PREFACE

The age of Shapur II, 309 to 379, corresponds to far more than the period of a single generation of Amoraim. The sayings of Rav and Samuel pertained mainly to the years of Ardashir and Shapur, and those of their chief students, to the age of Shapur I's sons and heirs through the death of Hormizd II. Shapur II, however, outlived three generations of Amoraim, the third, fourth, and fifth. In such a long period, sufficient changes in academic life and thought may well have taken place to justify a different procedure from that followed in volumes II and III. While I have reviewed the political events of the entire reign of Shapur II, I have concentrated upon the social and cultural-religious history of only the third and fourth generations of Amoraim. In the next volume of this study, I hope to treat the fifth, sixth, and last generations of Amoraim. The data warrant this procedure, for the third and fourth generations seem to me to coalesce, like the fifth, sixth, and last ones, into a meaningful and coherent division. The Amoraim whose sayings form the foundations of this volume are R. Joseph b. Hiyya (d. 333), Rabbah b. Naḥmani (d. 330), Abaye (d. 338), Rava b. R. Joseph (d. 352), Naḥman b. Isaac (d. 356), and their chief contemporaries. Of these, R. Joseph and Rabbah, and their disciples, Abaye and Rava, were the most important. As heads of schools, their sayings predominated in the traditions handed on in this time. I have, on the other hand, omitted R. Naḥman b. Jacob (d. 320), to whom much of vol. III was devoted, and R. Papa (d. 376). It seemed to me that R. Naḥman was important in the earlier period, as a leading younger contemporary of the disciples of Rav and Samuel. R. Papa similarly seemed to play a more central role in the last years of Shapur II. As far as dates go, however, one might have just as well preferred to include both with the Amoraim of the middle of the fourth century.

Few new issues have been raised in this volume. I have continued to apply the same questions and methods as seemed fruitful earlier, particularly in vol. III. Indeed, this study must be regarded as a close continuation of its immediate predecessor. I have tried to test the notions and theses of vol. III against the data of the following two generations. I could find no better way of proceeding. The sayings of

1 The dates are R. Sherira's, and I have no way of verifying them.
the fourth century masters differ little from those of the late third century ones. They are mostly contained in legal sayings and discussions, and offer only limited amounts of historical data. Yet those data were awaiting examination in a detailed and comprehensive manner, and I could see no more useful task for myself than to undertake that examination. In all, I am still trying to clear away the underbrush, to find out little more than what came first and what came afterward. What are the chief political events, the main governmental institutions, the most obvious social, religious, and cultural developments, revealed by our one-sided and extremely limited sources. I believe it is worthwhile to study new material in pretty much the same way that earlier material was studied. I set forth certain fundamental lines of investigation, which from vol. II led directly to what I think are the new issues and ideas of vol. III. These have here to be extended to, and tested against, later data. No progress has been made in the historical evaluation of the sayings. The Talmud is primarily the work of the last period it represents, namely, of the late fourth and fifth century masters, and the subsequent editors. It was then put into its present form. Only when we have reached the history of that last period can we begin to estimate with some confidence the motives and conditions which put the corpus of sayings into its present form. We can, making allowance for these, then argue back, with some hope of success, from the present form to the earlier material. So this study essentially preserves the provisional framework of discourse evident in the former ones.¹

I have not integrated the Jewish data into the account of Shapur II’s political and religious history. These data wholly pertain, quite naturally, to what happened to the Jews, and are reviewed in Chapter One, sections iv-xi. In my view, had I included them in the broader survey of Shapur’s times, I should have conveyed a distorted and false impression. It would have seemed to the reader that what was really most important about Iran, including Babylonia, from 309 to 379 was the local, parochial history of that part of the Jewish community we know about through the academic records. Emperor Julian seems to me to have paid far more attention to Byzantine, particularly Palestinian Jewry, than Shapur II did to the Jewish communities of his empire. Arsacid times were no more; the Jews were not now a formidable

¹ This is essentially the argument of “In Quest of the Historical Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkaı,” HTR 59, 1966, 391-413. See also vol. III, pp. ix-xxi, which serves to introduce this volume as well.
factor in Sasanian dynastic life. They were not important in the politics of the empire, nor in military affairs, and certainly not in the religious and cultural life of the Iranians. They took a mostly passive part in international politics. Shapur’s religious advisers were concerned mainly with the Christians, who suffered terrible persecutions, and with various heretics within the Mazdean tradition, but not with the Jews, who, I think, were mostly left alone. So it seemed to me appropriate to treat the Jews apart from the general history of the empire.1

I confess to a strong bias in favor of Shapur II. While trying to preserve an open mind, I have found very little persuasive evidence that he harmed the Jewish community, and it may be that my general bias in his favor has affected this judgment. The evidences are presented for the reader’s own evaluation.

After the usual review of the external setting of Babylonian Jewish history, in Chapter One, and of the internal political institutions of Jewry, in Chapter Two, I have devoted most attention to the relationship between the rabbis and the ordinary people. If our data had reached us from other sources, or if we had some independent accounts of Babylonian Jewish culture in addition to the Talmud, further issues would surely have been susceptible of close study. All our literary sources, however, derive from rabbinical schools, which preserved their own, but no other, records for posterity. Our glimpses into the life of Babylonian Jewry reach us, therefore, through the prism of the academy. These perceptions have, moreover, been affected directly or indirectly by the perspective of later Judaism. The normative and correct version of Judaism was long believed to be that of the Babylonian Talmud and its cognate literature from Palestine. This essentially theological judgment takes for granted the claim of the rabbinical schools to preserve “the whole Torah” and so to constitute the repository of divine revelation. History and theology have therefore combined to determine the ways in which ancient texts will be interpreted not merely for religious, but also for scholarly purposes. The result is that the history of the Jews in Babylonia in Parthian and Sasanian times has been categorized as “Talmudic history” or “the Talmudic period.”2 It has been written until now mostly in terms of the personalities of the schools, their legal and theological ideas, and the comments of medieval authorities upon their literature. So Talmudic history constituted a category of literary studies. We need now to dis-

2 See vol. III, pp. xii-xx.
tistinguish, however, between history and theology, and also between the history of the Jews and Judaism and the history of the rabbinical academies and writings.

The history of the Jews in Babylonia seems to me to consist of more than what a handful of great men said and did. It requires much attention to the life of a large community. In Chapter Three, close study is given to the role of the court in other than narrowly legal affairs, and to evidence of the rabbi's influence in various aspects of ritual life. In Chapter Four, the court's legal activities and consequent power to govern Jewish community affairs are assessed. These Chapters correspond to vol. II, Chapter Eight, and vol. III, Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Five continues the effort, begun in vol. II, Chapters Four, Five, and Six, and vol. III, Chapter Three, to describe the cultural and religious significance of the schools. While we may not yet know precisely how reliable are the attributions of various sayings to the great masters, we have factual evidence about the schools from their own carefully redacted traditions.

I realize that the emergent picture may trouble the Jewish reader, particularly if he has paid much attention to Talmudic literature as it is taught in Jewish schools and synagogues. It may prove difficult for him to accept what I believe is the fact that "Torah" was a source not only of law and ethics, but also of magic in a great many modes. Indeed, while most people are aware that magical sayings are contained in Talmudic literature, only few have taken seriously the fact that the leading rabbis were also presented as men preeminent precisely because of their magical powers, and that their magical powers were believed to be a direct consequence of their mastery of "Torah." If the data in vol. III, Chapter Three, have not sufficed to persuade the reader that this was the case, I hope that those presented here may do so. The common modern distinction between "religion" and "magic," or between "true religion" and "science," on the one hand, and "magic," "superstition," and "folk religion," on the other, has very little basis in the phenomena themselves, as we shall see. It is one thing to say that the rabbis were masters of the advanced sciences of their day, including astrology and various methods of healing, protection from demons, and the like. That fact has been widely recognized. It is quite another to say, as is asserted here, that the rabbis in their schools exhibited no greater awareness of any distinction between what is now commonly called "magic, superstition, and folk religion," on the one hand, and what is now commonly called "true religion and advanced science," on
the other, than did the ordinary people. They certainly offered a perfectly candid distinction between Torah and "magic." "Magic" was what other people did. "Torah" was what they knew and what empowered them to do supernatural feats, including the resurrection of the dead, the creation of men, communication with the heavenly court, angels, demons, and the dead, as well as more commonplace ones, such as making rain and driving away demons. I have tried in Chapter Five to explain why they held such convictions about themselves.

We must remember that the stories we have are those the Talmudic editors chose to tell. They were not embarrassed by magical data, but eager to report how the great masters performed theurgical wonders of all sorts. Whatever philosophical distinctions have been made in later times between magic and theology are data of the medieval and modern history of Judaism and of religion generally. If so, the distinction recognized by the rabbinical schools is an equally important datum, and it should not be set aside in favor of those which proved more acceptable to philosophical theology as it took shape in medieval and, more especially, modern times. I am guided by what Professor Thomas Kuhn wrote in connection with Galileo's refutation of Aristotle, "We like to forget that many of the concepts in which we believe were painfully drummed into us in our youth. We too easily take them as natural and indubitable products of our own unaided perceptions, dismissing concepts different from our own as errors, rooted in ignorance or stupidity and perpetuated by blind obedience to authority. Our own education stands between us and the past..."¹

Four important issues are not treated here at all. First, I have made no effort to ascertain the origins of various magical beliefs and practices. I believe questions of origins are important, but not decisive when attempting to describe the actuality of the schools and their culture. Second, I have not paid attention to the content of the law. To stress that this is not a work on the history of Jewish law, I have omitted the substance of the decisions in various court cases, reporting only the circumstance in which the case arose or apparently came before the rabbi. In doing so, I mean to underline the importance of legal study in its own right and make it clear that so narrow a framework as defines this volume leaves no place for speculation on the history and development of Jewish law. (I have as yet discovered no grounds to suppose that much that happened outside of the schools made signifi-

cant impact on the formation of the law inside of them. Doubtless future studies will provide more adequate basis for that widespread supposition.) Third, I have paid only brief and superficial attention to the content of Scriptural exegesis (in Chapter Five, section xiii). This is not a work of text-commentary or criticism. I am not a qualified philologist and so cannot offer new information on the meanings of specific words or even sentences in agadic passages. Many such passages are cited, of course, in the context of a historical discussion. To my knowledge, I have not contributed to the illumination of any one of them. Fourth, and most important, I have not yet turned to important and central questions of the history of the traditions shaped in the rabbinical academies and now preserved in the Babylonian Talmud. It is not that I do not think it an important question for historians to work out. On the contrary, I think it too important to deal with here and now, for it requires consideration not of one period alone, but of the formation of the Babylonian gemara as a whole over a period of three hundred years.¹

Originally I supposed that if one separated the various sayings attributed to the several masters by generations, he might discover signs of development, change, growth—in other words, the raw data of history. To the present time, I regard the enterprise as mostly a failure. It is true that we can recover some historical and political materials of interest. I had hoped, however, that we might be able to trace the development of legal and theological ideas, if not in great detail at least in some general way. I thought that we might thus detect changes of mood, or uncover different topics of discussion characteristic of one period and not of another, and that it would be possible to relate such changes of interest or of stress to larger political, economic, sociological, or religious questions. So far, I have seen very few significant changes of any sort. The literature presents a timeless and immutable visage, as if very little innovation took place over a century and a half among many different people in various circumstances. Whether or not the

schools actually were so static, their intellectual life so unvarying, their concerns so remote from the vicissitudes of society and history, I cannot say. Reason suggests that times changed and people changed with them. The evidence as I now comprehend it suggests otherwise. So I have tried to describe the apparently static phenomena of the school, the rabbi, and the court as they emerge from data pertaining to the middle fourth-century masters. I cannot now specify important details in which these phenomena would radically have differed from one place or age to another. It seems clear to me that we shall have to place greater stress upon the history of the rabbinical academies. Perhaps through such an history we may uncover the insights which so far have eluded me in the search for the history of the Jewish community as a whole.

Since I have specified problems I have not satisfactorily confronted, I hope it will not seem pretentious to note the broader disciplines to which I here try to contribute. These are history, sociology of religion, and history of religions. Chapters One and Two are purely historical in method and orientation. Chapters Three and Four focus upon data relevant both to history and to the sociology of Judaism. Chapter Five is shaped by the concerns of history of religions, though it is not an essay in the history of religions. I have offered a number of comments appropriate to the comparative study of religions, both in vol. III (pp. 95-126 and 192-194) and below. Historians of religions, however, normally do not concentrate upon a particular tradition, but generally pursue broader issues, cutting across many religious traditions. I have learned much from Professors Jonathan Z. Smith, University of Chicago, Geo Widengren, Uppsala University, Carsten Colpé, Göttingen University, Willard G. Oxtoby, Yale University, Hans H. Penner, Dartmouth College, and Morton Smith, Columbia University, whose various researches have exerted profound influence on my understanding of specific problems in studying the history of religions in late antiquity. So while retaining an abiding, indeed predominate interest in the study of history and in historiographical issues, I find as a historian working with sources of a primarily religious character that the discipline of history of religions provides a most fruitful and promising set of issues, inquiries, and perspectives. So narrowly limited a framework of time and space as mine is not, however, the best setting for demonstrating the value of religionsgeschichtliche methodology for the study of Judaism. The researches of Professors G. G. Scholem and R. J. Z. Werblowsky, Hebrew University, should be consulted as far more significant exemplifications of that value than I am able to offer.
I have translated some texts, but more often have cited with minor alterations the translations of the Babylonian Talmud edited by I. Epstein and published by Soncino Press, London. These are generally cited in the names of individual translators where they appear. In general, I translated texts of importance for narrowly historical questions, while those of the group of translators directed by Dr. Epstein seemed more than satisfactory for purposes of illustration or citation elsewhere. These I have checked against the original printed text, and against variant manuscript readings when available in Rabinowicz’s *Diqduei Soferim* (now including Gittin, in the excellent edition of M. S. Feldblum). However I have made only very minor alterations in them. Where I have translated texts myself, I have noted differences from the Soncino translators. I have gladly consulted all existing translations. They have made historical study far easier, and even at points where I have differed, have proved interesting and illuminating. I may have presented too many examples of cases, but preferred to err on the side of excess.

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Professor Michael Avi-Yonah, Hebrew University, graciously obtained permission to reproduce the copyrighted map appearing below, p. 184, from his Atlas. Professor W. W. Hallo kindly gave permission to reprint, in revised form, my translation of Chapters XIII and XIV of Škand Gumanik Vičar, which originally appeared in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* ("A Zoroastrian Critique of Judaism," *JAOS* 83, 3, 1963, pp. 283-294, and "Škand Miscellanies," *JAOS* 86, 4, 1966, 414-416). I wish once again to express my indebtedness to Professor R. N. Frye, with whom I studied the Škand material, and who guided my translation, and to the critical text of Professor P. J. de Menasce, on whose text, translation, and commentary my effort was entirely based.

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The less tangible contributions of my wife Suzanne, and sons, Samuel Aaron and Eli Ephraim, no less important to me, do not require specification. They know what they have given. No words can ever contain my gratitude.

No one shares the burden of my deficiencies, except the reader.

Jacob Neusner

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