom was Nahum the Mede, but from him as well it is impossible to reach conclusions about the level of Torah scholarship in Babylonia.

12. See Alon, History I p. 151 for an analysis of this source.

inclusion of Babylonia in this act would recognize the unique importance of this diaspora.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, after the Bar-Kochba rebellion, at least one sage Hananiah, Nephew of R. Joshua thought that Babylonia should inherit part of this authority of Erez Israel. This sage, a *Tanna* who left Israel for Babylonia at the beginning of the second century tried to proclaim leap years. The leadership in Eretz Israel after the Bar-Kochba rebellion objected to this, however, in no uncertain terms. Finally Hananiah had to retreat after having consulted with R. Judah b. Bathyra in Nisibis (Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin I, 19a, Bavli Berachot 63a-b). The claim of Hananiah that "he left no one equal to him in Israel," certainly signals the beginning of the change in the status of Babylonian Jewry from a diaspora like all others, to a community standing on the same plane as Israel. There is no doubt that Babylonian Jewry was aware of the great destruction wrought by the Bar-Kochba rebellion and it is possible that the descent of certain scholars to Babylonia gave fresh impetus to the foundation of new Torah institutions there, although the paucity of material makes it difficult to determine the course of things with any certainty. Interestingly, there are definite signs of the opposite phenomenon: the arrival of Babylonian sages in Eretz Israel and their inclusion in the leadership hierarchy of Israel. In *midrashim* emanating from the academy of R. Ishmael, Babylonian students are numerous<sup>14</sup> and after the Bar-Kochba rebellion, R. Nathan the Babylonian appears at the court of the patriarch Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel. This sage, who according to a remark in the Talmud and Geonic traditions was the son of the exilarch in Babylonia, occupied the second position in the hierarchy of Eretz Israel – the Head of the court (אב בית הדין). This is not an isolated phenomenon but the beginning of a trend towards including Babylonians in the leadership strata of the Patriarchate and Sanhedrin.

All this points to the growing importance of Babylonian Jewry towards the end of the Parthian period. Still lacking, however, are explicit references concerning the institutions of Babylonian Jewry and also concerning the level of Torah scholarship there. Although Rav Sherira Gaon writes in his *Letter* (p. 40 ed. Lewin) that "our Rabbis in Babylonia who were before our master (Judah the Prince) had for themselves *mishnayot*, for they had much Torah which they used to expound at the place of the academy," we have no means to either verify or reject his claim based on the sources before us, though we must admit that his words are highly logical. An interesting phenomenon, however, is mentioned in some sources: 'the Babylonian *mishnayot*' which Rav Sherira identifies with the Mishnah of R. Nathan (p. 41).<sup>15</sup>

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13. Moreover, already in the Temple period the Jews of Babylonian diaspora were mentioned explicitly, in letters sent from Eretz Israel to the various diasporas to announce the leap year; See Tosefta Sanhedrin 2:6; Yerushalmi *ibid.* I 18d and Bavli *ibid.* 11b; Midrash Tannaim p. 176 (ed. Hoffmann) and see Alon, *History* p. 150.

14. See J.N. Epstein *Mevo'ot le-Sifrut ha-Tannaim* (Hebrew) p. 570.

15. "Law of the Babylonians" are mentioned in Genesis Rabbah 33:3 (p. 306 ed. Theodor-Albeck) as the laws which R. Hiyya taught Rav during the thirty days he was out of the good graces of R. Judah the Prince. On the entire issue see Epstein *ibid.* (pp. 168-171) and his comments on the Babylonian *mishnayot* and *baraitot* in *Mavo le-Nussah ha-Mishnah* p. 171 ff. A. Goldberg has recently tried to prove that when the *mishnah* of Rabbi reached Babylonia, the Babylonians were forced to go to great limits to explain it within the framework of the existing Babylonian halacha. See *Tarbiz* 40 (1971) p. 144 ff.

It is possible that this refers to the pre-Talmudic Torah of Babylonian Jewry, but a definitive study to determine the existence of early Babylonian halakhah independent of Eretz Israel Torah is still lacking.

The leadership institutions – the exilarchate and the academies can be described fully only from the end of the Parthian period and beginning of the Sassanian period, because only then do we possess sufficient sources. However, here again a short historical survey is in order since the events of the beginning of the 3rd century will have far reaching effects both for Persians and Jews.

## THE SASSANIAN PERIOD

In the third decade of the third century,<sup>16</sup> following a successful revolt by a family of priests from the district of Fars, the ruling dynasty of Persia was replaced. The implications, however, of this event extend far beyond an exchange of dynasties, rather they usher in a radical change in the method of government and in the political and religious character of the kingdom.<sup>17</sup> The Sassanian dynasty, whose first king was Ardashir I (c. 224-241) sought to restore to Persia the might and glory of the Achaemenid period. To this end, the Sassanians abolished to a great extent the feudal government of Parthian days, and in its place established a strong central government at whose head stood the “King of Kings of Iran.”<sup>18</sup> The numerous districts of the kingdom were handed over to members of the Sassanian family whose complete loyalty to the King of Kings was never in doubt. This national awakening was accompanied by a revival of the ancient Persian religion, Zoroastrianism and the cult of Ahuramazda. The penetration of the cult to all corners of the Empire created, as it were, an official ‘state religion’ and although the enthusiasm of the new rulers for the new religion was beyond question, there is no doubt that it served political ends as well, i.e. the maximum unification of the empire. Parallel to the political hierarchy sprung up a priestly one possessing great influence in the empire and often the boundaries separating these two areas were blurred, and a high priest was also likely to be influential in matters of the court and government.<sup>19</sup>

The success of the Sassanian rulers in consolidating the empire aided them greatly on the battlefield. From one inscription we learn details about three military campaigns of the Persian King Shapur I against the Romans in the mid-third century. In the third campaign (circa 259-260), the Roman emperor Valerian was both defeated and captured. In these battles Jewish settlements were definitely damaged, and

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16. Between 224-227 according to various historians.

17. On the Sassanian kingdom see Cristensen, “Sassanid Persia”, CAH Vol. XII p. 109-137; R.N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, ch. 6: “Heirs of the Achaemenids,” and Alon, *History Vol. II* pp. 163-168.

18. Already by Shapur: *Shahan shah Eran ut Aneran*, both of Iran and outside of Iran.

19 For example Kartir, high priest in the days of Shapur and responsible for cruel religious persecutions which affected also Jews. See Widengren, “The Status etc.” p. 127 n. 2 and Frye pp. 209-213.

references to this are found in Talmudic literature.<sup>20</sup> Although it is not always clear whom the Jews supported, generally, and especially during the invasion of Julian in 363, the Jews remained loyal to the Sassanians.<sup>21</sup>

The new centralization of the government and the revival of the Zoroastrian religion directly influenced the Jewish community in Babylonia and references to this are also found in Talmudic literature. The very changing of the regimes and its significance is mentioned in an interesting story in tractate *Bava Kama* (117a) which describes the circumstances of R. Kahana's emigration to Israel. Sitting before the great *amora* Rav, R. Kahana heard a man threatening to inform on his friend. He refused to desist even after having been warned by Rav. Finally R. Kahana killed him. Then, "Rav said unto R. Kahana: until now the Greeks who did not take much notice of bloodshed were (here and had sway but) now the Persians who are particular regarding bloodshed are here . . . arise therefore and go up to the Land of Israel."<sup>22</sup>

The story stresses two points. First, the feeling of the Jews that the "Greek" period in Persia had culminated and secondly, the warning of Rav that the Sassanians are particular about bloodshed. This is nothing other than the first indication of interference on the part of the new government in internal Jewish autonomy, interference which occurred when the fear existed that the Jews were exercising judicial privilege in cases of capital punishment.<sup>23</sup>

The religious life of the Jews, especially in those sensitive areas which might seem to offend Zoroastrian principles, also suffered with the rise of the Sassanians. Once several sages sat before Rav Judah and during the course of the discussion a "*habar*" (=priest) came in and took away their lamp. Rabba b. Bar Hanah exclaimed: "either in Thy shadow (of God) or in the shadow of the son of Esau (=Rome!)" (Gittin 16b-17a). And lest one think that Babylonia served as a refuge for Jews from the Romans, the Talmud stresses, "thus before the "*habars*" came to Babylon," i.e. before the establishment of the Mazdean church state. In another place we find three decrees against Babylonian Jewry and at least one of them, exhuming the dead, stems from principles of the Persian religion.<sup>24</sup>

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20. Moed Qatan 26a – concerning Shapur who killed 12,000 Jews at Mazaca. This information is brought to the ears of Samuel who according to the *Letter* of Sherira died in 254 while Mazaca in Cappadocia was attacked by Shaput in 260. For literature on the problem see Neusner Vol. II pp. 46-47, and notes there.

21. Jews in fact received far better treatment than other religions and especially Christians. See below and see Neusner, "Babylonian Jewry and Shapur II's Persecution of Christianity," HUCA XLIII (1972) pp. 77-102.

22. In printed editions reversed: until now the Persians . . . and now the Greeks etc. (Correct version is that of MS, Munich brought here (see Diqduke Soferim ad loc.).

23. See Taanit 24b – concerning a man who died as a result of flogging at the court of Rabbah and the reaction of the authorities. See also Berachot 58b but cf. Alon II p. 113.

24. Yevamot 63b; Bava Batra 58a.

However, it cannot be said that the Jews suffered religious persecutions during the entire Sassanian period. Moreover, it appears that as long as powerful kings ruled, such as Shapur I (242-272) or Shapur II (309-379), the natural hatred of the Jews towards the Romans convinced them that they did not constitute a threat. After the Roman empire embraced Christianity during the days of Constantine (311) the Persian priesthood essentially persecuted the Christian church, combining political motives with religious persecution.

The Jews, however, had no reason to withdraw support from the government and it appears that in the dictum of Samuel, "the law of the government is law," is expressed the mutual understanding between Jewish leaders and the government. As long as the Jews recognized the legitimacy of Persian tax collections, property and land ownership law, the Sassanians were willing to allow them to retain their own judicial system and internal leadership. Only on occasion, as for example with the fanatical religious reaction after the death of Shapur I, were the Jews persecuted in a severe manner and even then it must be remembered that these persecutions were against all non-Zoroastrian religions.<sup>25</sup> During the fourth century, the Jews again enjoyed a sound relationship with the royal house, as can be seen from the stories describing the sympathy of the queen mother Ifra Hormizd for the Jewish people and its scholars.<sup>26</sup> We do, however, hear of the persecution of one scholar, Rabah bar Nahmani, head of the academy at Pumbedita on the charge of preventing Jews from paying taxes<sup>27</sup> and although Rabah met his death because of this charge, it appears that this was an extraordinary case. Moreover, the non-participation of Babylonian Jewry in the armies of Julian during his invasion (363), even in light of his famous promises concerning the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple, should be strongly stressed and we have once again another expression of the basic loyalty of Babylonian Jewry to the Sassanian dynasty.

The strong position of the Jewish community continued until the beginning of the fifth century. According to Pahlavi tradition, it is even possible that Yazdagird I (399-420) married the daughter of the exilarch, Šošenduxt (*Bat Shoshana*). To this must be added two Talmudic traditions connected with Rav Ashi, the head of the academy at Sura at this time, which portray the friendship of the king towards the Jewish sages and towards the exilarch Huna bar Nathan.<sup>28</sup> However, during the days of Yazdagird II (438-457), the position of ethnic and religious minorities and in particular Jews and Christians takes a turn for the worse due to the ascendancy of fanatical elements in the Persian priesthood. Towards the end of Yazdagird's reign, we hear of the first religious persecution in Babylonian Jewish history: "and

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25. On attacks against Jews, Christians and others Kartir exults in the famous inscription Ka'ba of Zardušt. See Widengren p. 130.

26. Bava Batra 8a; Taanit 24b; Bava Batra 10b; Zevahim 116b; Niddah 20b.

27. Bava Mezia 86a. According to Rav Sherira in 320 C.E., while according to *Seder Tannaim ve-Ammoraim* in 330 or 334.

28. Ketubot 61a; Zevahim 19a. Avoda Zarah 16a.

there was a persecution and Yazdagird decreed to void the Sabbath.”<sup>29</sup> Yazdagird’s son Peroz (457-484) is called in Jewish sources the “wicked” and both Jewish and Christian literature attest to the difficult position of the Jews. According to one tradition, the beating of two Persian priests by Jews was reported to the authorities and as a result, half of the Jewish population of Isfahan was put to death while their children suffered forced apostasy. Rav Sherira also testifies to the handing over of the children to the Magi, mentioning also the execution of the exilarch Huna bar Mar Zutra. In 477 the scholar ‘Rabbah Tosfa’ah’ was killed and in that year “they destroyed houses of study and decreed that Jews should become Persians.”<sup>30</sup>

Towards the end of the fifth century, the Jewish position worsened. During the reign of Kavad I (488-531), there appeared a Persian priest Mazdak<sup>31</sup> who declared himself to be a prophet (500). Mazdak preached a life of strict asceticism within a communistic framework. Kavad, accepting these doctrines turned them into the law of the land. In a short time, however, the conservative hierarchy, with the assistance of the army revolted and deposed the king for a period of time. This movement, of course, also effected the Jews, although it is not quite clear whom they supported.<sup>32</sup> In any event, Jewish sources state that in those days R. Isaac, the head of the academy<sup>33</sup> was killed, the exilarch Mar Zutra (the son of Huna who was killed in the time of Peroz) stood at the head of a rebel Jewish army, fought the Persians, and ruled an independent Jewish state for seven years,<sup>34</sup> (circa 495-502) but was finally apprehended and hung on the bridge at Mahoza. His son, likewise called Mar Zutra, managed to escape and reach Eretz Israel and there was appointed ‘*Resh Pirqa*’. This event symbolizes the end of a 300 year period in Babylonian Jewish history. According to the tradition of the Sages, the Talmud was sealed with the death of the second Ravina in Sura (500 C.E.), i.e. exactly during the days of the persecutions. We are far, then, from the ‘ideal’ description of Babylonian Jewry voiced by some. In contradistinction though to Eretz Israel which would continue to suffer a decline for hundreds of years, Babylonian Jewry would soon recover and the Geonic period would usher in another bright chapter in the history of the Babylonian community.

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29. *Letter* p. 94-95; *Seder Tannaim ve-Ammoraim* (ed. Neubauer) p. 184. According to Sherira the heads of the academies prayed “and a serpent swallowed Yazdagird in his bedroom chambers and the decree was revoked.”

30. *Seder* *ibid*; *Letter* p. 97; *Seder Olam Zuta* (ed. Neubauer) p. 76.

31. See O. Klima, *Mazdak*, Prague 1957. On the Jews see Klima, “Mazdak und die Juden,” *Archiv Orientální* XXIV (1956) pp. 420-431 and Y.A. Solodukho, “The Mazdak Movement and Rebellion of the Hebrew Population,” *Soviet Views of Talmudic Judaism*, Leiden 1973.

32. Funk, Klima and others claim the Jews could not have supported the Mazdakite program and were therefore persecuted by the priesthood and king until he was deposed. Widengren sees the attacks on Jews as a secondary result and it is possible that the Jews supported the king against the priests. In any event after the return of Kavad to the throne we find Jews in his army (see Widengren p. 145).

33. *Seder Olam Zuta* p. 76.

34. See H.Z. Hirschberg, “Mar Zutra, Head of the Sanhedrin in Tiberias,” (Hebrew) in *Kol Erez Naphtali*, Jerusalem, 1968, and Funk, *Die Juden in Babylonien, 200-500* (Berlin, 1902) II p. 143.