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It was only just after the Iranians' first appearance on the stage of history that the Jews came to know them. The Achaemenid dynasty was distinctively "Persian" (or, "Persian and Median") for the Jews. The Macedonian invasion brought about an interruption to the course of things, but then a new Iranian dynasty arose, the Parthian Arsacids. Interesting that although- understandably- Alexander is remembered negatively by the Iranians¹, it is not so for the Jews (and Aleksander is one of the few non-Hebrew names to be accepted as a "Jewish" name).

From the Babylonian Talmud (henceforth BT), most of which dates to the Sasanian centuries, and which was finally redacted in the first decades of Muslim rule in formerly Sasanian Babylonia, we know that the Rabbis of the BT still recalled the Arsacid period as a golden era (BT, 'Avodah Zara 10b-11a):²

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1. Cf., e.g., W. Hanaway, "Alexander and the Question of Iranian Identity," *Iranica Varia: Papers in Honor of Professor Ehsan Yarshater* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1990), 93-103.

2. Geoffrey Herman, (*A Prince without a King*

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Ardaban [V, 216–224CE] attended to Rav [Abba Arikha, the founder of the Talmudic center at Sura in Babylonia ca. 220³] ... when Artaban died, Rav exclaimed: “The bond is snapped!”

אדר*בן שמשיה לרב ... כי שכיב אדר*בן אמר רב נתפרדה חבילה

Indeed, earlier on, the relationship between Rabbi (Judah the Prince, d. ca. 217 CE), the leader of the Palestinian Jewry in the Roman-occupied Palestina, and the last Arsacid king, triumphant over Caracalla’s armies at Nisibīn in 217, was such that it enabled Rabbi to play the role of a protector of Artaban V’s realm by means of magic:⁴

Artaban sent to our holy Rabbi a fine, priceless pearl. He said to him, “Send me something as good as this.” He sent him a single *mezuzah* [*amuletum*]. He [Ardaban] said to him [Rabbi], “I sent you something priceless and you sent me something worth one *follarion*.” He [Rabbi] sent to him, saying “Your possessions and my possessions together do not equal the value of this. Moreover, you sent me something that I must guard; but I sent you something that will watch over you when you sleep, as it is written ‘When you walk it will lead you, when you lie down it will watch over you’ [Proverbs 6:22].”

ארטבן שלח לרבינו הקדוש חד מרגלי טבא אטימיטון אמר ליה שלח לי מילה דטבה דכוותה שלח ליה חד מזוזה אמר ליה מה אנא שלחית לך מילה דלית לה טימי ואת שלחת לי מילה דטבא חד פולר אמר ליה חפציך וחפצי לא ישוו בה

dom. The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 28–29) speaks of rabbinic “nostalgia” for the Arsacid era.

3. His contemporary rival and colleague Shemuel of Neharde’a, however, promoted an accommodation with the new Sasanian regime and the Babylonian Talmud frequently mentions Shemuel’s close relations with “ŠBWR MLK’” (Šāhpūr I, 241–72 CE). Shemuel was the transmitter of much Iranian

material in the BT.

4. Interestingly, this tradition is only preserved in the Palestinian Talmud (henceforth, PT) and contains three Greek loanwords; see PT, Peah 1:1, 15d. The translation is adopted from *Midrash Rabbah*, ed. H. Freedman and M. Simon (London: Soncino Press, 1939). This passage should be taken into account while discussing Aramaic and other magic texts from Mesopotamia of Late Antiquity.

ולא עוד אלא דאת שלחת לי מילה דאנא מנטר לה ואנא שלחית לך מילה דאת דמך לך והיא מנטרה לך דכתיב בהתהלכך תנחה אותך.

Characteristically, these two texts fail to tell us exactly how and why Artaban V died, who he was, and why Rabbi's magic text failed to protect the former's realm. One may also observe that the Palestinian tradition in PT Pe'ah preserved the more original form of the king's name, while that of the BT, 'Avodah Zara, formulated by the end of the Sasanian rule in Babylonia, where Middle Iranian was still heard, spells the name of the last Arsacid king in a rather younger form, reflecting the shift *art>ard*.

Our knowledge of Jewish relations with the Parthian Arsacids, and their attitude toward them, is very limited for a number of reasons. There are, however, genuine early traditions in the later Jewish texts that enable scholars to discern that the Parthian warriors, and the Parthians, were renowned for their cavalry, were seen by Jews of Roman Palestine as apocalyptic redeemers of Israel who would bring about the Messianic era and the resurrection of the dead.⁵

Šir haŠširīm Rabbāh (Song of Songs Rabbah), is a *midrashic* composition, an anthology of exegesis on the biblical *Song of Songs* (*Šir haŠširīm*). It is thought that *Song of Songs Rabbah* (henceforth SSR) reached its final redaction in Byzantine Palestine in the middle of the sixth century.⁶ The sources used in SSR are mostly from the Palestinian Talmud and no borrowing from the Babylonian Talmud has been detected so far. Obviously, the traditions quoted in SSR from the Palestinian Talmud can be of very different dates. In the exegesis in SSR on the Cant. 8:9–10, we

5. Cf. James Darmesteter, "Les Parthes à Jérusalem," *Journal Asiatique* 9, ser. 4, 1894, 43–54, 53.

6. In the long and famous Messianic passage in BT, Sanhedrin, it is stated, i.a.: (Sanh 97b): שלח ליה רב חנן בר תחליפא לרב יוסף מצאתי אדם אחד ובידו מגילה אחת כתובה אשורית ולשון קדש

אמרתי לו זו מניין לך אמר לי לחיילות של רומי נשכרתי ובין גינזי רומי מצאתיה וכתוב בה לאחר ד' אלפים ומאתים ותשעים ואחד שנה לבריאתו של עולם העולם יתום מהן מלחמות תנינים מהן מלחמות גוג ומגוג ושאר ימות המשיח ואין הקב"ה מחדש את עולמו אלא לאחר שבעת אלפים שנה.
"R. Ḥanan bar Taḥlīpha informed R. Yoseph:

can trace, I believe, an old tradition linking Messianic aspirations with Parthian conquest.⁷ Midrashic literature is a genre with its own style and rules, but it is not my intention here to probe beyond points of immediate interest to this paper: traditions concerning the Parthians.

The Biblical Hebrew text of *Song of Songs* 8:9–10 reads:

אם חומה היא נבנה עליה טירת כסף ואם דלת היא נצור עליה לוח ארז אני חומה ושדי
כמגדלות אז הייתי בעיניו כמוצאת שלום

“If she be a wall, we will build upon her a palace of silver: and if she be a door, we will enclose her with boards of Cedar. I am a wall, and my breasts like towers: then was I in his eyes as one that found favour.”

Here follows the abbreviated English translation of SSR ad loci:

If she be a wall, we will build upon her . . . and if she be a door . . . we will enclose her with boards of cedar. . . I am a wall . . . and my breasts are like the towers thereof . . . then was I in His eyes as one that found peace. Why so? Because all the other nations taunted Israel saying to them: “If that is so, why did God expel

‘I met a man with a scroll written in Assyrian script, but in the Holy Language (Hebrew). I asked him, “where did you get this?” He answered me: “I was hired to serve in the Roman/Persian armies and found it (among other things) in the Roman/Persian archives; it is written within that after 4,291 years after the Creation of the world, the world will be orphaned/ended. Some of these (years) will be wars of the (sea) monsters [תַּיִנְיָמ], others, wars of Gog and Magog, and the rest—the days of the Messiah. And God will not recreate His world until after 7,000 years (from the First Creation?)”. The sea monsters [תַּיִנְיָמ] here are both a reference to the Iranian-tainted Jewish apocalypics and the plain Aži-Dahāka; cf. Reuven Kiperwasser and Dan Shapira, “Irano-Talmudica II: Leviathan, Behemoth and the ‘Domestication’ of Iranian Mythological

Creatures in Eschatological Narratives of the Babylonian Talmud,” in *Shoshanat Yaakov: Ancient Jewish and Iranian Studies in Honor of Yaakov Elman*, ed. Steven Fine and Shai Secunda (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 203–35. The date 4,291 (or, 4,231, as a variant) places us in the mid-sixth century. The printed text has RWMY, Rome; PRS was the reading suggested in Urbach 1967; cf. Otakar Klíma, “Mazdak und die Juden,” *Archiv Orientalní* 24 (1956), 420–31, 428–9. As the dating of SSR, compare note 21 below.

7. The translation adopted below is by *The Midrash Rabbah—Complete English Translation, Midrash Rabbah IX Esther Song of Songs*, ed. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Simon Maurice, vols. 1–10 (London, 1939 [published by The Soncino Press, London, 1983]), 313–17.

you from His land, and why did He lay waste His sanctuary?” Israel thereupon answered: “We are like a king’s daughter who went to celebrate the first festival after her marriage [רגל / RGL] in her father’s house; in the end she will certainly return to her own house in peace.” . . . The Rabbis applied the verses to the exiles who returned from Babylon. “We have a little sister”—these are the returning exiles. “Little” because their numbers were small. “And she has no breasts”—this refers to the five things in which the second Temple fell short of the first, namely, the fire from heaven, the oil of anointment, the ark, the holy spirit, and the Urim and Thummim. . . . “What shall we do for our sister”—what shall we do on the day when Cyrus decrees ‘Whosoever has crossed the *Euphrates* may remain, whosoever has not crossed may no longer cross over?’” “If she be a wall”—*had the Israelites gone up from Babylon like a wall*, the Temple would not subsequently have been destroyed a second time⁸. . . . And if she be a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar: just as even after a drawing has been erased its traces are discernable, so although the Temple had been destroyed, *Israel did not cease from their pilgrimages three times a year*. “I am a wall”: . . . R. Joḥanan said: It is written, *But the Lord shall give you there a trembling heart* [Deut. 17:65]:⁹ when they went back to the Land from exile, the trembling remained and went with them. R. Samuel, however, said: There [in Babylon] there was trembling, but when they went back they were healed.¹⁰ . . . When R. Joḥanan saw them [the Babylonian Jews; DS], he used to rebuke them. He said: If the prophet could rebuke them, as it says *my God will cast them away, because they did not hearken unto Him* (Hos. 9:17),

8. Here follows a series of negative references to Babylonian Jews who did not return “like a wall” to the Land of Israel. Some of these and similar traditions have been studied by my

friend and colleague Dr. Reuven Kiperwasser (forthcoming).

9. ונתן ה' לך שם לב רגז

10. כיון שעלו רוגזו ניתן ועלה עמהם רבי שמואל אמר

can I not rebuke them? R. Abba b. Kahana said: If you see seats filled with *Babylonians in the Land of Israel, expect the coming of the Messiah. Why so; because it says, "He has spread forth a net for my feet"* [Lam. 1:13].¹¹ R. Simeon b. Yoḥai taught: *If you see a Persian horse tethered to a grave in the land of Israel, look out for the coming of the Messiah.*¹² Why so? Because it says, "And this shall be peace: when the Assyrian shall come into our land, and when he shall tread in our palaces, then shall we raise against him seven shepherds" [Micah 5:4].

Now, the main themes of this passage, which I have slightly abbreviated, are the pilgrimage to Jerusalem (*RGL / régel / רגל*), the Jewish triannual *hajj*,¹³ and regret that the Jews of Persian Babylonia did not return from the Exile *en masse*—"like a wall." There follow a series of slurs on Babylonian Jewry's failure to return "like a wall." We see, too, an interesting reference to the Iranian concept of "wrath," *xēšm*¹⁴ (translated as *rógez < rōgēz*), seen, apparently, as a kind of a demon, whom the returnees had left behind in Babylonia/**Dil-ē Irānšahr*, thereby becoming healed from it in the Land of Israel.

Then, R. Abba b. Kahana, or according to another tradition,¹⁵ R. Simeon b. Yoḥai, an important second-century sage, adduces a scriptural verse from

שמה לב רגו כיון שעלו נתרפאו. Here, the Biblical verbal form *rōgēz* was reinterpreted as a substantive *rógez*, which is a translation of Iranian *xēšm*, "wrath."
11. פרש רשת לרגלי.

12. This tradition seems to be quite old, for these two opinions are quoted, in a slightly different wording, in a midrash on Lamentations 1:13, Lamentations Rabbah (Eichah Rabbah, ed. S. Buber, Wilna 1899, 77):

פרש רשת לרגלי א"ר אבא בר כהנא אם ראית ספסלים מלאים [בבליים] בארץ ישראל צפה לרגליו של מלך המשיח א"ר שמעון בן יוחאי אם ראית סוס פרסי קשור בקברי ארץ ישראל צפה לרגליו של מלך המשיח.
"He has spread a net for my feet [Lam. 1:13]; R. Abba b. Kahana said: If you see seats filled with

Babylonians in the Land of Israel, look out for the feet/festivals of the King Messiah. R. Simeon b. Yoḥai taught: If you see a Persian horse tethered to a grave in the land of Israel, look out for the feet/festivals of the King Messiah".

13. Arabic *hajj* comes from Hebrew *hag*, "festival," unattested in Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Dictionary of the Qur'an* (Baroda 1932).

14. Cf. Shlomo Pines, "Wrath and Creatures of Wrath in Pahlavi, Jewish and New Testament Sources," *Irano-Judaica*, ed. Shaul Shaked (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1982), 76–82.

15. Cf. Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah*, 317n2.

Lamentations 1:13, where the original text reads פֶּרֶשׁ רִשְׁתָּ לְרַגְלֵי, PRŠ/Š RŠT LRGLY, literally, “He has spread forth a net for my feet.” Now, we cannot know for certain how Hebrew was pronounced in the first Christian centuries; the much later Massoretic pronunciation is *pāras réšet laraglay*. The second-century sage, however clearly used this verse reading **Pāras*, Hebrew for Persia, Pārs/Fārs.¹⁶ The meaning of the Hebrew word LRGLY in *this reading* and in the context that speaks of pilgrimage, is clearly not “for my feet,” but rather the homonymous “for my pilgrimages.” We have, then, “Persia is RŠT for my pilgrimages.” It is very tempting to read here RŠT (Massoretic *réšet*) as Middle Persian *nāst* or Parthian *nāšt*, “right, true, straight, direct,” with the *PRS RŠT LRGLY being thus a pun, “Persia/Parthia is right for my pilgrimages.”¹⁷

Furthermore, the pseudo-quotation from an imagined Aramaic imperial decree by Cyrus, “Whosoever has crossed the Euphrates may remain, whosoever has not crossed may no longer cross over,” implies that the Euphrates was seen by the discussant Palestinian Rabbis as the border between the Iranian realm and the territory where they, the Rabbis, lived. At different periods, the Euphrates indeed marked the border between Romans/Byzantines and Parthian/Sasanians. The Hebrew for “Euphrates” is PRT, Massoretic Hebrew Pərāt, which recalls “Parthia.” Obviously, the name of the river¹⁸ has no connection to the name of the Parthians, but this could be a conscious—or an unconscious—pun.

In this case, too, we cannot be sure how the consonants PRT were pronounced by the Rabbis of SSR. We do not know for certain how and whether their

16. *Idem*, 317n1: “The word פֶּרֶשׁ (*be bath spread*) is taken as equivalent to פֶּרֶס (Persians), as if to say: The present of Babylonians (Persians) is a net to draw the Messiah.” I disagree with the second part of this statement.

17. This pun might even be two-layered; cf. Šamuel II 8:4, אֵלֶיךָ וְשִׁבְעַת מֵאוֹת פְּרָשִׁים וְעֶשְׂרִים אֲלֵךְ,

רגְלֵי, “a thousand and seven hundred horsemen, and twenty thousand footmen”; in this verse we have the plural form of PRŠ, “a rider, a horseman, a mounted warrior,” and RGLY.

18. Akkadian for the name of the river was Purattu, Old Persian *Ufrātu*.

dialect included the phenomenon of “*begadkefat* spirantization” (in the case of PRT, the shift of the final T to $\underline{T} = \text{Ṣ}$); Samaritan Hebrew, one might note, has no *begadkefat* spirantization. The forms PRSY and PRTY are similar in orthography and were probably also similar in pronunciation. The long oral transmission of the midrashic and talmudic texts and the later manuscript tradition could have changed the long-forgotten “Parthians” into more familiar “Persians.” In any case, Jastrow correctly added the gloss “Parthian cavalry” in reference to our passage in SSR 8:9 and to the parallel version in the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a.¹⁹ The parallel version of BT Sanhedrin 98ab was recently studied by Geoffrey Herman:²⁰

When he (R. Jose b. Qisma) lay dying he said to them, “place my coffin deep [in the earth], for there is not one palm tree in Babylonia to which a horse of the Persians will not be tethered, nor one coffin in Palestine out of which a Median horse will not eat straw.”

בשעת פטירתו אמר להן העמיקו לי ארוני שאין כל דקל ודקל שבבבל שאין סוס
של פרסיים נקשר בו ואין לך כל ארון וארון שבארץ ישראל שאין סוס מדי אוכל
בו תבן

The context here and the sage to whom the quotation is attributed are entirely different from those in SSR, as Geoffrey Herman noted. In the original Palestinian version, the Persian/Parthian horse, suggests a horseman grazing near the tombs of the Land of Israel—perhaps near the rather large structures such as tombs of Jewish saints, kings, and the prominent righteous people. This source implies a Persian/Parthian apocalyptic victory over Rome, associated with Jewish political liberation, the coming of the Messianic Age and the resurrection of the dead.²¹ Not

19. Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (London and New York: 1903), 967a.

20. Geoffrey Herman, “Bury My Coffin Deep! Zoroastrian Exhumation in Jewish and Christian

Sources,” in *Tiferet Leyisrael, Jubilee Volume in Honor of Israel Francus*, ed. Joel Roth, Menahem Schmelzer, and Yaacov Francus (The Jewish Theological Seminary, 2010), 31–59, 51–52.

21. As Prof. Adam Silverstein noted, commenting on my paper, perhaps there is a reflex of this in

so in the Babylonian version, where the “Persian-Median”²² occupation of the Land of Israel is disconnected from any apocalyptic or Messianic expectations. Here it merely alludes to weariness from the throngs of war and fear of the desecration of the Jewish tombs by the magi. As Geoffrey Herman put it,

“As part of a series of apocalyptic statements that envision the extension of the Persian Empire to encompass Palestine, he [the sage quoted; DS] conveys his anxiety that the Persians will exhume his tomb if he is not buried deep enough. In the process of reformulating this Palestinian tradition and giving it a more oracular and poetic style, the Babylonian Talmud has slipped in an explicit reference to Babylonia and has also adapted it in accordance with its own perspective. The Persian conquest, itself, then is not depicted in this Babylonian version, as the harbinger of salvation to the Jews, as has been assumed by some scholars, but as the extension of the Persian “persecution” to Palestine.”

The very last part of Herman’s explanation, namely, that the Persian conquest was seen in this version as the “extension of Persian persecution to Palestine” needs, perhaps, to be slightly nuanced. The statement which quotes the older Palestinian tradition, in a reformulated fashion, appears in the BT within the context of a broader discussion in Sanhedrin 98ab, which is apocalyptic-messianic in nature and full of references to Iran. In the Babylonian Talmud here, however, composed under Iranian political and cultural dominance, Iranians are not viewed as sympathetically as in Byzantine Palestine:

Sūrat al-Rūm (which starts: “*ghulibat al-rūm*”), albeit with the Romans defeating the Persians as a sign of the Redemption. In such a case, this could be another argument for a later date of the editing of SSR, cf. note 6 above.

22. As already mentioned, “Persia and Media” is a stock phrase taken from the Bible, where it refers to the First Iranian Empire; the use of this expression here demonstrates that the historical Parthians have been long forgotten.

Sanhedrin 98a:²³

R. Papa said: When the haughty cease to exist [in Israel] **the magi** [’MGWŠY] **shall cease** [among the Persians]; when the judges cease to exist [in Israel], **the chiliarchi** [GZYRPTY] **shall cease likewise**. Now, “**when the haughty cease to exist, the magi shall also cease**”—as it is written, *And I will purely purge away your haughty ones and take away all your tin* [Isaiah 1:25]. “**When the judges cease to exist, the chiliarchi shall cease likewise**—as it is written, *The Lord has taken away your judgments, He has cast out your enemy*” [Zephaniah 3:15].

אמר רב פפא אי בטלי יהירי בטלי אמגושי אי בטלי דייני בטלי גזירפטי אי בטלי
יהירי בטלי אמגושי דכתיב ואצרוף כבור סיגיד ואסירה כל בדליך ואי בטלי
דייני בטלי גזירפטי דכתיב הסיר ה, משפטך פנה אויבך

We must explore the broader context in which this saying appears:

Sanhedrin 98a: “Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship?” [Isaiah 49:7]. R. Eliezer countered, but is it not written, “if you wilt return, O Israel, says the Lord, return unto me?” [Jeremiah 4:1].

מלכים יראו וקמו שרים וישתחוו אמר לו רבי אליעזר והלא כבר נאמר אם תשוב
ישראל נאום ה' אלי תשוב

Here in this Babylonian tradition, the return to the Land of Israel—and we remember that the Babylonian Jews were castigated in the above-quoted Palestinian traditions precisely for their failure to accomplish this physical return—is substituted by “the return to God” (TŠWBH/TWBH) and depoliticized.

Sanhedrin 98a: R. Hanina said: The Son of David will not come until a fish is sought for an invalid and cannot be procured,²⁴ as it is written,

23. Quoted from *English Translation of the Babylonian Talmud, with Notes, Glossary and Indices*, 36 vols. ed. Isidore Epstein (London,

Soncino Press: 1935–52), with slight changes.

24. This an echo of the Gilgamesh story, which recurs in the Qur’an 18:60ff, as Prof. Silverstein noted to me.

Then will I make their waters deep, and cause their rivers to run like oil [Ezekiel 32:14], whilst it is written, *in that day will I cause the horn of the house of Israel to bud forth* [Ezekiel 29:21].

R. Hama b. Hanina said: **The son of David will not come until even the pettiest kingdom ceases [to have power] over Israel**, as it is written, *He shall both cut off the sprigs with pruning hooks, and take away and cut down the branches* [Isaiah 18:5], and this is followed by *in that time shall the present be brought unto the Lord of hosts of a people that is scattered and peeled* [Isaiah 18:7].

אמר רבי חנינא אין בן דוד בא עד שיתבקש דג לחולה ולא ימצא שנאמר אז אשקיע מימיהם ונהרותם כשמן אוליך וכתב (בתריה) ביום ההוא אצמיח קרן לבית ישראל
אמר רבי חמא בר חנינא אין בן דוד בא עד שתכלה מלכות הזלה מישראל שנאמר (ישעיהו יח, ה) וכרת הזלזלים במזמרות] וכתב בתריה בעת ההיא יובל שי לה' צבאות עם ממשך ומורט

R. Hama b. Hanina, who was a third-century Palestinian sage (*amora*), still maintained the older Palestinian view of liberation as a political event. Hence, it is the people of Israel, and not the Land of Israel, that is the object of foreign domination. As a result, not only the Romans and Sasanians, but all the small potentates (and one thinks of Palmyra of Odaenathus and Zenobia, Osroene of Abgar the Great and Amru, or Hatra of Sanatruq II) should cease to exercise dominion over the people of Israel or even cease to exist at all.

Sanhedrin 98a: R. Simlai said in the name of R. Eleazar, son of R. Simeon: The son of David will not come until all judges and officers are gone from Israel, as it is written, *And I will turn my hand upon you, and purely purge away your dross and take away all your tin: And I will restore your judges as at first* [Isaiah 1:25].

‘Ulla said: **Jerusalem shall be redeemed only by righteousness**, as it is written, *Zion shall be redeemed with judgment, and her converts with righteousness* [Isaiah 1:27].

R. Papa said: When the haughty cease to exist [in Israel] **the magi shall cease [among the Persians]; when the judges cease to exist [in Israel], the chiliarchi shall cease likewise**. Now, “**when the haughty cease to exist, the magi shall also cease,**” as it is written, *And I will purely purge away your haughty ones and take away all your tin*. “**When the judges cease to exist, the chiliarchi shall cease likewise,**” as it is written, *The Lord has taken away your judgments, he has cast out your enemy* [Zephaniah 3:15].

אמר רבי שמלאי משום רבי אלעזר בר"ש אין בן דוד בא עד שיכלו כל שופטים
ושוטרים מישראל שנאמר ואשיבה ידי עליך ואצרוף כבור סיגיד וגו' ואשיבה
שופטיך

אמר עולא אין ירושלים נפדית אלא בצדקה שנאמר ציון במשפט תפדה ושביה
בצדקה

אמר רב פפא אי בטלי יהירי בטלי אמגושי אי בטלי דיני בטלי גזירפטי אי בטלי
יהירי בטלי אמגושי דכתיב ואצרוף כבור סיגיד ואסירה כל בדליך ואי בטלי
דיני בטלי גזירפטי דכתיב הסיר ה' משפטך פנה אויבך

This, then, is the broader context of R. Papa’s statement. R. Simlai, who was a third-century Palestinian *‘amora*, is still concerned with politics, this time inner-Jewish politics. Ulla, who was a late third/early fourth-century Palestinian *‘amora* with special connections to Babylonia, where he travelled frequently, stresses what is now called “Jewish values” (which are no less Zoroastrian values, too), do-good. R. Papa, who was a fourth century Babylonian *‘amora* and a contemporary of Šāhpūr II (309–79 CE), stresses that Jewish self-improvement and the removal of the haughty from among the Jews are a prerequisite for the end of the oppressive rule of the Sasanian magi and *chilliarchi* over the Jews of Babylonia. He was concerned with strategies of Jewish survival, not apocalypics.

Sanhedrin 98a: R. Alexandri said: R. Joshua b. Levi pointed out a contradiction. It is written, *in its time* [will the Messiah come], whilst it is also written, I [the Lord] will hasten it! [Isaiah 60:22]—if they are worthy, *I will hasten it*: if not, [he will come] at the due time. R. Alexandri said: R. Joshua opposed two verses: it is written, *And behold, one like the son of man came with the clouds of heaven* [Daniel 7:13] whilst [elsewhere] it is written, [*behold, thy king cometh unto thee ...*] *lowly, and riding upon an ass!* [Zechariah 9:7]—if they are meritorious, [he will come] with the clouds of heaven; if not, lowly and riding upon an ass. King Shapur [I] said to Samuel, “You maintain that the Messiah will come upon an ass: I will rather send him SWSY’ BHRG/BRQ²⁵ of mine.” He replied, “Have you a thousand-hued donkey?’ [read: X’R HZR GWWNY, *xarr[-ē] hazār gawne*].²⁶

אמר רבי אלכסנדרי רבי יהושע בן לוי רמי כתיב (ישעיהו ט, כב) בעתה וכתוב אחישנה זכו אחישנה לא זכו בעתה אמר רבי אלכסנדרי רבי יהושע בן לוי רמי כתיב (דניאל ז, יג) וארו עם ענני שמיא כבר אינש אתה וכתוב (זכריה ט, ט) עני ורוכב על חמור זכו עם ענני שמיא לא זכו עני רוכב על חמור אמר ליה שבור מלכא לשמואל אמריתו משיח על חמרא אתי נשדר ליה סוסיא בהרג ידי אמר ליה מי אית לך כאר חזר גווני

Here the arrival of the Messiah is transformed into a distant and miraculous event. When Mani’s protector, Šāhpūr I (240–70 CE), whom

25. The printed text has here SWSY’ BRQ, with the standard English translation having here “a white horse.” The first word is clearly Aramaic for “horse”; the second looks like Hebrew/Aramaic for “lightning,” but clearly the Pahlavi *bārag*, “mount, horse” is involved. Indeed, Sokoloff’s Dictionary, compiled on the basis of the best manuscripts, has the reading SWSY’ BHRG, making it clear that the Sasanian king quoted in the Talmud used a Middle Iranian word for “mount, horse.” See Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat-Gan:

Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 183a. The same Middle Iranian word may have contributed to the creation of the Qur’anic *burāq*.

26. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary*, 374b. The three-legged ass of the Iranian tradition was said to have a bluish-greenish (*xašēn*) head and a shining-white (*spēd*) body; cf. Reuven Kiperwasser and Dan Shapira, “Irano-Talmudica I: The Three-Legged Ass and Ridya in BT Ta’anith: Some Observations about Mythic Hydrology in the Babylonian Talmud and in Ancient Iran,” *AJS Review* 32 (2008), 101–16.

the aforementioned Samuel was courting, suggested, quite benevolently, to usher in the Coming of the Messiah by providing him with a *bārag*-horse of his, instead of the more text-based donkey, Samuel rejected the chivalric gesture of the Sasanian King of Kings in jocular fashion—and in Persian.

Sanhedrin 98b: Rab said: The son of David will not come until the power enfolds Israel for nine months, as it is written, Therefore will he give them up, *until the time that she which travails has brought forth: then the remnant of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel* [Micah 5:2].

אמר רב אין בן דוד בא עד שתתפשט המלכות על ישראל תשעה חדשים שנאמר
לכן יתנם עד עת יולדה ילדה ויתר אחיו ישובון על בני ישראל

This opinion is somehow opaque, and, indeed, the imaginary of the Gathering of the Exiled as linked together with the childbirth labours—like spasmodic beginnings of the Messianic era is rather common. The word “Roman” was added to “power” (actually, HMLKWT, “the Empire”) by the English translator, following the traditional understanding of the commentators. However, by the time of Rav, the Land of Israel had been in Roman hands for two centuries; they had already squashed two major Jewish revolts and destroyed the Second Temple. Thus, some other identification of this “Empire” should be sought. For want of a better one, I would suggest that the intention here might be to a “Parthian/Persian” kingdom rather than a “Roman” one, especially in light of Rav’s special relationship with Artaban V and Rabbi’s writing a Hebrew amulet for him. This might be an echo of the wars between the times of Ardašīr I and Šāhpūr II.

What we find in the passages under consideration here is rather a circuit from expectations for the Parthian cavalry as harbingers of Jewish eschatological salvation in Palestine to a playful refusal, in the name of the

Messiah, to receive a cross-breed between Raxš and Burāq; a much lower level of apocalyptic/eschatological enthusiasm in Sasanian Babylonia than in the Roman/Byzantine Land of Israel; a more sober image of Iranians in Sasanian Babylonia than in Palestine; and on the whole, less stress on politics in Babylonia and when this is brought up, the focus is about inner-Jewish politics. This Jewish-Babylonian tendency to distance itself somewhat from apocalyptic expectation might possibly open a window into the “Sasanian mind” in general.