The chronological and thematic framework of this study relates to a period of Jewish history defined by two letters. The first of these was written to the Jews of Babylonia from the Land of Israel, while the second went in another, and in many ways opposite direction, from the Jews of Babylonia to their brethren throughout the diaspora. Moreover, this second letter targeted the traditions of the Land of Israel, and was clearly not intended to be embraced by the Jews living therein. A time span of fourteen hundred years separates these two communications, during which Babylonian Jewry was destined to evolve from a community shrouded in silence and about which we have extremely limited information, to the one community that would determine, above all others, the nature of Jewish life and religious expression for all subsequent generations. By means of the Babylonian Talmud we were all rendered, to one degree or another, Jews of Sasanian Babylonia.

The first of these two letters was written by the prophet Jeremiah in the fourth year of King Zedekiah, i.e., 594 BCE, just a few years before the final Babylonian onslaught on Jerusalem and the destruction of the First Temple.\(^1\) It was addressed to ‘the remainder of the elders who were carried away captive, and to the priests, and to the prophets, and to all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Bavel’ (Jer. 29:1).

These same captives would be joined eight years later by a second wave of deportees from Judah, all constituting the new community of Jews who, in the words of the psalmist, would find themselves weeping ‘by the rivers of Babylon’ as they remembered Zion. (Ps. 137:1). In this letter the prophet urges those captives not to despair, but rather to ‘build houses and settle down, plant gardens and eat their produce. Marry and beget sons and daughters, in order that you may increase in number there and not decrease’. Politically they were

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\(^1\) The specific date of the letter is not included within its text, as quoted in chapter 29 of Jeremiah, but the letter has been dated by scholars to the same chronological context as the two preceding chapters; cf. J. Bright, *Jeremiah*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1984) pp. 210–211.
also advised to ‘seek the welfare of the country to which I have deported you, and pray on its behalf to God, for on its welfare your own depends’ (Jer. 29:5–7). As I have commented elsewhere, we would be hard-pressed to find another example in ancient Israelite history, in which the community heeded the words of the prophet to such an extent and in such detail.

Fourteen hundred years later, approximately in the year 813 CE, another letter would be dispatched, this time by a rabbinic authority in Babylonia. The author of the letter, one Pirkoi ben Baboi, was the student of one of the disciples of Rav Yehudai Gaon, who at one time served as head of the Suran academy and died around the year 761 CE. In his letter Pirkoi articulates the extent to which the Land of Israel has lost both its halakhic authority over world Jewry as well as the legitimacy of its own customs. As a consequence of five hundred years of persecution under Greeks, Romans and Byzantine Christians, these customs, he claims, had evolved into ‘traditions born of persecution’.

In support of his diatribe Pirkoi was obliged to engage in some original textual exegesis as well, and primarily to reinterpret those biblical scriptures that might weaken his claims by placing the Torah of the Land of Israel—the biblical ‘Zion’—in the center of the spiritual lives of the Jewish people. Surely he realized that verses such as ‘For out of Zion shall come forth Torah and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem’ (Isaiah 2:3) would serve as prooftexts in the hands of the defenders of Palestinian tradition, who would set out to deflect Babylonian attempts at such perceived subversion. To preempt such a defense of Palestinian tradition, Pirkoi had no qualms about interpreting ‘Zion’ to mean ‘the [Babylonian] academy (yeshiva) where they excel (or “stand out”: moreyvin) in the Torah and the commandments’. And thus,