IV. RABBINIC LITERATURE
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PRIESTS, KINGS, AND PATRIARCHS:
YERUSHALMI SANHEDRIN IN ITS EXEGETICAL AND
CULTURAL SETTINGS

1. Introduction

Until very recently, scholarly attention to the Jerusalem Talmud (henceforth, Yerushalmi) has largely focused on mining its text for historical nuggets with which to reconstruct the history of Jewish/rabbinic law, events, and institutions of late antique Palestine. The Yerushalmi’s own self-presentation as a commentary to the Mishnah has generally not attracted sustained scholarly attention. That is largely due to the fact that the Yerushalmi itself does not appear to be a sustained commentary to the successive words of the Mishnah, as we might normally expect of a commentary. Rather, its own disjointed discourse, especially in comparison to the more finely edited, and extensively studied, Babylonian Talmud (henceforth, Bavli), has tended to favor a more disjointed scholarly approach to its text as the location in which legal and narrative bits just happen to be embedded.1

The present study is a modest attempt at taking seriously the Yerushalmi as mishnaic interpretation, by considering one chapter of the Yerushalmi in its relation to the chapter of the Mishnah upon which it presents itself as commentary. That mishnaic chapter (Sanhedrin 2) is itself remarkable for the extent to which it explicitly interprets a fairly self-contained biblical unit: Deut 14:17–20, the “law of the king.” Both the mishnaic exegesis and the Yerushalmi’s commentary thereto are furthermore noteworthy in that they deal with an institution (Israelite monarchy), and legal traditions attendant thereupon, that had long ceased to exist by the time both the Mishnah and the Yerushalmi were assembled in their extant forms. Thus, we

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1 The most recent critique of and alternative to this dominant approach has been that of Christine Hayes, Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds: Accounting for Halakhic Difference in Selected Sugyot from Tractate Avodah Zarah (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).