

GEOFFREY HERMAN

A Prince  
without a Kingdom

*Texts and Studies in  
Ancient Judaism  
150*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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150





Geoffrey Herman

# A Prince without a Kingdom

The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era

Mohr Siebeck

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זכרון עולם

אמי מורתי

חווה בת משה ומרים

(לבית גריצרשטיין)



## Preface and Acknowledgments

This is a book about the Sasanian Exilarchate. Through a re-examination of the primary sources and scholarship, as well as the integration of comparative sources from Iranian studies and Persian Christianity, it seeks to understand and explain the enigmatic Exilarchate that features in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds. It addresses some of the key historical questions about the Exilarchate, progressing through chapters that concern dating its origins, its location, the source of its authority and its effective powers. It deals with the relationship between the rabbis and the Exilarchs, broaching topics such as the authority of the Exilarchs over the judicial system, rabbinic portrayals of, and responses to the Exilarchate, and the relationship between the Exilarchate and Persian culture. The first two appendices are comprehensive studies of the Geonic sources.

This volume is a revised and expanded translation of my doctoral thesis. The thesis was submitted to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in the autumn of 2005 and approved (*summa cum laude*) in the following spring. It was subsequently awarded the Bernard M. Bloomfield prize for 2007 by the Hebrew University.

The brief discussion of the *hargbed* has been slightly amended on the basis of an article I published in 2009. The discussion of a significant episode (*b. Ber.* 46b) is now based upon a more detailed study that recently appeared in *Zion*. Most of the material on the *Catholicos* which appeared in the original thesis as a separate chapter is here integrated in the relevant discussions on the Exilarchate. Other changes are more minor, but since this volume reflects my on-going thinking on the subject it should be seen as replacing the Hebrew thesis.

A number of articles have appeared recently that are relevant to the subject of this book but have reached me too late for me to relate to their findings here. Of special note are Avinoam Cohen's most recent studies on Mar Zuṭra published in *Sidra* and Shaya Gafni's study on Sherira's epistle published in *Zion*.

This work is the culmination of years of work and intellectual development and this is an opportune moment to take account. My years at the Hebrew University have been many and good. There I studied history, and particularly Jewish history under great historians. My teachers of ancient Jewish



history have included Shaya Gafni, Moshe David Herr, Tal Ilan, Oded Irshai, Yisrael (Lee) Levine, the late Shmuel Safrai, and Danny Schwartz. Among those with whom I have studied rabbinic literature are Robert Brody, Menahem Hirshman, Menahem Kahana, Menahem Kister, and Yaakov Sussman. My ancient language studies have included Greek, Syriac, Pahlavi, and Arabic. My study of Pahlavi and the Zoroastrian religious literature has been with Shaul Shaked, and with James Russell (Harvard), and Ab de Jong (Leiden) the last two while they were in Jerusalem as visiting professors.

Jerusalem is known for its sages, and the resources available extend well beyond the university walls. I was privileged to spend four years in the academic environment of the Hartman Institute studying Talmud with such distinguished pedagogues as Moshe Halbertal, Menahem Kahana, Shelomo Naeh, and Aharon Shemesh. The Jewish National (and University) Library, a veritable treasure-house of Judaic scholarship is also distinguished for the amicability and expertise of its staff. The staff at the *Institute for Microfilm and Hebrew Manuscripts at the Jewish National and University Library*, and the Oriental, Judaica, and General reading rooms are always helpful and make the National Library a pleasant environment for scholarship. It is also a happy duty to express my appreciation to the staff at the HUC library, the Schocken library, the library of the L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art, the Israel Museum library, and the IAA library at the Rockefeller Museum, and the library of Tantur, the Ecumenical Institute for Theological Studies, all in Jerusalem. I would like to thank the helpful staff of the JTS library and the New York Public Library.

Various data bases have considerably facilitated the work with rabbinic material. Among these are the Friedberg Genizah Project; the Talmud manuscript witnesses collected by Yad Harav Herzog, and the Saul Lieberman databank.

The translation and revision of this book I have undertaken in brief moments snatched from my formal commitments at the institutions where I have since been graciously hosted. These include the Jewish Theological Seminary, Harvard University, the Hebrew University, the University of Geneva, Ruhr University in Bochum, and finally Cornell University.

I would like to warmly thank Seth Schwartz for inviting me to publish this work in this series, and Henning Ziebritzki of Mohr Siebeck for kindly accepting it. I would like to thank Ilse König of Mohr Siebeck for her dedicated editorial guidance. I owe a debt of gratitude to Shamma Friedman and David Goodblatt, the two external readers of the original thesis, for their encouraging evaluations. I would especially like to thank Henry Edinger for his devoted editorial help and Ab de Jong (Leiden) who read and commented upon chapter 1.

I wish to also acknowledge some other colleagues, friends and relatives for their support, encouragement, advice, and collegiality over the years, not exclusively related to this study: Aaron Amit, Avri Bar-Levav, Zechariah Edinger, Liora Elias Bar-Levav z"l, Yaakov Elman, Noah Hacham, Kim Haines-Eitzen, Richard Kalmin, Reuven Kiperwasser, David Powers, Shai Secunda, and Dan Shapira. Above all others is Nehama whose sacrifices for my academic pursuits have been considerable.

Jerusalem, May, 2012

Geoffrey Herman



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## Notes to the Reader

The Yerushalmi is cited according to MS Leiden (Academy of the Hebrew Language edition) and the Bavli is usually cited from the best textual witness as described unless otherwise stated. The epistle of Rav Sherira Gaon is cited from the French version.

The translation of rabbinic texts is my own unless noted. All translations from modern Hebrew scholarship are my own.

For the Bavli I have on occasion, sought assistance from existing translations to aid with felicitous language, favouring the Soncino translation, and turning to Michael Sokoloff's masterly *Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic* for individual words and phrases. Citations from Aphrahat's demonstrations are based on Parisot's edition.

The transliteration of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac terms and names follows a middle path, seeking to preserve a fairly accurate transcription of the consonants, including the gutturals, but not employing a fully phonetic transcription. Common biblical names appear in the familiar English form, e.g. Samuel, Judah, Joseph. For Middle-Persian words and names I have followed the conventions for that field.

# Abbreviations

## Non-Hebrew Journals and Series

AB	Analecta Bollandiana
AI	Acta Iranica
AJSR	Association for Jewish Studies Review
AMSL	The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures
AMS	Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum
ANRW	Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt
AO	Archiv Orientalní
BAI	Bulletin of the Asia Institute
BSOAS	Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
CHI	The Cambridge History of Iran
CRINT	Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
EI	Encyclopaedia Iranica
HR	History of Religions
HTR	Harvard Theological Review
HUCA	Hebrew Union College Annual
IA	Iranica Antiqua
IEJ	Israel Exploration Journal
IJ	Irano-Judaica
JA	Journal Asiatique
JAOS	Journal of the American Oriental Society
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JE	Jewish Encyclopedia
JESHO	Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient
JH	Jewish History
JHS	Journal of the Hellenistic Society
JJGL	Jahrbücher für Jüdische Geschichte und Litteratur
JJLG	Jahrbuch der Jüdisch-Literarischen Gesellschaft
JJS	Journal of Jewish Studies
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review
JRAS	Journal of the Royal Asian Society
JRS	Journal of Roman Studies
JSAI	Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam
JSIJ	Jewish Studies Internet Journal
JSJ	Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSNT	Journal for the Study of the New Testament
JSS	Jewish Social Studies

JStQ	Jewish Studies Quarterly
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
MGWJ	Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums
OC	Oriens Christianus
OS	Orientalia Suecana
OT	Oudtestamentische Studiën
PAAJR	Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research
PBA	Proceedings of the British Academy
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
PW	Paulys Realencyclopädia Der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft
REArm	Revue des Études Arméniennes
REJ	Revue des Études Juives
RHR	Revue d'histoire des religions
SCI	Scripta Classica Israelica
SEG	Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum
SEU	Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensa
SHA	Scriptores Historiae Augustae
StIr	Studia Iranica
TAM	Tituli Asiae Minoris
VTSup.	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WZKM	Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlands
YCS	Yale Classical Studies
ZDMG	Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft
ZKT	Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie
ZNW	Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft

### Rabbinic Texts\*

In references to the Talmudic literature, the following abbreviations are used: b. = Babylonian Talmud; m. = Mishnah; y. = Palestinian Talmud; t. = Tosefta. The names of the tractates cited in this book are abbreviated as follows:

<i>AZ</i>	‘Avoda Zara
<i>BB</i>	Bava Batra
<i>Bekh.</i>	Bekhorot
<i>Ber.</i>	Berakhot
<i>Beṣa</i>	
<i>Bik.</i>	Bikkurim
<i>BM</i>	Bava Meṣi’a
<i>BQ</i>	Bava Qamma
<i>Demai</i>	
‘ <i>Eruv.</i>	‘Eruvin
<i>Git.</i>	Giṭṭin
<i>Ḥag.</i>	Ḥagiga
<i>Ḥul.</i>	Ḥullin

---

\* For abbreviations for other rabbinic works see the bibliography.

<i>Hor.</i>	Horayot
<i>Kelim</i>	
<i>Keritot</i>	
<i>Ket.</i>	Ketubbot
<i>Kil.</i>	Kilayim
<i>Mak.</i>	Makkot
<i>Meg.</i>	Megilla
<i>Me'ila</i>	
<i>Men.</i>	Menahot
<i>MQ</i>	Mo'ed Qatan
<i>Nazir</i>	
<i>Ned.</i>	Nedarim
<i>Nidda</i>	
<i>Nega'im</i>	
<i>Ohalot</i>	
<i>Pea</i>	
<i>Pes.</i>	Pesaḥim
<i>Qid.</i>	Qiddushin
<i>RH</i>	Rosh haShana
<i>San.</i>	Sanhedrin
<i>Shab.</i>	Shabbat
<i>Shevi'it</i>	
<i>Shev.</i>	Shevu'ot
<i>Sheq.</i>	Sheqalim
<i>Sota</i>	
<i>Suk.</i>	Sukka
<i>Ta'an.</i>	Ta'anit
<i>Temura</i>	
<i>Ter.</i>	Terumot
<i>Yoma</i>	
<i>Zev.</i>	Zevaḥim

### Other Abbreviations

- DJPA M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, Bar-Ilan University Press, Ramat Gan/The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 2002<sup>2</sup>.
- DJBA M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods*, Bar-Ilan University Press, Ramat Gan/The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 2002.
- IMHMJNUL Institute for Microfilm and Hebrew Manuscripts at the Jewish National and University Library



## Introduction

The Exilarchate was the foremost leadership office of Babylonian Jewry in the Sasanian era.<sup>1</sup> Based in the empire's capital, the Exilarch was the official representative of the Babylonian Jews before the king. Rabbinic literature is the main source of knowledge about the Exilarchate. It provides a colourful portrait of power and wealth, and betrays the Exilarchs' mixed relationship with the rabbis. This book is an historical study of the sources relating to the Exilarchate.

In the Aramaic sources the Exilarch is usually referred to as the *resh galuta* – the 'Head of the Exile'.<sup>2</sup> This title often appears in the construct form [*de-]vei-resh galuta*<sup>3</sup> meaning 'those affiliated with the House of the Head of the Exile'. The 'Exile' or Captivity mentioned here is a term of biblical vintage.<sup>4</sup> It evokes the illustrious biblical antiquity of Babylonian Jewry, a community that traces its origins to the exile of the Judean kingdom after the destruction of the First Temple. It alludes to the special consciousness of the Jewish community of Babylonia – often viewed in rabbinic sources as the quintessential diaspora.

Another title used for Exilarchs is (*de-]vei nesi'a*,<sup>5</sup> meaning 'those affiliated with the House of the *nesi'a*'. This title employs the Aramaic calque on the Hebrew *nasi*. It is often translated as 'prince' yet has more of a monarchical

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<sup>1</sup> The question of the existence of the Exilarchate in the Parthian era is addressed in detail in the course of the book. On the Exilarchate in the Geonic era and beyond see below appendix I, n. 3.

<sup>2</sup> ראש גלותא. The form ראש גלותא is found sometimes in early witnesses. A few witnesses (confined to *b. Hul.* 92a, *b. San.* 38a and *b. Hor.* 11b) have this term in Hebrew, ראש גולה.

<sup>3</sup> [ד]בי ריש גלותא. The construct form דב/בי is common in the Bavli and is used in this context to define the determinant as a family, school, party, dynasty, and so on; an alternative possibility is to understand it as a place. Cf. LEWIN, *Igeret*, 83–4 (below in appendix II).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Jeremiah 28:6; 29:1; Ezra 1:11. In the Tannaitic sources, e.g. *m. Mid.* 3:1; *m. Sheq.* 2:4; *m. RH* 2:4. Cf. JUDELOWITZ, *Pumbedita*, 126–8; BEER, *The Babylonian Exilarchate*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> [ד]בי נשיאה. See BEER, *The Babylonian Exilarchate*, 6–9, 227. This title is used to refer to the Exilarch only in the Bavli. It appears in this sense just once in the Yerushalmi (*y. Ta'an.* 4:2 (68a), and perhaps the Babylonian context of that source was not fully appreciated. In the Geonic era it is common.

connotation. It carries the sense of a supreme political leader,<sup>6</sup> implying a certain royal pretention.<sup>7</sup>

## A. A Kingdom without Sources

### I. *Recovering a Lost Kingdom*

A combination of factors has made the Exilarchate a topic of avid interest for scholars. The Exilarchs are linked in the sources to Davidic ancestry and the notion of a princely leadership over a Diaspora community of unparalleled antiquity had great appeal. This stir is evident already in the ancient sources. For modern scholars it was perhaps accompanied by the allure of the oriental and the exotic. Such a leadership might encourage the communities of the diaspora and provide them with a source of pride, “to sweeten just a little for the Israelite nation the bitterness of the exile.”<sup>8</sup> And yet this enthusiasm may have led not a few scholars to step a little beyond the sources.

Scholars have, in fact, constructed an image of ancient Babylonian Jewry that cannot be easily borne by the sources. Babylonian Jewry is perceived as a highly unified and centralized community. Within the region of Babylonia believed to be densely populated by Jews,<sup>9</sup> it has been broadly accepted that the Exilarchate was an institution of tremendous power, and that it ruled the Jewish community of Babylonia autonomously or semi-autonomously.<sup>10</sup> Just

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<sup>6</sup> It is not employed for the Exilarch in the other common usage found in rabbinic literature as the head of a law court.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. GOODBLATT, *The Monarchic Principle*, 290–8; HABAS-RUBIN, *The Patriarch*, 13–37 (with reference to the Palestinian patriarch).

<sup>8</sup> Thus in the majestic prose of S. P. Rabbinowitz’s paraphrase/translation of Graetz (*Divrei Yemei Yisrael* 2, 341): להמתיק מעט לבני העם הישראלי את מרירות הגלות. Cf. the ‘panegyric’ for Babylonia, id., 340–341; and see LAZARUS, *Die Häupter der Vertriebenen*, 2: “Ein trostreicher Gedanke!”. For the Geonic era cf. GROSSMAN, *The Babylonian Exilarchate in the Gaonic Period*, 78.

<sup>9</sup> We lack a clear idea of the size of the Jewish population of Babylonia. It is hardly possible to go beyond the hyperbolic and vague statements of Josephus (*Ant.*, 11:5, 2 [134]) and Philo (*Legatio ad Gaium*, 31, [216]) who speak of a countless number of Jews beyond the Euphrates. Cf. Neusner’s estimate of 860,000 (NEUSNER, *History*, II, 246–50), more than doubled in ELMAN “Middle Persian Culture”, 195, n. 3. Cf., too BARON, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 1, 170, 370–2.

<sup>10</sup> JOST, *Geschichte der Israeliten*, 267; GRAETZ, *Geschichte der Juden*, IV, 252: “eine gewisse politische Selbständigkeit, und sie fühlten sich in diesem Lande, wie in einem eigenen Staate”; and in S.P. Rabbinowitz’s translation of Graetz (*Divrei Yemei Yisrael*, II, 346), Babylonian Jewry were כעם יושב לבדד ומכלכל בעצמו את עניניו על פי תורת מדינה אשר נתן לו, and *ibid.*, כעין ממלכה וקבוץ מדיני. FUNK, *Die Juden in Babylonien*, I, 34: “Dem Volke gegenüber waren sie allmächtig, ihr Wille war Gesetz, und ihre Befehle wurden von Allen

as Babylonian Jewry has often been perceived as some form of a “state within a state”,<sup>11</sup> or a “Jewish vassal state”,<sup>12</sup> so the Exilarchate was “a kind of miniature Jewish government”.<sup>13</sup> Already at the beginning of the era of *Wissenschaft des Judenthums*, scholars set to work exploring the structure of this institution in greater detail. Their endeavours, however, were rewarded with unsatisfactory results. This imagined Exilarchal “kingdom”, if it *was* a kingdom, was one without a land, an army, and a true citizenship to rule in any real sense.<sup>14</sup> More disconcerting, however, was that this was a kingdom without *sources*, such that are given to successive historical analysis. The scholars now confronted the reality that “the talmuds ... have not told us anything, just a little here and a little there”.<sup>15</sup> It was commonly felt that any self-respecting kingdom should have a detailed line of dynastic succession. Yet the Exilarchs mentioned in the Bavli are described “without method and regime to know the order of their succession as is right and fitting”.<sup>16</sup> Scholars believing that the Exilarchs’ alleged Davidic pedigree was a central component in establishing their status amongst the Jews would discover that there was no significant expression of this lineage in the sources. The ancient redactors of the Bavli were now accused of deliberately suppressing the ‘true’ importance of this

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befolgt”. See HOFFMANN, *Mar Samuel*, 1–2. Beer (*The Babylonian Exilarchate*, 2–3) refers to the “autonomy of Babylonian Jewry that existed for over two thousand years”.

<sup>11</sup> See GRAETZ, *Geschichte der Juden*, IV, 252; JONA, *I Rasce Galutà*, 336. Gezau (*Al Naharot Bavel*, 45), on the other hand, writes as follows: "חוקף ועז נתן לו לעשות משפט עמו בכל עניניהם האזרחיים והדתיים ויהי כראש לכנסיה חפשיה. אמנם כאשר לא היתה לשמרה זאת כל רעיון מדיני, רק לטובת הסדרים בחיים החומרים והמוסריים של היהודים על פי רוח אמונתם ודתיהם, ויהיו גם נאמנים לארץ מולדתם בכל נפשם ומאודם, מלאו חקיה וטיבה דרשו כל הימים, על כן לא נבית על זה כממלכה בתוך ממלכה (שטאַאט אים שטאַאטע). For the promoter of Jewish autonomy in the former Pale of Settlement, Shimeon Dubnov, Babylonia provided a suitable historical precedent. Whilst he did not devote a comprehensive study to the topic, he put an emphasis on the almost complete self-rule, of Babylonian Jewry. The descent of the many rabbinic disciples to Babylonia after the defeat of the Bar Kokhba revolt, “introduced an exhilarating spirit into the life of the Jews of Babylon. It imbued them with courage to dream of liberation from the Palestine national hegemony.” (DUBNOV, *History of the Jews*, 149). He declared that the “compact masses of Jews, concentrated in the various cities of Babylon, enjoyed the fullest autonomy” (ibid, 152), and in his view the Exilarch was “a sort of satrap over the Jews” (ibid, 153).

<sup>12</sup> GRAETZ, *Geschichte der Juden*, IV, 247 and further, ibid: “die Selbständigkeit, welche die parthischen und persischen herrscher ihnen ungeschmälert gelassen hatten”. BARON, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 1, 282: “a sort of Jewish vassal prince”.

<sup>13</sup> JUDELOWITZ, *Nehardea*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. LAZARUS, *Die Häupter der Vertriebenen*, 3: “Ein König ohne Königreich, ein Fürst ohne Volk”. Likewise, a similar expression appears at the beginning of Benjamin Disraeli’s historical novel, *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy* (London, 1833) which was translated into German in the same year.

<sup>15</sup> REIFMAN, “Resh-Galuta”, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



lineage for Babylonian Jewry. Already Heinrich Graetz complained about the contemporary sources and derisively leveled an accusing finger at the Talmud itself declaring: “the Talmud, that speaks of all and sundry, surprisingly, apparently deliberately maintains its silence with respect to the Exilarchate”.<sup>17</sup> And even as it seemed clear that the Exilarchs possessed “significant influence over the development of the history of the Jews in Babylonia”,<sup>18</sup> nevertheless, in the contemporary sources we had “only disjointed matters.”<sup>19</sup> Thus it was no longer possible to reconstruct this apparently magnificent, but now *lost* royal dynasty.

Even when the talmuds speak up about the Exilarchate the picture they depict is far from clear. The relationship between the rabbis and the Exilarchs is ambiguous. The range of opinions on the Exilarchate varies from endorsement to apathy and deprecation. Besides this, the sources are apt to be terse and uninformative. When Exilarchs do appear in these sources they tend to remain in the background. With such sources it would be hard to work. As a result the sources did not offer satisfactory answers to many basic questions about the function of the Exilarchs within Jewish society. Early on Jacob Reifman, a 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar, for instance, could summarize his understanding of the evidence as follows:

The job of the Exilarch was to harshly rule over the nation and oppress them with the stick that was given him by the king, that they turn neither to the left nor to the right of whatever the *nasi*<sup>20</sup> says to them, and to punish all who depart from it, but not to teach Torah and commandments and not to instruct the nation whither they should go and how they should act.<sup>21</sup>

Reifman’s description, far from providing a compelling portrait of the Exilarchate, is better appreciated as a patent reminder of the disparate nature of the available sources, since his naïve but succinct summary reflects little more than a kind interpretation of the mixed manner in which the Exilarchate is portrayed in the Talmud.

The rabbinic corpus, then, presents a challenge. There are multiple difficulties before scholars of the Exilarchate, both on account of the paucity of sources and on account of the difficulty in reading them in an accurate, criti-

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<sup>17</sup> GRAETZ, *Geschichte der Juden*, IV, n. 37, 461: “Der Talmud, der von allem und jedem spricht, beobachtet merkwürdigerweise ein, wie es scheint, geflissentliches Stillschweigen über die Resch-Galuta ...”. See, too, *ibid*, 253. The accusation that the Talmud deliberately silences the information on the Exilarchate recurs with other scholars. See, for instance, ZEITLIN, “The Opposition to the Spiritual Leaders”, 20; NEUSNER, *History*, V, 251, 257; GOODBLATT, *The Monarchic Principle*, 278. On the Talmud’s hostility to the Exilarchate see also BEER, *The Babylonian Exilarchate*, 170.

<sup>18</sup> GRAETZ, *Geschichte der Juden*, IV, 253.

<sup>19</sup> GRAETZ, *Divrei Yemei Yisrael*, II, 347.

<sup>20</sup> He is referring to the president of the rabbinic court.

<sup>21</sup> REIFMAN, “Resh-Galuta”, 38–9.

cal and historically useful way.<sup>22</sup> Below, I shall point to ways to cope with these difficulties, but first a review of the earlier efforts by the more important scholars engaged in Exilarchal historiography.

## II. *Satrap, Feudal Prince, Tyrant, Hakham Bashi: Former Models of Exilarchal Leadership*

While indeed, a popular topic already at the beginning of modern scholarship, we should glance back a full millennium, to the Geonic era, for the real beginning of systematic Exilarchal historiography. The first documented effort to present the history of the Exilarchate is probably the medieval chronicle *Seder 'Olam Zuta* (Minor World Chronicle, henceforth *SOZ*). This chronicle contains a dynastic list linking the contemporary office holders in direct succession to the biblical King David and clearly intending to assert that they were the legitimate heirs to the Davidic dynasty. Another attempt to reconstruct the history of the institution can be pieced together through analysis of the writings of the late 10<sup>th</sup> century head of the Pumbedita academy, Rav Sherira Geon.<sup>23</sup> Talmud commentators and chroniclers reflect upon the Exilarchate and its history throughout the Middle Ages. Of particular note are testimonies found in the works of Muslims who are very interested in the institution for reasons of their own.<sup>24</sup>

Modern scholarship on the Exilarchate dates to the works of Isaac Marcus Jost,<sup>25</sup> followed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars Reifman,<sup>26</sup> Avraham Krochmal,<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The topic of the Exilarchate appears, unfortunately, to be filled with far-reaching theories claiming support from various but ultimately dubious sources. Many will be addressed in the course of this book but here is one example. A. Burstein (“Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s Request from Vespasian”, 42) holds that R. Yohanan b. Zakkai requested “the dynasty of the *Exilarch*” from Vespasian, but this was not granted him. In his view, the original source read ‘שׁוֹשִׁילֵת דַּרְגָּא’ and the abbreviation was deciphered by the later scribes as רַבֵּן גַּמְלֵאֵיל. Since this request was not granted, the Palestinian tradition did not preserve this request. However, in reality, R. Yohanan b. Zakkai surely would not have asked for Rabban Gamaliel since he was affiliated with a different chain of rabbinic tradition. On his deathbed, he wished for the coming of Hezeqiah – the *Exilarch*, but ultimately Rabban Gamaliel seized the patriarchate.

Even as history cannot be written without at least a modicum of imagination, as goes the saying of Mommsen (mentioned by BICKERMAN, *Der Gott der Makkabäer*, 11), I have set for myself the task of steering clear of imaginative and speculative reconstructions that drift away from the data, and to carefully sieve through the sources. Judelowitz’s formulation on our topic appears rather apt (*Nehardea*, 85): “we have no interest in this book in investigations and casuistry, only in that which we have found to be explicit, or that which can be proven by our estimation constructed upon the methods which we have proposed for our task”.

<sup>23</sup> These Geonic sources are examined in appendices I and II.

<sup>24</sup> GOLDZIHNER, “Renseignements”.

<sup>25</sup> JOST, *Geschichte der Israeliten*, IV, 267–328; idem, *Geschichte des Judenthums*, esp. 130–132.

S. Galante,<sup>28</sup> Graetz, Nehemiah Brüll,<sup>29</sup> and others.<sup>30</sup> The Exilarchate often figures centrally in their historical studies and surveys of the period. They base their studies almost exclusively on the Talmudic sources, aided by the Geonic evidence.<sup>31</sup>

It was Jost who created the first historical survey of the topic. For him, the Exilarchate emerged as an inner Jewish phenomenon subsequently to be recognized by government authorities. He sees it as a powerful and highly influential political body, administering the lives of the members of the Jewish community. Honoured in a way that recalls the Ottoman Hakham Bashi, it acted as intermediary between the Jews and the crown. The Exilarch, like a prince, tended to act harshly (“despotisch schaltete”), but the rabbis whom he appointed as judges were able to limit his excesses.<sup>32</sup>

Graetz breathes life into Jost’s dry portrayal and passionately romanticizes Talmudic Babylonia as a whole. It was, indeed, for him the fertile pasture on which Judaism rose to spiritual heights, and he attributes this intellectual achievement to a large degree to the comfortable political and economic conditions enjoyed by the Jews of Babylonia. As Babylonia became a second homeland for the Jews<sup>33</sup> and the ruling authorities allowed them to run their own lives, the Exilarchate stood at the pinnacle of the system of Jewish self-rule.<sup>34</sup> Graetz sees the Exilarch as an oriental feudal prince. And if, as he reluctantly would concede, the deeds of the Exilarchs merited censure from time to time, this was surely the unavoidable part of the reality of any govern-

<sup>26</sup> REIFMAN, “Resh-Galuta”.

<sup>27</sup> KROCHMAL, “Qil’ah devei resh galuta”, 5–68.

<sup>28</sup> GALANTE, “De-vei resh galuta”. He mentions the studies of Graetz and Gezau, but most of all he criticizes Krochmal.

<sup>29</sup> BRÜLL, “Die Entstehungsgeschichte des babylonischen Talmuds als Schriftwerkes”. In this composition there is also discussion of *SOZ*. After the publication of Lazarus’ study Brüll began to review it in his journal, called *Central-Anzeiger* however he died prior to having completed reviewing the entire work.

<sup>30</sup> JONA, “I Rasce Galutà”; GEZAU, *Al Naharot Bavel*, 45–55. Jona (according to Lazarus) relies upon KROCHMAL, “Qil’ah devei resh galuta”. Isaac Halevy, too, in *Dorot haRishonim*, mentions the Exilarchate as necessary for his discussions.

<sup>31</sup> Jost had already included in his work on Jewish history a survey on the Jews of Babylonia, and reserved there the place of honour for the Exilarchate. His description of the Exilarchate is devoid of the feeling that is so present in the surveys of the other (Jewish) historians.

<sup>32</sup> JOST, *Geschichte des Judenthums*, II, 131–2.

<sup>33</sup> GRAETZ, *Geschichte der Juden*, IV, 247: “Babylonien wurde für die jüdische Nation eine zweite Mutter ... und wurde ... ein zweites Vaterland für die Heimatlosen”.

<sup>34</sup> GRAETZ, *ib.* Like Jost he, too, notes that the Exilarch was only *confirmed* by the Persian rulers, but not chosen by them. Cf. too, HOFFMANN, *Mar Samuel*, 1–3.

ment in the world.<sup>35</sup> Graetz, as Jost before him, begins his survey of Babylonian Jewish history with a lengthy introduction on the Exilarch and then brings a series of aggadic stories culled from the Talmud.<sup>36</sup> He progresses chronologically through the generations of the Amoraim, and a sizeable proportion of these stories, too, relate to the Exilarchate.

Most of the other Jewish Enlightenment era scholars, such as Reifman and Krochmal, do not advance much beyond the style of traditional commentary, whether with respect to their methodology,<sup>37</sup> their access to non-rabbinic sources, or their conclusions.

Among the important scholars who worked in the area in the period after Graetz are Felix Lazarus and Salomon Funk.<sup>38</sup> Lazarus published a monograph on the Exilarch under Arsacid and Sasanian rule in Brüll's journal, *Jahrbücher für Jüdische Geschichte und Litteratur*, in 1890.<sup>39</sup> This work, the first monograph on the Exilarchate, was submitted as a critical edition of the portion of *SOZ* that relates directly to the Exilarchate (i.e., from the Return to Zion until the end of the composition),<sup>40</sup> accompanied by a scientific commentary. Lazarus' main contribution is the examination of the versions of *SOZ* that were available to him. He added a discussion of the sources amid broader reflections on the Exilarchate including its origins and history, and providing a historical-talmudic commentary to *SOZ* within the general context of the history of Babylonian Jewry.

An additional sign of progress in understanding the Exilarchate in this period was the integration of non-Talmudic data and greater reference to the broader historical context. Until the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century primarily rabbinic sources had been available. Developments in the fields of Iranology and the study of early Arabic literature from this period onwards soon began to filter into scholarship on the Exilarchate. Lazarus and Funk could now draw upon reliable information on the Persian empire from the rich and brilliant wellspring of Theodor Nöldeke who, in 1879, published his translation of the section of Ṭabarī's *Annals*, *Tarīkh al-rasūl w'al mulūk*, which deals

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<sup>35</sup> GRAETZ, *ibid*, 254; Jost had already assured his readership that although "mancher Resch-Galutha missbrauchte diese Stellung zu offenbaren Gewaltthaten, doch kam dergleichen nur selten vor" (*Geschichte des Judenthums*, 132).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Abraham Geiger's criticism against the fourth volume of Graetz's history (*Jüdische Zeitschrift für Wissenschaft und Leben* IV (1866), 146) that he deals with "Geschichten".

<sup>37</sup> In the words of Galante (*ibid*, 35), Krochmal "built his arguments on theories of casuistics" (בנה דבריו על השערות של פלפול).

<sup>38</sup> FUNK, *Die Juden in Babylonien*, esp. I 31–6, but he discusses the Exilarchate throughout the two volumes, and also I, n. 4 (x–xiv): Die Reihenfolge der Exilarchen im dritten Jahrhundert; II, n. 4 (143–5): Aufstand der babyl. Juden unter Mar Sutra II; II, n. 5 (145–6): Huldigungssabbath des Exilarchen.

<sup>39</sup> LAZARUS, *Die Häupter der Vertriebenen*.

<sup>40</sup> I evaluate this edition in appendix I.

with the Sasanian kings.<sup>41</sup> Jewish scholars were now provided not only with a careful and considered study on Sasanian history, but also with an aperture through which relevant Arabic literature could be viewed. Ignaz Goldziher,<sup>42</sup> too, gathered data relating to the Exilarchate from the Arabic literature<sup>42</sup> which would serve Lazarus and Funk well in their work.

In the meantime James Darmesteter, the great French Iranist, during his sojourn among the Parsee community in India, encountered in a composition called *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* (The Provincial capitals of the Iranian Domain), that survived in a Pahlavic manuscript, information on a certain Šīšīnduxt, the daughter of the Exilarch and wife of the fifth century Sasanian king, Yazdgird I.<sup>43</sup> As part of a broad tendency to integrate Jewish with general history scholars seek to fuse, among other things, the Mar Zutra revolt, described in *SOZ*, with the disturbances surrounding the enigmatic figure of the Zoroastrian heresiarch, Mazdak.<sup>44</sup> Funk, like Graetz and his predecessors, elevates the status of the Exilarchate considerably. For instance, even if, with Nöldeke's work before him,<sup>45</sup> he concedes that the Exilarch could not possibly have ranked fourth in importance in the empire,<sup>46</sup> as others had been tempted to conclude on the basis of certain Talmudic sources, nevertheless, he seeks to prove, following a different statement by Nöldeke, and doubtful logic, that the Exilarch belonged to the fourth rung of the nobility.<sup>47</sup>

No significant new detailed studies appeared until the 1960's.<sup>48</sup> Two scholars of very different backgrounds chose Babylonian Jewry in the Tal-

<sup>41</sup> Nöldeke, himself, had already referred explicitly in this work to a number of matters that relate to the history of Babylonian Jewry, including the Exilarchate, see NÖLDEKE, *Geschichte der Perser*, 69.

<sup>42</sup> GOLDZIHHER, "Renseignements".

<sup>43</sup> See DARMESTATER, "La reine Shasyân Dôkht". As the title suggests, he, himself, transcribed the name of the wife from the ambiguous Pahlavi script differently than here.

<sup>44</sup> This is noticeable already with Graetz. See appendix I.

<sup>45</sup> NÖLDEKE, *Geschichte der Perser*, 69.

<sup>46</sup> Jost had already conveyed his doubts about this. See *Geschichte des Judenthums und seiner Secten*, 132, n. 2.

<sup>47</sup> FUNK, *Die Juden in Babylonien*, I, 32–3. Discussion shall follow.

<sup>48</sup> Of the studies written in this period: Wilhelm Bacher wrote a detailed encyclopedia entry ("Exilarch"). Jacob Zuri discusses the relations between the Exilarchate and the academies in *The Reign of the Exilarchate and the Legislative Academies*. He is especially interested in the lifetime of one Babylonian rabbi, Rav Naḥman b. Isaac, but overstates the centralized nature of Babylonian Jewry and the involvement of the Exilarchate in the life of the academies. See also JUDELOWITZ, *Nehardea*, 47–54, and n. 5, 84–5, especially his remarks on 85. An additional study of note is Ezra Spicehandler's unpublished doctoral thesis, written in 1952 as *The Local Community in Talmudic Babylonia, Its Institutions, Leaders and Ministers*. Spicehandler devotes a chapter to the Exilarchate (esp. 56–62). I am grateful to my friend, Michael Terry, then head librarian of the Jewish division of New York Public Library who attained for me a copy of the thesis.

metic period as their specialization – Moshe Beer, in Israel, and Jacob Neusner in the United States.

Beer published a series of articles between the years 1962 and 1967<sup>49</sup> and in 1970 a detailed monograph on the Exilarchate.<sup>50</sup> The Exilarchate plays a major role in Neusner's books and articles on the history of Babylonian Jewry in the Parthian and Sasanian era.<sup>51</sup> Both assume that the institution of the Exilarchate was commanding and powerful.<sup>52</sup> Neusner believes that the renewed rabbinic movement subordinated itself to the authority of the Exilarchate which, he assumes, was more ancient and established. Thus, in his view, the rise of the rabbis as a new movement in Babylonia took place under the watchful and suspicious eye of the Exilarch. For him the Exilarch acted as the 'employer' of the rabbis. He imagines that the Exilarchs sought to influence the newly established academies while the rabbis struggled to wrestle their independence from them. Neusner is not the first to describe the relationship between the rabbis and the Exilarchate as confrontational and competitive.

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<sup>49</sup> These articles included an initial general survey on the topic (BEER, "The Exilarchs in Talmudic Times"); A study of the names of the Exilarchs that appear in *IRSG* compared with the Talmudic material (idem, "Exilarchs of the Talmudic Epoch"); and two articles on historical episodes that relate to the subject (idem, "Geniva's Quarrel"; idem, "The Removal of Rabba bar Nahmani").

<sup>50</sup> *The Babylonian Exilarchate in the Arsacid and Sassanian Periods*, Tel-Aviv, 1969. Here he incorporated the results of some of his earlier studies and added new ones. In a second edition that appeared in 1976 he appended corrections, additions, and bibliographical notes. This comprehensive monograph claimed among other things, to describe the institution, "its origins; the sources of its authority; its nature and activities in practice; its contacts with Palestine; and the attitude of the rabbis towards it", and all this "in the days of the Mishna and the Talmud" – BEER, *The Babylonian Exilarchate*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Neusner's studies were collected and published anew in 1986 unchanged, but with the addition of a short introduction (NEUSNER, *Israel's Politics in Sasanian Iran*). They appeared originally as separate chapters devoted to diverse themes, for instance: 'Exilarchate and Rabbinat: Uneasy Alliance' (= *History*, III, 41–94); 'Exilarchate and Rabbinat: Loosening Ties' (= *History*, IV, 73–124). He also discusses the Exilarchate elsewhere but generally the later studies are based on his five volume history. Whilst his studies on Babylonian Jewry appeared before Beer's book, he was familiar with some of Beer's earlier studies and even relates to them – occasionally quite critically. See id. *History*, V, 48–52. In the second volume of this series he acknowledges receipt of corrections to the first volume from Beer. Likewise, Beer in his book had cited in the bibliography the first three volumes of Neusner's *History of the Jews of Babylonia*, but did not refer to them much in the body of his book. See, however, BEER, *The Babylonian Exilarchate*, 59, n. 8.

<sup>52</sup> Beer has a better command of the sources than Neusner. Neusner relies on uncritical editions of the sources, and upon the printed texts and translations of rabbinic sources. With Beer the collation of textual variants of the sources, including those from the medieval rabbinic commentators is in evidence but not systematic. Neusner appears to have neglected the textual witnesses of the rabbinic literature that he refers to. On his difficulties in coping with a text lacking a readily-accessible translation (*SOZ*) see below in appendix I. Cf. ROSENTHAL, "For the Talmudic Dictionary", 56–8.