

“A Great Man Is Coming from the West”: Aspirations of Power by the Rivers of Babylon¹

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Abstract

The Talmudic account of the arrival and reception of Rav in Babylonia is considered alongside a contemporary Manichaean account of Mani's visit to the royal Sasanian palace, found in the Kephalaia. In both, it is proposed, the new leader is portrayed as posing a threat to the existing power establishment. In both accounts, furthermore, the elevation of the river, and cosmological notions which, it is suggested, are indigenous to Babylonia, play a key role. Indeed, it is through the shared experience and symbolism of the rivers of Babylonia and their interpretation that the inhabitants of the region, both Jewish and Manichaean, convey their fears and hopes, their new tidings and their aspirations.

It is often the case that major historical change, which is invariably the result of a multiplicity of factors stretching over a period of time² and affected by many agents, is perceived, typically from a distance, as having been brought about by a single individual or as being linked

¹ I would like to express my appreciation to Dr. Neri Y. Ariel for reading this paper and offering helpful comments and suggestions.

² See, for instance, on the issues surrounding this early period in history and in modern scholarship, Moshe David Herr, “A Zoroastrian-Sasanian and a Babylonian Talmudic ‘Renaissance’ at the Beginning of the Third Century: Could This Be a Mere Coincidence?” [Hebrew], in *Between Babylonia and the Land of Israel: Studies in Honor of Isaiah M. Gafni*, ed. Geoffrey Herman, Meir Ben Shazar, and Aharon Oppenheimer (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2016), 51–78; broadly on the history and historiography in the formative years of the rabbis in Babylonia, see Isaiah Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia in the Talmudic Era: A Social and Cultural History* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1990), 68–91. See also Moshe Beer, “The Political Background of Rav’s Activities in Babylonia” [Hebrew], *Zion* 50 (1985): 155–72 (repr. in Beer, *The Sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud: Teachings, Activities and Leadership*, ed. Emmanuel Friedheim, Daniel Sperber, and Refael Yankelevitch [Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2011], 10–26).

to a single event. The emergence of Babylonia as a major rabbinic center is traditionally dated to one sage, Rav, arriving there in the early third century CE.³ Later sources would mark this as a pivotal moment when Babylonia achieved its independence from Palestinian hegemony in certain matters of rabbinic law.⁴ While the arrival of an important sage, bearing in his person the authority and teaching of Palestine and its Patriarch,⁵ was perceived as a moment of enormous promise for Babylonia, Rav was not a pioneer charting unknown territory. Indeed, there were already senior scholars there to receive him. A story appearing in *BT Shabbat* 108a, which is full of symbolism, portrays his arrival as challenging the existing rabbinic leadership and highlights determined local resistance to the new sage. The aim of this intervention is to show that behind this description, there are striking allusions to contemporary Babylonian cosmology, which can be better appreciated through a comparison with an evocative contemporary Manichean parallel.⁶

Rav Comes to Babylonia

The talmudic source, cited in *BT Shabbat* 108a, is as follows.⁷

א. שמואל וקרנא הוו יתבי אגודא דנהר מלכא.
חזוניהו למיא דקא דאלו ועכירי.

³ The traditional date of Rav's arrival in Babylonia is the year 530 of the Seleucid era, as given in the Epistle of Rav Sherira Gaon. For discussion and references, see Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia, Volume 2: The Early Sasanian Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 126–28; Isaiah Gafni, “On the Talmudic Chronology in *Iggeret Rav Sherira Gaon*,” in Gafni, *Jews and Judaism in the Rabbinic Era: Image and Reality – History and Historiography* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 123–24.

⁴ *BT 'Eruvin* 28a; *BT Bava Qamma* 80a; *BT Gittin*. 6a. See H. Norman Strickman, “A Note on the Text of Babylonian Talmud *Giṭ. 6a*,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s., 66 (1976): 173–75, who demonstrates how a less assertive tradition is later developed to establish Rav's arrival in Babylonia as a determining factor for a legal ruling.

⁵ *BT Berakhot* 43a; *BT Bezaḥ* 22b; *BT Sanhedrin* 5a; *BT Hullin* 54a; 137b.

⁶ The halakhic questions that feature in this narrative, notwithstanding their interest, are not critical for *this* study, and so will not be closely examined. For an in-depth discussion on this topic, see Yuval Fraenkel, “Sniffing the Jar: Metaphor and Body in the Story of the Encounter between Shmuel and Rav,” *Prooftexts* 40 (2023): 1–37. I am very thankful to him for providing me with his study ahead of publication and for discussing this narrative with me.

⁷ According to MS Oxford 366, which is the manuscript chosen by Ma'agarim: The Historical Dictionary of the Academy of the Hebrew Language. Punctuation has been added.

אמר ליה שמואל לקרנא : גברא רבה קא אתי⁸ וחייש במיעיה, וקא דאלו מיא לאקבולי אפיה. זיל תהא ליה בקנקניה. אזל ונפק לאפיה ואשכחיה לרב.

ב. אמ' ליה מנין שאין כותבין תפלין אלא על גבי עור בהמה טהורה בלבד. אמ' ליה דכתי' למען תהיה תורת יי' בפין מן המותר בפין מנין לדם שהוא אדום שנא' ויראו מואב מנגד את המים אדומים כדם ומנין למילה שהיא באותו מקום נאמ' כאן ערלתו ונאמ' להלן ע(ר)לתו מה להלן דבר שעושה פרי אף כאן דבר שעושה פרי ואימ' לבו דהא כתי' ונמלתם את ערל' לבבכם ואימ' אזנו כדכתי' ערלה אזנם דנין ערלתו תמה מערלתו תמה ואין [דנין] מערלתו שאינה תמה ערלתו תמה

ג. אמר ליה : מה שמך ? קרנא. אמר : יהא רעוא דתיפוק קרנא בעינך. נפק ליה קרנא בעיניה.⁹ לסוף עייליה שמואל לבנייתה¹⁰ ואוכליה נהמה דשערי [בהרסנא] ואשקיה שיכרא ולא אחוי ליה בית הכסא. סבר כי היכי דלישתלשל. לייט רב על דצערן : לא ליקיימו ליה בני, וכן הות.

1. Samuel and Qarna were sitting on the bank of the Royal Canal. They observed that the water was rising and was turbid. Samuel said to Qarna: A great man is coming [from the West¹¹] and he has stomach trouble, and the water is rising to receive him. Go, sniff his jar! He went out to him and encountered Rav.

2. He asked him: Whence is it derived that one may write phylacteries only on the hide of a clean animal?

He answered: As it is written, "So that God's Torah will be in your mouth" (Exod 13:9) – from what is permitted in your mouth.

Whence do we learn that blood is red?

As it is said: "And the Moabites saw the water from afar, red like blood" (2 Kings 3:22).

Whence is it derived that circumcision is in that [particular] place?

It is said here "[and the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of] his foreskin [is not circumcised]" (Gen 17:14), and it is stated elsewhere, "[you shall count the fruit thereof as] uncircumcised" (Lev 19:23). Just as there, [it refers to] something that bears fruit, here, too, [the reference is to] something that bears fruit.

⁸ Here, the Vilna edition, the manuscript testimony from JTS Rab. 501/1-6, Wien N: Heb 184, and Oxford Heb. C. 27/10-15 (gloss), and the geonic responsum of Rav Hayy Gaon add the word ממערבא. MS St. Peterburg, Yevr III B 942 adds מנהרדעא.

⁹ Besides this manuscript, this phrase is also attested in Oxford Heb. C. 27/10-15 (as a gloss) and in MS Vatican 108, but it is absent from the other main textual witnesses.

¹⁰ All other textual witnesses have לבייחיה here.

¹¹ See above, n. 8.

[He rebutted:] Say [that circumcision were performed on] the heart, as it is written: “And you shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart” (Deut 10:16)? Or, perhaps, the ear, as it is written: “their ears are uncircumcised” (Jer 6:10)?

[Rav responded:] One draws a comparison between the unmodified word “foreskin” from [another case of] the unmodified use of “foreskin”; but one does not draw a comparison between the modified use of the word “foreskin” and the unmodified term “foreskin.”

3. He asked him: What is your name? [He answered:] Qarna.

He said: May it be that a horn emerges in your eye. [And] a horn emerged in his eye.

Eventually, Samuel brought Rav into his home and fed him with barley bread [in (a cup¹² of) small fish] and gave him beer to drink, but did not show him the lavatory, intending for him to have a loose bowel. Rav cursed whoever made him suffer that he should have no sons. And so it was.

Samuel and his subordinate, Qarna,¹³ sit on the bank of the Royal Canal, the major artery that carries water, and indeed traffic, from the Euphrates across Mesopotamia to the metropolis of Ctesiphon, where it meets the Tigris.¹⁴ Two exceptional signs are manifest to the sages: the rising water and the fact that it is turbid or murky. Samuel interprets these signs as the river honoring a great man suffering

¹² The textual witnesses vary in their description of the cup of small fish. At any rate, two of the three elements here, the fish and the beer, are described in *BT Bava Batra* 91b as food products that decline in quality with age.

¹³ Qarna features only a few times in the two Talmuds and the way he is portrayed in both, but particularly in the Bavli, is atypical for *amoraim*. In *JT Bava Batra* 5:5 (15a–b), he appears as a subordinate to Rav in an unclear source where (there with the title “Rav,” and in MS Escorial as קרני) he seems not to follow Rav’s instructions. In the parallel to this same source in *BT Bava Batra* 89a, Qarna is subordinate to Samuel rather than Rav. On these two sources, see Geoffrey Herman, *A Prince without a Kingdom: The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 162–66. He appears elsewhere in the Yerushalmi as a transmitter of *baraitot*, and in *BT Sanhedrin*, 30b there is a vague reference to נויקין דבי קרנא. In a halakhic disputation in *BT Qiddushin* 44b, he appears as an equal alongside other first-generation sages, Samuel, Rav, and Mar ‘Uqba, but his opinion is forcefully rejected by his peers Samuel and Rav. He is described as a judge in *BT Ketubbot* 105a, and in *BT Sanhedrin* 17b he is declared to be the subject of the statement “the judges of the Exile” (רייני גולה קרנא).

¹⁴ Jacob Obermeyer, *Die Landschaft Babylonien im Zeitalter des Talmuds und des Gaonats* (Frankfurt: Kauffmann, 1929), 246.

from stomach trouble and sends Qarna to “sniff his jar”¹⁵ in order to clarify the identity and worthiness of this exceptional traveler. The newcomer happens to be Rav. Rav is now asked three halakhic questions, to which he responds well. His response to the third question is further challenged, but he also provides an answer to this challenge. The latter, upon grasping that he has unwittingly been tested, presumably feels insulted or frustrated, and, at any rate, curses Qarna. Samuel now steps in and hosts Rav in his home, but feeds him food that gives him loose stools while denying him access to the privy. He, too, receives a curse. Thus, both Samuel and Qarna intend to harm Rav, and both ultimately emerge injured themselves.¹⁶

This narrative, in the course of its three sections, can be understood as seeking to establish the superiority of Rav over Samuel in Babylonia, and indeed as relating the unique miraculous circumstances of his arrival, when nature participated in his reception.¹⁷ It also provides an etiological explanation for Samuel’s lack of sons, a fact that features elsewhere in the two Talmuds.¹⁸ It is, however, striking for its grotesque and coarse style, its choice of sanguinary and somewhat distasteful halakhic topics, and its scatological references, as well as its discomfiting interaction between the rabbis.¹⁹

The early Talmud commentators were indeed quite perplexed by this account and embarrassed by Samuel’s conduct towards Rav, and they attempted to spare the dignity of these two pillars of Babylonian

¹⁵ On this phrase, see Moshe Beer, *The Babylonian Amoraim: Aspects of Economic Life* [Hebrew], 2nd ed. (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1982), 165 n. 26; and now Fraenkel, “Sniffing the Jar”, 8–9, 12–15.

¹⁶ On this interaction, see Richard Kalmin, “Saints or Sinners, Scholars or Ignoramuses? Stories about the Rabbis as Evidence for the Composite Nature of the Babylonian Talmud,” *AJS Review* 15 (1990): 188; Shmuel Faust, “Criticism in Sage Stories from the Babylonian Talmud” (PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2010), 189.

¹⁷ The actual relationship between Rav and Samuel, the hierarchy between them, beyond this story, and how this hierarchy is perceived by the medieval legal commentaries are not examined here. The Bavli itself cites rules concerning which is to be followed in which areas of law. See, for instance, *BT Bekhorot* 49b; *BT Niddah* 24b; *BT Shabbat* 22a.

¹⁸ The account of the captivity and release of Samuel’s daughters is found in *BT Ketubbot* 23a; *JT Ketubbot* 2:6, 26c. See also *BT Mo’ed Qatan* 18a.

¹⁹ For a focus on the grotesque in this narrative, see Fraenkel, “Sniffing the Jar.” More broadly on the grotesque in the Bavli, see Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

rabbinic Judaism.²⁰ Rav Sherira Gaon, for whom this account might have been a pertinent prooftext in his account of the history of the oral law and the emergence of the Torah centers in Babylonia, omits it from his epistle. In a responsum, Rav Hayy Gaon, who is explicitly asked about it, seeks to account for the entire episode as if Samuel had genuinely sought to help Rav and heal him from his discomfort, and this apologetic approach was also embraced by other medieval commentators such as Rashi.²¹ And yet, this understanding is in opposition to a clear and straightforward reading of the story, and also to the style of the Babylonian Talmud, which does not shy away from portraying its heroes abusing one another.²² To understand this account is not to gloss over or deny elements that might be uncomfortable to us today and offer a sanitized version, but rather to contextualize them.

Samuel senses that he is about to lose his supreme status among the sages of Babylonia. It is for this reason that he seeks to clarify for

²⁰ This tendency is not surprising. Another example of Geonic apologetic interpretation can be found in Rav Natronay Gaon's explanation of the common talmudic term of abuse *בר פחתי*. For close study of this term in its various forms, see Aaron Amit, "The Epithets *בר פחתי*, *בר פחזה*, *בן פחזה*, and *בר פחתי* and Their Development in Talmudic Sources" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz*, 72 (2003): 489–504. The references to Rav Natronay Gaon's citation can be found on 493 n. 26.

²¹ See Benjamin Menashe Lewin, *Otzar haGeonim*, vol. 2: *Shabbath* (Haifa, 1930), 97–98. Rav Hayy Gaon also offers more rational explanations for Samuel's interpretation of the signs. Rav's curses, according to this apologetic stance, were the result of a misunderstanding, or miscommunication, and Rav was contrite upon learning of Samuel's intentions. Most scholars, however, have maintained that Samuel deliberately intended to harm Rav. See, for example, Faust, "Criticism," 189; Isaiah Gafni, "On Talmudic Historiography in the Epistle of Rav Sherira Gaon: Between Tradition and Creativity," in Gafni, *Jews and Judaism*, 144–45; Yonatan Feintuch, "The Story of R. Ada b. Abba – Multiple Contexts and Multiples Messages in a Babylonian Talmudic *Sugya*" [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 27 (2014): 7–8; cf. Israel Ben-Shalom, "'And I Took unto Me Two Staves: The One I Called Beauty and the Other I Called Bands' (Zach. 11:7)" [Hebrew], in *Dor leDor: From the End of Biblical Times up to the Redaction of the Talmud. Studies in Honor of Joshua Efron*, ed. Aryeh Kasher and Aharon Oppenheimer (Tel-Aviv: Bialik Institute; Jerusalem: Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies, 1995), 244–45; cf. Fraenkel, "Sniffing the Jar."

²² After all, as the Babylonian Talmud acknowledges elsewhere, "these are the sages of Babylonia who destroy one another in Halakha" (*BT Sanhedrin* 24a).

himself the nature of the man who is arriving, and if necessary, to preemptively eliminate the threat he poses.²³

Signs and Symbols

This story begins with what might be thought of as a natural phenomenon, the seasonal high-water level in the river. However, nothing is said here about the season. In fact, it is unexpected. This is confirmed by Samuel's response. Samuel indeed interprets it semiotically not as a natural affair, but as a portent heralding the arrival from the *West*, a metonym for Palestine, of a "great man;" namely, a great *rabbi*.²⁴

There is a certain logic if not precision in Samuel's deduction. The Royal Canal brings water from the Euphrates. The Euphrates itself, in a tradition attributed to Rav, is imagined as being attached to Palestine, as he states that "the Euphrates is a great witness of rain in the West."²⁵ The water has risen, however, not because a great deal of rain has fallen upstream, as hydrometeorology would have it, but because the water has come from another source. In *BT Bekhorot* 55b, Samuel expresses the view that the increased amount of water in the river comes from its *banks* ("a river is blessed from its banks"), the implication being that this water derives from beneath or beside the river.²⁶

²³ In this sense, the plot conforms with the parallel account in *BT Bava Batra* 22a, relating to Rav Dimi of Neharde'a, on which see especially Barry Scott Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 140–41; and Kalmin, *Sages*, 7 n. 20. The sniffing of the jar metaphor is intertextually related to this parallel. There, too, the newcomer is put to the test, and the loss of his merchandise, as described there, is equal to the elimination of the potential threat he poses. See Fraenkel, "Sniffing the Jar," 8–9.

²⁴ On גברא רבא as specifically a great *rabbi* in the Babylonian Talmud, see, for example, *BT Berakhot* 30b; *BT Bezaḥ* 40a.

²⁵ *BT Bekhorot* 55b: מִיִּטְרָא בְּמַעְרְבָא סְהַדָּא רַבָּא פִּרְתָּ. See, too, *Sifrei*, 'Egev 86. Cf. Obermeyer, *Die Landschaft*, 45; Raphael Patai, *Mayim* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Debir, 1936), 154.

²⁶ *BT Nedarim* 40b: נִהְרָא מִכִּיפֵיהּ מִיִּבְרִיךְ. Cf. Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods*, 2nd rev. ed. (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2020), 534. He, however, understands this to mean that the river increases "from water which flows into it from tributaries and not from rain."

Samuel declares that the river has risen in honor of the new arrival, in order to greet him. The setting for this story is Babylonia, with its particular geography, topography, climate, rivers, mythical cosmology, and religious heritage. While the rivers had been divine in earlier times,²⁷ in late antiquity people still spoke of the “spirit” of the rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, as attested in the text of an incantation bowl.²⁸ In the rabbinic imagination, however, the rivers of Babylonia are subordinated to the world of the rabbis, and the cosmos is responding to their itinerary. They react to the demise of great sages²⁹ and here rise to pay homage to one. Such behavior also features in other rabbinic sources – the water of the well rises for the biblical Rebecca and for the goat herds of Abraham, according to the Palestinian midrash, *Genesis Rabbah*.³⁰ Moreover, what is seemingly true for the unpretentious wells of the land of Israel is on a completely different scale with the colossal rivers of Babylonia.

“The Water Was Rising and Was Turbid”

The river water is not only rising, but it is also turbid or cloudy. One recalls the rebuke against the ancient Israelites that “if you had been worthy, you would have been settled in Jerusalem, drinking the water of the Siloam whose waters are clean and sweet; now, since you are not worthy, you will be exiled to Babylonia and drink the water of the Euphrates whose waters are turbid and smelly”,³¹ in the Palestinian midrash *Lamentations Rabbah*. In contrast, the Bavli (*BT Ketubbot* 77b) praises the quality of the water from the Euphrates in the name of the Palestinian R. Yoḥanan. In our Babylonian account, we should prefer the Babylonian assessment of the quality of their

²⁷ In Zoroastrian literature, for references, see Albert de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden, New York, and Cologne: Brill, 1997), 138–39. Closer to this topic, the first-to-second-century mosaic from Zeugma shows an anthropomorphic image of the river god Euphrates.

²⁸ See Stephen A. Kaufman, “Appendix C: Alphabetic Texts,” in *Excavations at Nippur: Eleventh Season*, ed. McGuire Gibson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 151–52 (IM 76106): רוחי פרת ורגלת נהרה – “spirits of the Euphrates and the River Tigris.”

²⁹ *BT Mo’ed Qatan* 25b. This is indeed part of a broader tendency within rabbinic literature in which nature is subordinated to the will of the rabbis. See, for example, the famous account of the oven of Akhnai in *JT Mo’ed Qatan* 3:1 (81c–d) and *BT Bava Meṣi’a* 59b.

³⁰ *Gen. Rab.* (ed. Theodor–Albeck), 582, 645.

³¹ *Lam. Rab.* 19.

river water. Furthermore, the internal logic of this Babylonian account dictates that the water of the Royal Canal is usually different and *not* turbid. This is therefore an exceptional occurrence, one that Samuel sees as worthy of comment and interpretation.

What, however, would the initial assumption have been before Samuel's symbolic interpretation? The curt and casual way in which the sight is mentioned is deceptive. A rising river is an existential threat in Mesopotamia, a cause for great trepidation. Where is the water coming from and why is it different than usual? Could it be rising from the abyss (תהום)?³² In the rabbinic worldview, one might not expect the abyss to be rising, since it was seemingly "closed" after the biblical flood (Gen 8:2). Yet, rabbinic traditions would acknowledge that not all the springs of the "Great Abyss" had been closed,³³ and an elaborate midrash appearing in both Talmuds relates how they had even threatened to rise in the days of David.³⁴

The turbidity provides a clue to the origins of the water. The abyss is referred to as the "black waters" in the accounts of the Gnostics of this region, a term that also appears in contemporary Aramaic and Mandaean incantation bowls.³⁵ It is turbid because it is understood as filthy, as the Manichaean stench. Indeed, the Talmud includes a tradition attributed to R. Yishmael (according to the manuscripts), but lacking Palestinian parallels, that describes the water that rose from the abyss of the biblical deluge as being "thick and hard as semen" (עבין וקשין כשכבת זרע).³⁶ The change in the river, then, at first sight, is the ominous harbinger of imminent and massive

³² On the abyss in biblical and rabbinic sources, see the brief survey in Patai, *Mayim*, 150.

³³ *BT Sanhedrin* 108a.

³⁴ *BT Sukkah* 53a–b; *JT Sanhedrin* 10:2 (29a). This story, which imagines the magical suppression of the abyss and its rise, includes comments on what contemporaries understood about the subterranean water and whether it comes from the abyss or from elsewhere. Evidently, this was a matter of debate among them.

³⁵ See the British Museum bowl with the signature BM 91767 with corrected reading and discussion in Matthew Morgenstern, "The Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Magic Bowl BM 91767 Reconsidered," *Le Muséon* 120, nos. 1–2 (2007): 9, 17–18: "אין אתון מלאכין דישון בתהומי תחתיי ובמיי סיי דארעא" ("you are angels that dwell in the lower abysses and in the black waters of the earth") and the Klagsbald Collection bowl, Jerusalem, published in Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1985), B13 (198–200): בני אתרא דמא איסיר ("sons of the place of black waters").

³⁶ Cf. *BT Sanhedrin* 108b.

devastation. Samuel and Qarna recognize the change in the river and fear the uncontrolled rise of the abyss.

Such a situation, and the anxiety it engenders, is not uncommon to notions of the region and to the cosmology and mythology of the inhabitants of Babylonia. Indeed, non-talmudic contemporary texts, such as the incantation bowls from this region, when juxtaposed with this story, help to contextualize it. Such texts frequently make precise reference to the concern for the elevation of the primordial waters and emphasize the subdual of the primordial waters of the abyss.³⁷ The texts of incantation bowls frequently extoll the ability of supernatural powers to subdue the abyss.

The opening of this account might indeed recall a familiar setting. Samuel and Qarna sit precisely where the magician imagines himself to be, as in one incantation bowl text: “I stand beside the seashore, on the great bank of the ocean” [אכין ימא קינא ואכיפא רבא] [דרביהא].³⁸ Samuel is seemingly able to diffuse the situation. The river rises to greet Rav in a cosmic response to a unique event, his arrival in Babylonia. But this is a controlled event; Samuel’s symbolic interpretation allays the greatest fears. The intimidating constitution of the water is also resolved. Samuel, like a dream interpreter, reads the sign to avert the danger: “And as he interpreted it, so it was.”³⁹ The water is turbid – עכיר – so he explains that the newcomer is suffering from pain in his stomach. We see later that his ailment was constipation, and this offers Samuel the means to remove the threat by causing him immense shame and embarrassment. This interpretation is achieved through employing the alternative sense of the same root, a homonym, a sense attested in the Babylonian Jewish Aramaic of the incantation bowls – עכר as *hold back*, and here, evidently, *stop up*.⁴⁰

³⁷ Shaul Shaked, James Nathan Ford, and Siam Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls, Volume One* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 140 (JBA 25:3). Some bowl texts begin with כבשין בתהומא תיחא or כבשין לתהומא תיחא (AS 13). On the extent of water in the abyss, see BT Yoma 76a. The primordial waters are also the abode of evil spirits of various forms; see text cited above, n. 24, and (text T28003) תהומא תחתא אשבעית עלי רוחא בישתא דיסליקת מן יומא ומן תהומא תחתא.

³⁸ Moussaieff 145, published in Dan Levene, *A Corpus of Magic Bowls: Incantation Texts in Jewish Aramaic from Late Antiquity* (London: Kegan Paul, 2003), 100–102.

³⁹ Cf. BT Mo’ed Qatan 18a.

⁴⁰ Sokoloff, *Dictionary*, 831, who cites two incantation bowls with this meaning; Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls*, bowl 9 (formerly in the possession of V. Barakat, Jerusalem), 174–75; and CBS 2916 (J. A. Montgomery, *Aramaic*

This story shows that Rav's passage into Babylonia is divinely ordained, and Samuel's failure to stop him paves the way for the future history of Babylonian Jewry, with a new hierarchy, whereby he is perceived as being superior to Samuel. Samuel had sought to change fate, but his hopes were frustrated.

Mani and the Inundation of Ctesiphon

Many of the features of this talmudic source, I suggest, can be fruitfully compared with a Manichaean account. First, however, it will be useful to comment briefly on the study of Manichaean literature within the context of the Babylonian Talmud, which has been little explored. Indeed, scholarship on Manichaeism has tended to evade the gaze of scholars of Babylonia in the Talmudic era, and the inverse is equally true. This is despite the obvious temporal and geographical synchronism of the emergence of Manicheism and the Babylonian rabbinic teachings, both of which took root in third-century Babylonia. Those who have examined Jewish aspects related to Manichaean literature have focused on gnosis, early Jewish traditions, and lore.⁴¹ Those interested in Jewish history have tended to accept

Incantation Texts from Nippur [Philadelphia, 1913], no. 6:6 (141) which Sokoloff reads as *וּבְרִינָא* against Montgomery's: *וּבְרִינָא*. James Ford (oral communication), however, suggests here *וּבְרִינָא*. This meaning is explained in Jacob Nahum Epstein, "Gloses Babylo-Araméennes I. Les textes magiques araméens de Montgomery," *Revue des études juives* 83 (1921): 34, who refers to this meaning in additional Aramaic dialects. See, too, Matthew Morgenstern, "On Some Non-Standard Spellings in the Aramaic Magic Bowls and Their Linguistic Significance," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 52, no. 2 (2007): 249. For Syriac, see *Peshitta Wisdom of Solomon*, in A. A. di Lella, ed., *The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshitta Version, Part II Fasc. 5. Proverbs; Wisdom of Solomon; Ecclesiastes; Song of Songs* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 2:12, 19:17.

⁴¹ See, especially, John C. Reeves, *Jewish Lore in Manichaean Cosmogony: Studies in the "Book of Giants" Traditions* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1992); Werner Sundermann, "Mani's 'Book of Giants' and the Jewish Book of Enoch: A Case of Terminological Differences and What It Implies," in *Irano-Judaica III: Studies Relating to Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture throughout the Ages*, ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1994), 40–48 (repr. in *Manichaica Iranica, Ausgewählte Schriften von Werner Sundermann*, ed. Christiane Reck, Dieter Weber, Claudia Leurini, and Antonio Panaino [Rome: Istitutio Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 2001], 2:697–706). The main focus has been on the Book of Giants in Enochide literature and the Jewish roots of this literature. On the whole, scholars do not believe that this literature reached Mani directly from the Jews. For an article that compares the Manichaean field of cosmogony

the judgment that Mani did not particularly like Judaism and so excluded it from his system.⁴² And yet, irrespective of what Mani might have thought of Judaism, he created his system in geographical, linguistic, and chronological proximity to the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud. This alone offers possibilities of interest to students of the rabbinic texts. One should not, therefore, be surprised to find certain parallels of diverse genres, including a shared lexicon, modes of thought, and expressions.

There have been but a handful of more recent efforts to consider the Manichaean religion in comparison with Babylonian Judaism, and some recent studies have shown certain possible borrowings between Manichaeans and Babylonian Jews. Jewish magical formulae, for instance, found their way into Manichaean magic texts.⁴³ Some years

with rabbinic traditions (but not particularly those of Babylonian origin), see Eugenia Smagina, "The Manichaean Cosmological Myth as a Re-Written Bible," in *In Search of Truth: Augustine, Manichaeism and Other Gnosticism. Studies for Johannes van Oort at Sixty*, ed. Jacob Albert van den Berg, Annemaré Kotzé, Tobias Nicklas, and Madeleine Scopello (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 201–16. See, too, Werner Sundermann, "Der Manichäismus und das Judentum," *Iranzamin. Echo der iranischen Kultur* 11 (1998): 180–81. On the other hand, for discussion of the legends found in Enochide literature in the incantation bowls, see already, with further references, Jonas Greenfield, "Notes on Some Aramaic and Mandaic Magic Bowls," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 5 (1973): 149–56.

⁴² Its relationship to Judaism is unclear. As is known, despite Manichaeism's syncretistic tendency, it apparently demonstrated hostility towards Judaism. On the absence of Judaism in Mani's religious system, for instance, see Neusner, *A History of the Jews of Babylonia*, 21 ff. On the condemnation of the Magi, implicated in Mani's suffering as "brothers of the Jews" and similar expressions, see Ps 225 and 241 in C. R. C. Allberry, *A Manichaean Psalm-Book: Book II* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1938), 15.9–12. Although Jews are not usually mentioned explicitly, the negative comments about the Bible may imply condemnation of them. At the same time, hostility towards the Jews may be overstated. See, too, Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Mesopotamia and the Roman East*, 2nd ed. (Leiden, Boston, and Cologne: Brill, 1999), 12–14.

⁴³ Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst, "The Apotropaic Magical Text M389 and M8430/1/ in Manichaean Middle Persian," *Aram* 16 (2004): 141–60. Ithamar Gruenwald, "Manichaeism and Judaism in Light of the Cologne Mani Codex," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 50 (1983): 29–45; Yishai Kiel, "Reimagining Enoch in Sasanian Babylonia in Light of Zoroastrian and Manichaean Traditions," *AJS Review* 39 (2015): 407–32; Kiel, "Study versus Sustenance: A Rabbinic Dilemma in its Zoroastrian and Manichaean Context," *AJS Review* 38 (2014): 275–302; Kiel, "The Wizard of Āz and the Evil Inclination: The Babylonian Rabbinic Inclination (*yeẓer*) in Its Zoroastrian and Manichean Context," in *The Evil Inclination in Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. James Aitken,

ago, I myself undertook a comparison of Manichaean and talmudic narratives, proposing not a borrowing, but a shared narrative trope.⁴⁴

The account I shall present below, which has a clear geographical and historical setting,⁴⁵ is also concerned with the frightful rise of the river in Babylonia. Moreover, it deals with the interpretation of this event and alludes to a discourse of power. It is found in the Coptic *Kephalaia*, a composition that was discovered in Egypt, dating to the fourth century CE. It claims to reproduce the discussions and conversations between Mani, who is referred to as “the apostle,” and his disciples, and is apparently based on an Aramaic *Vorlage*. I shall reproduce a section of this source in the English translation by Iain Gardner.⁴⁶

Once again, at one of the times when the apostle entered [in] to the presence of King Shapur. He gave him a greet[ing], turned, and went away from before King Shapur.

He st[o]od on a quayside that was built upon the bank of the mighty river Tigris. At that time it was the month of Ph[ar]mouthi. The river Tigris was engorged with many waters; it had [surged up] and swelled and [burst forth] beneath the great force of the flood, so that the waters flowed do[wn ... and] poured into the gates of the city, they [...] only, but the waters flowed into the {} of the city until they submerged the market place of the city [...] are few and the city goes [under ... comes to] be fear of its wind. Even his

Hector M. Patmore and Ishay Rosen-Zvi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 294–314; Kiel, “‘Playing with Children’: A Talmudic Polemic against Manichaean Sexual Ethics,” *Jewish Law Association Studies* 28 (2019): 112–36; Kiel, “Creation by Emission: Recreating Adam and Eve in the Babylonian Talmud in Light of Zoroastrian and Manichaean Literature,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 66 (2015): 295–316; Jae Han, “Mani’s Metivta: Manichaean Pedagogy in its Late Antique Mesopotamian Context,” *Harvard Theological Review* 114 (2021): 346–70.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Herman, “The Talmud in Its Babylonian Context: Rava and Bar Sheshakh; Mani and Mihrshah” [Hebrew], in Herman, Shahar, and Oppenheimer, *Between Babylonia and the Land of Israel*, 79–96.

⁴⁵ Michel Tardieu (“Gnose et Manichéisme,” *École pratique des hautes études, section des sciences religieuses. Annuaire* 93 [1984]: 372) suggests that it alludes to events belonging to the *beginning* of the reign of King Shapur I.

⁴⁶ Iain Gardner, ed. and trans, *The Kephalaia of the Teacher: The Edited Coptic Manichaean Texts in Translation with Commentary* (Leiden, New York, and Cologne: Brill, 1995), 160–62. I claim no expertise in Coptic and therefore the discussion of the Coptic text is based on the translation provided.

kingdom was in great terror because of the enormous size of the flood of these waters.

So the apostle was standing there on the quay, with also three disciples standing by him, [le]aders of his church. They were watching the river engorged with these many waters. They saw that the waters rose up against the city walls, and the flood was even inside the walls.

One of the disciples then spoke. He says to the apostle: H[o]w great is the power of the garment of the waters? How far shall [it extend]? That it should enter with the roar of its flood and fill th[is] river Tigris in its vastness like the mighty [s]ea! It has carried waves from river bank to bank, and run from wall to wall. The source from which a[l]l these waters burst forth, how great will it be? For they come and come each year at their [ap]pointed season!

Then the apostle says to him: What are you astonished at the vastness of the Tigris waters, and why are you amazed by its flood? Still, listen to what I am about to tell you, and be truly astonished about th[e r]iv[er] that came into being during the first time.

The apostle, Mani, is summoned to the royal palace of the Persian king, Shapur I, and returns to his disciples after an audience with the king. Soon thereafter, the river floods its banks. They sit on the bank of the Tigris and observe a dramatic, but natural and familiar phenomenon. The month of Pharmouthi, the date provided in the account for this event, falls in the spring (27 March until 25 April), so a high-water level is not unusual at this time of year, and the river flows with great force. This flooding was a constant feature of the Tigris, as, indeed, of life in Babylonia near the rivers and canals, as noted earlier.⁴⁷ In the course of the next century, the force of the river would ultimately split the city in two.⁴⁸

After witnessing this sight, the disciples express their wonder at the power and quantity of the water. Whence comes the water that arrives anew every year? The disciples understand that the source of the water is the abyss, the “garment of the waters” according to the

⁴⁷ For talmudic references to flooding and concern about it, see *BT Berakhot* 60a; *BT Eruvin* 21a; *BT Ta’anit* 22b; *BT Bava Batra* 41a.

⁴⁸ *BT Eruvin* 57b.

terminology current in Manichaeism. The event is taken as an opportunity for Mani and his disciples to discuss certain aspects of Mani's cosmological doctrine about the "garment of the waters" and its enormity. Like Samuel, Mani interprets the river, and he now contextualizes it according to his religious mythology⁴⁹ as but a "small stream." The waters of the Tigris in the spring are a tiny portion of the immense water swallowed by the primordial *archontes* in order to extinguish the fire burning in their intestines, which is then spat out after the summer.⁵⁰

And yet, what draws attention here is both the timing of the flood and the effect it has on the royal palace and the capital city. We are not told the purpose of Mani's visits to the palace, yet one hardly needs to note the inequality between Mani and the king, with the powerless yet aspiring new prophet struggling to advance his message before the Zoroastrian "king of kings." This account juxtaposes two sources of immense power. Yet the power of the Sasanian kingdom is as naught in the face of the greater power that seems to have manifested itself precisely in coordination with Mani's visit. This account, in how it is structured and what it chooses to tell us, seeks to link Mani and the river, as if he brings the river flood with him. Mani, too, may be perceived as powerful, far beyond anything that is in the possession of the Sasanian kingdom.

Like the rabbis, Mani believed that the river's high-water level comes from the subterranean abyss, the *tehom*, "the garment of the waters." Its size and power are beyond any capability in the hands of the Sasanian Empire. The Persian royal palace is shaken to the core by the release of a large quantity of water, but the "garment of the waters" is vast. The Tigris is "only one river from thousands of rivers of water, from the secrets that are not revealed."⁵¹ Mani's "dominion," so to speak, in comparison with that of the Persian king, is found in his possession of this secret knowledge, the hidden knowledge of the world, the gnosis, although this is not spelled out in the Manichaean source itself.

⁴⁹ This is an example of a broader approach to natural phenomena; see Gábor Kósa, "The Manichaean Attitude to Natural Phenomena as Reflected in the Berlin *Kephalaia*," *Open Theology* 1 (2015): 255–68.

⁵⁰ Tardieu, "Gnose et Manichéisme," 371.

⁵¹ Gardner, *Kephalaia*, 162.

In these two sources, the Talmud and the Kephalaia, the river water rises from the abyss and is turbulent, dangerous; thus, we are dealing with cosmic phenomena. The two differ in that the elevation of the river in the situation described is treated as a regular occurrence in the Manichaean source, whereas in the Talmud, it is seen as exceptional. Yet in both, it is closely linked, either explicitly or implicitly, to the appearance of a great man, a sage, Rav or Mani, in the early third century. In both of these sources, regarding Rav and Samuel and Mani and the royal palace, the river, in its force and behavior, intimates the change – the presence of an aspiring sage who threatens the existing reality, a new “prophet” who must be taken into consideration and who cannot be overcome. It is indeed through the shared symbolism of the rivers of Babylon and their interpretation that the inhabitants of the region, both Jewish and Manichaean, convey their fears and hopes, their new tidings and their aspirations.