Our knowledge for the classical rabbinic period of popular religion, by which I mean the beliefs and practices of Jews outside the rabbinic elite, is extremely limited. The literary evidence for Judaism in this period is almost exclusively rabbinic, and any picture of other strands must be pieced together from archeology, epigraphy, perhaps liturgy and some of the targumim, and the brief glimpses offered by rabbinic texts and non-Jewish sources, Christian and pagan. Here I would like to suggest another source for popular Judaism, a literary source: the early seventh-century Hebrew apocalyptic work Sefer Zerubbabel.

By the time of the composition of Sefer Zerubbabel, the age of classical rabbinic literature was over. In Palestine, where Sefer Zerubbabel was probably written, the tannaitic midrashim and the Jerusalem Talmud were long complete, and most of the important homiletical midrashim had taken shape more than a century earlier. In the other great center of rabbinic activity, the Babylonian Talmud was reaching its final form. Sefer Zerubbabel's occasional use of proof texts
introduced by rabbinic formulas for citation offers a clear indication of its acquaintance with rabbinic literature, and most scholars have understood it to draw on rabbinic literature for elements of its content as well. Here I shall argue that on closer examination many of the parallels between Sefer Zerubbabel and rabbinic texts turn out to reflect not Sefer Zerubbabel’s dependence on the rabbinic corpus or rabbinic traditions but rather independent use of popular traditions on which the rabbis also drew. Thus, though it postdates the rabbinic period, I believe that a careful consideration of Sefer Zerubbabel in relation to rabbinic literature can illumine non-rabbinic eschatological expectations and perhaps other popular religious attitudes of the rabbinic period. In this article I focus on the two messiahs, but there are other elements of Sefer Zerubbabel, such as the figure of Hephzibah, the mother of the Davidic messiah, and the attitude toward the restoration of sacrifice and the eschatological temple, that would merit consideration.

I begin with Menahem b. Ammiel, as Sefer Zerubbabel calls the Davidic messiah. The name Menahem for the messiah appears several times in rabbinic literature. It is the name of a disappearing baby messiah in a story in the Yerushalmi (y. Ber. 2:4), to which I shall return, and it is also one of the names proposed in a discussion of names for the messiah in the Bavli (b. San. 98b). The discussion relates the name Menahem to the verse in Lamentations, “Far from me is any comforter (*menahem*)” (1:16); a version of the Yerushalmi’s story appears in *Lamentations Rabbah* in the comments to this verse, in the middle

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*Period* (ed. Steven T. Katz; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 840–42. Kalmin dates the completion of the Bavli to sometime between the mid-sixth and mid-seventh century.