

# Jews and Syriac Christians

Edited by  
AARON MICHAEL BUTTS  
and SIMCHA GROSS

*Texts and Studies in  
Ancient Judaism*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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# Jews and Syriac Christians

Intersections across the First Millennium

Edited by

Aaron Michael Butts and Simcha Gross

Mohr Siebeck

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# Abbreviations

## Rabbinic Texts

The following abbreviations are used for the citation of rabbinic texts:

- m. Mishnah.
- t. Tosefta, cited according to S. Lieberman, *The Tosefta* (Jerusalem, 1955–1988) and M. S. Zuckerman, *Tosefta, Based on the Venice and Vienna Codices* (Jerusalem, 1970).
- y. Palestinian Talmud, cited according to Y. Sussman, *Talmud Yerushalmi: Yotze le-or al-pi ketav yad Scaliger 3 (Or. 4720)* (Jerusalem, 2005).
- b. Babylonian Talmud, cited according to the pagination of the Vilna edition (1880–1886).

The following Mishnah and Talmud tractates are referenced:

Avod. Zar.	Avodah Zarah	Meg.	Megillah
Avot	Avot	Moed Qat.	Moed Qatan
B. Bat.	Bava Batra	Naz.	Nazir
B. Metz.	Bava Metzia	Ned.	Nedarim
B. Qam.	Bava Qamma	Nid.	Niddah
Ber.	Berakhot	Pes.	Pesahim
Betzah	Betzah	Qidd.	Qiddushin
Demai	Demai	San.	Sanhedrin
Eruv.	Eruvin	Shabb.	Shabbat
Git.	Gittin	Shev.	Sheviit
Hor.	Horayot	Sotah	Sotah
Hul.	Hullin	Taan.	Taanit
Ketub.	Ketubbot	Yev.	Yevamot
Kil.	Kilayim	Zevah.	Zevahim
Mak.	Makkot	Yoma	Yoma

Additional rabbinic texts cited include:

Avot de-Rabbi Natan	Cited according to S. Schechter, <i>Avot de Rabbi Natan</i> (Vienna, 1887; corrected repr. Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1979).
Bereshit Rabba	Cited according to J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, <i>Bereschit Rabba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary</i> (2nd revised ed.; Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1965).
Hekhalot Rabbati	Cited according to P. Schäfer, <i>Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur</i> (TSAJ 2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981).
Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael	Cited according to H. S. Horowitz and I. A. Rabin, <i>Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ismael</i> (Frankfurt am Main: J. Kauffmann, 1931) or J. Z. Lauterbach, <i>Mekhilta de-Rabbi</i>



	<i>Ishmael</i> (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933).
Pesikta de-Rav Kahana	Cited according to B. Mandelbaum, <i>Pesikta de-Rav Kahana</i> (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1962).
Pesikta Rabbati	Cited according to M. Friedmann, <i>Pesikta Rabbati</i> (Vienna: Selbstverlag des Herausgebers, 1880).
Shemot Rabba	Cited according to A. Shinan, <i>Midrash Shemot Rabbah. Chapters 1–14</i> (Jerusalem: Devir, 1984).
Sifra	Cited according to I. H. Weiss, <i>Sifra. Commentar zu Leviticus aus dem Anfange des III. Jahrhunderts. Nebst der Erläuterung des R. Abraham ben David (Rabed) und Masoret ha-Talmud</i> (Vienna: J. Schlossberg, 1862).

## Biblical Books

*Hebrew Bible / Old Testament*

Genesis	Gn	Proverbs	Prv
Exodus	Ex	Ecclesiastes	Eccl
Leviticus	Lv	Song of Songs	Song
Numbers	Nm	Wisdom	Wis
Deuteronomy	Dt	Sirach	Sir
Joshua	Jos	Isaiah	Is
Judges	Jgs	Jeremiah	Jer
Ruth	Ru	Lamentations	Lam
1 Samuel	1 Sm	Baruch	Bar
2 Samuel	2 Sm	Ezekiel	Ezek
1 Kings	1 Kgs	Daniel	Dn
2 Kings	2 Kgs	Hosea	Hos
1 Chronicles	1 Chr	Joel	Jl
2 Chronicles	2 Chr	Amos	Am
Ezra	Ezr	Obadiah	Ob
Nehemiah	Neh	Jonah	Jon
Tobit	Tb	Micah	Mi
Judith	Jdt	Nahum	Na
Esther	Est	Habakkuk	Hab
1 Maccabees	1 Mc	Zephaniah	Zep
2 Maccabees	2 Mc	Haggai	Hg
Job	Jb	Zechariah	Zec
Psalm(s)	Ps(s)	Malachi	Mal

*New Testament*

Matthew	Mt	Acts of the Apostles	Acts
Mark	Mk	Romans	Rom
Luke	Lk	1 Corinthians	1 Cor
John	Jn	2 Corinthians	2 Cor

Galatians	Gal	Hebrews	Heb
Ephesians	Eph	James	Jas
Philippians	Phil	1 Peter	1 Pt
Colossians	Col	2 Peter	2 Pt
1 Thessalonians	1 Thes	1 John	1 Jn
2 Thessalonians	2 Thes	2 John	2 Jn
1 Timothy	1 Tm	3 John	3 Jn
2 Timothy	2 Tm	Jude	Jude
Titus	Ti	Revelation	Rv
Philemon	Phlm		

### Journals, Series, and Reference Works

AB	<i>Analecta Bollandiana</i>
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
AJEC	Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity
AJS Review	<i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i>
AJSLL	<i>The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures</i>
AJSR	<i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i>
ANF	A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds.), <i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969–1971).
AO	<i>Acta Orientalia</i>
AS	<i>Aramaic Studies</i>
BHT	Beiträge zur historischen Theologie
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BSOAS	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
BSOS	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies</i>
BZ	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
CA	Christianisme antique
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CELAMA	Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages
CH	<i>Church History</i>
CHR	<i>Catholic Historical Review</i>
CHRC	<i>Church History and Religious Culture</i>
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
CSS	Cistercian Studies Series
DJBA	M. Sokoloff, <i>A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods</i> (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).
DJD	Discoveries in the Judean Desert
DOP	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
DOT	Dumbarton Oaks Texts
EC	<i>Early Christianity</i>
ECS	Eastern Christian Studies

EEC	E. Ferguson (ed.), <i>Encyclopedia of Early Christianity</i> (2nd ed.; New York: Garland, 1997).
EI	E. Yarshater (ed.), <i>Encyclopaedia Iranica</i> (New York: Columbia University Center for Iranian Studies, 2002–), available <a href="http://www.iranicaonline.org">http://www.iranicaonline.org</a> .
EJ	M. Berenbaum and F. Skolnik (eds.), <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i> (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007).
EQ	J. D. McAuliffe (ed.), <i>Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān</i> (Leiden: Brill, 2001–2006).
ÉS	Études syriaques
ETL	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i>
FC	Fontes Christiani
FO	<i>Folia Orientalia</i>
FoC	The Fathers of the Church
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte
GECS	Gorgias Early Christian Studies
GRBS	<i>Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies</i>
HCMR	History of Christian-Muslim Relations
HR	<i>History of Religions</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HTS	<i>HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IJS	Institute of Jewish Studies (University College London)
IOS	<i>Israel Oriental Studies</i>
JA	<i>Journal asiatique</i>
JAAS	<i>Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies</i>
JAC	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>
JAJ	<i>Journal of Ancient Judaism</i>
JAOC	Judaïsme ancien et origines du christianisme
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JC	Judaism in Context
JCPs	Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series
JCSSS	<i>Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies</i>
JE	C. Adler (ed.), <i>The Jewish Encyclopedia</i> (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901–1906).
JEastCS	<i>Journal of Eastern Christian Studies</i>
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JJTP	<i>The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy</i>
JLA	<i>Journal of Late Antiquity</i>
JLAS	<i>Jewish Law Association Studies</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JQR	<i>The Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
JS	<i>Jewish Studies</i>
JSAl	<i>Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam</i>
JSHL	<i>Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature</i>
JSIJ	<i>Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal</i>
JSJ	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>

JSJF	<i>Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore</i>
JSJS	Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplements
JSOR	<i>Journal of the Society of Oriental Research</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSP	<i>Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha</i>
JSQ	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LAHR	Late Antique History and Religion
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LS	<i>Language Studies</i>
LSAWS	Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic
MHR	<i>Mediterranean Historical Review</i>
MLR	<i>Mediterranean Language Review</i>
MPIL	Monographs of the Peshiṭta Institute, Leiden
MUSJ	<i>Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph</i>
NPNF	P. Schaff (ed.), <i>A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> (New York: Scribner, 1898–1909).
NT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OC	<i>Oriens Christianus</i>
OCP	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i>
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
OLP	<i>Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica</i>
OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs
PAAJR	<i>Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research</i>
PETSE	Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile
PG	P. Migne, <i>Patrologia Graeca</i> .
PISBR	Publications of the Israel Society for Biblical Research
PL	P. Migne, <i>Patrologia Latina</i> .
PLAL	Perspectives on Linguistics and Ancient Language
PMAS	Persian Martyr Acts in Syriac: Text and Translation
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
POC	<i>Proche-Orient chrétien</i>
Prooftexts	<i>Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History</i>
PS	Patrologia Syriaca
PTS	Patristische Texte und Studien
RB	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
REJ	<i>Revue des études juives</i>
RHPR	<i>Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses</i>
RHR	<i>Revue de l'histoire des religions</i>
ROC	<i>Revue de l'orient chrétien</i>
RQ	<i>Revue de Qumrân</i>
RRJ	<i>The Review of Rabbinic Judaism</i>
RSR	<i>Recherches de science religieuse</i>
SBLSP	<i>Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers</i>
SC	Sources chrétiennes
SCH	Studies in Church History

SEA	Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum
SFoC	Selections from the Fathers of the Church
SJHC	Studies in Jewish History and Culture
SJSJ	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
SLA	<i>Studies in Late Antiquity</i>
SOR	Serie Orientale Roma
SPB	Studia Post-Biblica
SSS	Studies Supplementary to Sobornost
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
STMAC	Science, Technology, and Medicine in Ancient Culture
STT	Semitic Texts with Translations
SVT	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
<i>SymSyr</i> II	<i>Symposium Syriacum 1976</i> (OCA 205; Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1978).
<i>SymSyr</i> IV	H. J. W. Drijvers, R. Lavenant, C. Molenberg, and G. J. Reinink (eds.), <i>IV Symposium Syriacum, 1984. Literary Genres in Syriac Literature (Groningen – Oosterhesselen 10–12 September)</i> (OCA 229; Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1987).
<i>SymSyr</i> V	R. Lavenant (ed.), <i>Symposium Syriacum 1988</i> (OCA 236; Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1990).
<i>SymSyr</i> VII	R. Lavenant (ed.), <i>Symposium Syriacum VII. Uppsala University, Department of Asian and African Languages, 11–14 August 1996</i> (OCA 256; Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1998).
TeCLA	Texts from Christian Late Antiquity
TEG	Traditio Exegetica Graeca
TH	Théologie historique
TSAJ	Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism / Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum
TSMEMJ	Texts and Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Judaism
TSQ	Texts and Studies on the Qur’ān
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
YJS	<i>Yale Judaica Series</i>
ZA	<i>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie</i>
ZAC	<i>Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZDMG	<i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>
ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

## Introduction\*

Scholarly interest in intersections between Jews and Syriac Christians has experienced a boom in recent years. This is the result of a series of converging trends in the study of both groups and their cultural productions. The present volume contributes to this developing conversation by collecting sixteen studies that investigate various intersections between Jews and Syriac Christians over the first millennium CE. These studies are both indicative of the state of the question and signal ways forward for future work on the subject. In this introduction, we outline the types of intersections that are documented in the sources as well as the various scholarly approaches to studying them.

But, first, a few words about the title of the volume: We titled the volume *Jews and Syriac Christians: Intersections across the First Millennium* to highlight the disciplinary connections we hope to draw between fields that have increasingly become the subject of comparison. These connections span many centuries, cross diverse geographical regions, and employ different corpora and methodologies, and therefore the studies in this volume fit best under the broad rubric of intersections. The use of the term intersections is, thus, deliberate. This term is purposefully general so as to allow room for various modes of contact, interaction, etc., without biasing the conversation with terminological preconceptions from the outset. In addition, the term intersections leaves room – and points to – the fact that this volume is primarily concerned with disciplines, i. e., intersections between the field of Syriac studies and the field of Jewish studies. Also in the title, the terms Jews and Syriac Christian are inherently loaded. Perhaps most relevant for this volume, these terms connote bounded and isolated communities which in reality were certainly more porous than the sources produced by religious elites would have us believe. In fact, several contributions in this volume challenge these very categories. Nevertheless, the terms Jews and Syriac Christians – especially in contrast with the abstractions Judaism and (Syriac) Christianity – serve as the best available heuristic in our view for the lived communities who defined, defended, or defied these terms.

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\* An earlier version of some of this material was presented at the Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins (PSCO) at The University of Pennsylvania on 1 October 2015. We are grateful to Annette Yoshiko Reed and Jae Han for inviting us to workshop this material. We would also like to thank the following people for helping in various ways with this introduction: Adam Becker, Janet Timbie, and Lucas Van Rompay. In addition, Butts's work on this volume was supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellowship for Assistant Professors at the Institute for Advanced Study.

We propose that intersections between Jews and Syriac Christians can be divided into two broad categories.<sup>1</sup> One of the categories involves cases in which the ‘other’ is explicitly referenced. This category is primarily concerned with texts, most, but not all, of which are polemical. Within this category, there are far more examples of ‘Jews’ appearing in Syriac Christian texts than of the inverse. But, regardless, scholars are faced with the same set of interpretative questions: Is the ‘other’ in the text ‘real’ or ‘imagined’? How is the ‘other’ construed? If ‘imagined’, what is the purpose of including an ‘imagined other’? What can it tell us about the one constructing the ‘imagined other’? And, more broadly, what, if anything, can these representations of the ‘other’, whether ‘real’ or ‘imagined’, tell us about the ‘other’ as (s)he actually existed?

The second category can, at least initially, be defined negatively: It comprises cases in which the ‘other’ is *not* explicitly referenced. More practically, this category involves cases in which scholars look to Syriac Christian texts, history, culture, and more to understand better the historical context of Jews, or *vice versa*. Many examples belonging to this category, especially those related to texts, fall within research paradigms that have been increasingly problematized in recent years. Most obviously, these comparisons, which by definition lack the control of an explicit reference to the ‘other’, conjecture a connection where none is explicitly stated. In addition, these comparisons tend to posit directionality and to prioritize simple one-sided exchange over other, more complicated explanatory models. These criticisms should not, however, compel us to reject *a priori* either the fruitfulness of such comparisons or the utility of resorting to the texts and material culture of *both* Jews *and* Syriac Christians to understand better the broader historical context in which both these communities participated. In the next two sections, we explore in more detail these two broad categories of intersections between Jews and Syriac Christians.

### ‘Other’ Does *Not* Explicitly Appear; or, Historical Contextualization

In recent years a number of Jewish studies scholars have looked to Syriac Christianity, and especially its vast surviving literature, to help shed light on Babylonian Judaism and in particular the Babylonian Talmud. This is part of a broader trend to locate Judaism in its historical context. Since the beginning of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, scholars have investigated the Greco-Roman context of Jews located in Palestine. Traditional research in this vein culminated in the mid-twentieth century with S. Lieberman’s two monumental volumes, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*

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<sup>1</sup> Moss (p. 207–208 below) has independently arrived at a similar categorization.

(1942) and *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (1950).<sup>2</sup> Interest in the Greco-Roman context of Jews continues until today, however, and includes new and innovative approaches, as evidenced by works such as S. Schwartz's *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society?* (2010) and H. Lapin's *Rabbis as Romans* (2012), to name only a couple of the many examples.<sup>3</sup>

It is only more recently that scholars have similarly sought to contextualize Babylonian Jews and the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>4</sup> By far the clearest example of this recent trend is the subfield of Irano-Talmudica.<sup>5</sup> Scholars of Irano-Talmudica have sought to locate Babylonian Judaism in its Iranian context, and in particular they seek to explain passages in the Babylonian Talmud by recourse to Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts. The comparison of the Babylonian Talmud to Zoroastrian Middle Persian literature is not, however, without its problems.<sup>6</sup> One of the more serious is that the surviving Middle Persian sources leave much to be desired: The earliest Middle Persian manuscripts date well into the medieval period. They thus substantially post-date the Babylonian Talmud, even if one opts for a late date for its final redaction. While Zoroastrian Middle Persian literature no doubt preserves earlier material that originally circulated orally, distinguishing between earlier and later material is not straightforward. In addition, much of the scholarship in Irano-Talmudica has suffered from methodological issues. Most basically, the parallels offered are often not compelling, with studies that, on the one hand, border on parallelomania and, on the other hand, create low bars for comparison.<sup>7</sup> More broadly, most of the scholarship in Irano-Talmudica has aimed to identify parallels without asking broader, second-order questions about those parallels. These critiques should not, however, be understood as a rejection of the pursuit of such parallels or of the use of Zoroastrian Middle Persian

<sup>2</sup> S. Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1942); idem, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950).

<sup>3</sup> S. Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society? Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); H. Lapin, *Rabbis as Romans. The Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 100–400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> For exceptional, earlier work, see the histories of scholarship in S. Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in its Sasanian Context* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 10–14 and G. Herman, "Ahasuerus, the Former Stable-Master of Belshazzar and the Wicked Alexander of Macedon: Two Parallels between the Babylonian Talmud and Persian Sources," *AJS Review* 29 (2005): 284–288. For some possible motivations for scholars' reluctance to investigate the historical context of the Babylonian Talmud, see S. Gross, "Irano-Talmudica and Beyond: Next Steps in the Contextualization of the Babylonian Talmud," *JQR* 106 (2016): 248.

<sup>5</sup> See the bibliographies in Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud* as well as G. Herman and J. L. Rubenstein, "Introduction," in idem, *The Aggadah of the Bavli and its Cultural World* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2018), xii–xiii.

<sup>6</sup> See most forcefully R. Brody, "Irano-Talmudica: The New Parallelomania?," *JQR* 106 (2016): 203–232.

<sup>7</sup> See the discussion in Secunda, *Iranian Talmud*, 111–126, which does not in our view entirely redress the issues.



literature.<sup>8</sup> We remain convinced that the Irano-Talmudica school will continue to enrich our understanding of Babylonian Judaism, especially as it adopts more careful methodologies for identifying and analyzing comparison, as it is more cognizant of both the potentialities and limitations of the Middle Persian sources, and as it expands its interest beyond Zoroastrian literature to other kinds of royal and elite literature produced under the Sasanian Empire.<sup>9</sup>

In the wake of this turn to the Sasanian context of Babylonian Judaism, some scholars have also looked to Syriac.<sup>10</sup> Two articles stand out as especially foundational in this enterprise. The first was published by I. Gafni in 1982.<sup>11</sup> In this article, Gafni pointed to a number of interesting overlaps in the terminology used to describe East Syriac and rabbinic academies and suggested that other comparisons between these institutions would be fruitful. This line of inquiry was subsequently aided by advances in our understanding of both East Syriac and rabbinic academies, though much work still remains to be done.<sup>12</sup> The second article was published by Sh. Naeh in 1997, in which he argued that the word *heruta* in b. Qidd. 81b is best understood in light of Syriac *herutā* ‘freedom’, with its “Janus-like duality of meaning” – to use Naeh’s words – of self-control, suppression of influence, and so even celibacy, on the one hand, and the debauchery and licentiousness that can arise from uncurbed freedom, on the other.<sup>13</sup> Naeh’s

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<sup>8</sup> A position adopted by Brody (“Irano-Talmudica: The New Parallelomania?”), whose critique is, however, based at least in part on models of Sasanian feudalism and rabbinic insularity that have long been, and should be, rejected.

<sup>9</sup> See already Gross, “Irano-Talmudica and Beyond.” Our position is similar to that of Rubenstein below (see p. 256). Exemplary studies, in our view, include G. Herman, “Bury my Coffin Deep!: Zoroastrian Exhumation in Jewish and Christian Sources,” in J. Roth, M. Schmeltzer, and Y. Francus (eds.), *Tiferet leYisrael: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Israel Francus* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 2010), 31–59; idem, “Like a Slave before his Master: A Persian Gesture of Deference in Sasanian Jewish and Christian Sources,” *ARAM* 26 (2014): 101–108; idem, “One Day David Went out for the Hunt of the Falconers: Persian Themes in the Babylonian Talmud,” in S. Secunda and S. Fine (eds.), *Shoshanat Yaakov: Jewish and Iranian Studies in Honor of Yaakov Elman* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 111–136; S. Gross, “Rethinking Babylonian Rabbinic Acculturation in the Sasanian Empire,” *JAJ* 9 (2019): 280–310.

<sup>10</sup> See the excellent summary in Herman and Rubenstein, “Introduction,” xvii–xxx.

<sup>11</sup> I. Gafni, “Nestorian Literature as a Source for the History of the Babylonian *Yeshivot*,” *Tarbitz* 51 (1982): 567–576 (in Hebrew).

<sup>12</sup> A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); idem, “The Comparative Study of ‘Scholasticism’ in Late Antique Mesopotamia: Rabbis and East Syrians,” *AJS Review* 34 (2010): 91–113. Scholars of the Babylonian Talmud now regularly rely on this comparison; see, for instance, J. Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 35–37; R. Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3–4; D. Boyarin, “Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia,” in C. E. Fonrobert and M. Jaffee (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 336–363.

<sup>13</sup> Sh. Naeh, “Freedom and Celibacy: A Talmudic Variation on Tales of Temptations and Fall in Genesis and its Syrian Background,” in J. Frishman and L. Van Rompay (eds.), *The Book of*

proposal illustrates the utility of turning to Syriac literature to illuminate the Babylonian Talmud, and in particular, the stories (*aggada*) therein. These studies of Gafni and Naeh did not, however, immediately spawn a wave of similar studies. Rather, the turn to Syriac took time to percolate. But, by the second decade of this millennium, a number of studies began to appeal to Syriac texts to shed light on Jewish Babylonian literature, and this work continues to the present.<sup>14</sup> In fact, several contributions in this volume, including those by M. Bar-Asher Siegal (pp. 27–46), G. Herman (pp. 145–153), R. Kalmin (pp. 155–169), and J. Rubenstein (pp. 255–279), fall within this trajectory, which could, we propose, be call Syro-Talmudica.

In theory at least, Syriac studies has much to offer for the contextualization of Babylonian Judaism. Syriac and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic are both dialects of

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*Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation* (TEG 5; Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 73–89. The Hebrew version was published as Sh. Naeh, “Heruta,” in *Issues in Talmudic Research: Conference Commemorating the Fifth Anniversary of the Passing of Ephraim E. Urbach, 2 December 1996* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2001), 10–27. See also Bar-Asher Siegal’s contribution to this volume (pp. 27–46 below), which builds upon Naeh’s insight.

<sup>14</sup> Among the many studies that could be cited here, see M. Bar-Asher Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); A. Becker, “Bringing the Heavenly Academy Down to Earth: Approaches to the Imagery of Divine Pedagogy in the East-Syrian Tradition,” in R. Boustán and A. Y. Reed (eds.), *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 174–191; idem, “The Comparative Study of ‘Scholasticism’ in Late Antique Mesopotamia;” idem, “Polishing the Mirror: Some Thoughts on Syriac Sources and Early Judaism,” in R. Boustán et al. (eds.), *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), vol. 2, 897–916; S. Gross, “When the Jews Greeted Ali: Sherira Gaon’s Epistle in Light of Arabic and Syriac Historiography,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 24 (2017): 122–144; idem, “A Persian Anti-Martyr Act: The Death of Rabbah Bar Nahmani,” in Rubenstein and Herman, *The Aggada of the Babylonian Talmud and its Cultural World*, 211–242; G. Herman, *A Prince without a Kingdom: The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era* (TSAJ 150; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); R. Kalmin, *Migrating Tales: The Talmud’s Narratives and their Historical Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); R. Kiperwasser and S. Ruzer, “Zoroastrian Proselytes in Rabbinic and Syriac Christian Narratives: Orality-Related Markers of Cultural Identity,” *HR* 51 (2011): 197–218; eidem, “To Convert a Persian and Teach him the Holy Scriptures: A Zoroastrian Proselyte in Rabbinic and Syriac Christian Narratives,” in G. Herman (ed.), *Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians: Religious Dynamics in a Sasanian Context* (JC 17; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2014), 91–127; N. Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness. Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Y. Moss, “Fish Eats Lion Eats Man: Saadia Gaon, Syriac Christianity and the Resurrection of the Dead,” *JQR* 106 (2016): 494–520; Y. Paz and Tz. Weiss, “From Encoding to Decoding: The ATBH of R. Hiyya in Light of a Syriac, Greek and Coptic Cipher,” *JNES* 74 (2015): 45–65; Y. Paz, “‘Meishan is Dead’: On the Historical Contexts of the Bavli’s Representations of the Jews in Southern Babylonia,” in Rubenstein and Herman, *The Aggada of the Babylonian Talmud and its Cultural World*, 47–99; J. Rubenstein, “A Rabbinic Translation of Relics,” in K. Stratton and A. Lieber (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity: Ambiguities, Complexities, and Half-Forgotten Adversaries: Essays in Honor of Alan F. Segal* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 314–334; C. Shepardson, “Interpreting the Ninevites’ Repentance: Jewish and Christian Exegeses in Late Antique Mesopotamia,” *Hugoye* 14 (2011): 249–277.

Aramaic, and they share much in common linguistically, from lexicon to morphology and syntax.<sup>15</sup> In addition, Syriac Christians were present throughout the Sasanian empire, where they undoubtedly lived alongside Jews.<sup>16</sup> A huge corpus of literature survives in Syriac, whether written by Christians in the Sasanian empire, in the Eastern Roman Empire, or elsewhere. In fact, this corpus, which consists of tens of millions of words, is larger than all other surviving ancient Aramaic texts combined. Extant Syriac texts cover a range of genres, such as biblical exegesis (including but not limited to commentaries), canons, hagiography, history, law, liturgy, magic, philosophy, poetry, medicine, and science.<sup>17</sup> A large number of Syriac texts were written during Late Antiquity, and, what's more, not a small number of them are preserved in manuscripts from this period.<sup>18</sup> Thus, in many ways, the corpus of Syriac literature presents fewer methodological challenges than Zoroastrian Middle Persian literature as a comparandum for the Babylonian Talmud, though to be sure this is not a zero-sum game: Different projects and questions require different sources.

<sup>15</sup> A point of clarification is needed: It is often remarked in this regard that Syriac is an East Aramaic dialect like Jewish Babylonian Aramaic. This is not, however, so straight-forward. Traditionally, Syriac was indeed classified as a late East Aramaic dialect along with Mandaic and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic. This was, however, challenged by D. Boyarin, who argued that Syriac shares several innovations with the late West Aramaic dialects of Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, and Samaritan Aramaic (D. Boyarin, "An Inquiry into the formation of the Middle Aramaic dialects," in Y.L. Arbeitman and A.R. Bomhard [eds.], *Bono homini donum. Essays in Historical Linguistics in Memory of J. Alexander Kerns* [Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1981], vol. 2, 613–649). In light of Boyarin's article, it can no longer be maintained that Syriac is simply East Aramaic, even if it remains disputed how exactly to understand Syriac's relationship to the other Late Aramaic dialects (for further discussion, see A. M. Butts "The Classical Syriac Language," in D. King [ed.], *The Syriac World* [New York: Routledge, 2019], 224–225).

<sup>16</sup> A new history of Syriac Christians in the Sasanian Empire is needed. The classic study of J. Labourt (*Le Christianisme dans l'empire perse sous la dynastie Sassanide* [Paris: Victor Lecoffre, 1904]) has long been outdated, in terms of data and, even more so, in terms of methodology. Better is A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1936), but it is still in need of update. Several recent studies have opened new avenues of research on Christians in the Sasanian Empire, especially R.E. Payne, *A State of Mixture. Christians, Zoroastrians and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015) and K. Smith, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia: Martyrdom and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016). See also the recent overview in G. Herman, "The Syriac World in the Persian Empire," in King, *The Syriac World*, 134–145. We should note that the same could be said of the history of Jews in the Sasanian Empire: J. Neusner's *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, 1–5 (Leiden: Brill, 1965–1970) is in desperate need of replacement.

<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, there is no up-to-date history of Syriac literature. The *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage (GEDSH)*, however, contains entries for most authors of Classical Syriac. It is now available online at <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org>.

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of Syriac manuscripts, see J.F. Coakley, "Manuscripts," in *GEDSH*, 262–263 and F. Briquel-Chatonnet, "Writing Syriac. Manuscripts and inscriptions," in King, *The Syriac World*, 243–265.

In addition, there is tangible evidence that suggests that comparison between the Babylonian Talmud and Syriac literature is promising. For instance, the Babylonian Talmud seems to be aware of some traditions from the New Testament, especially according to its Syriac version, including one passage (b. Shabb. 116a–b) with a quotation of Mt 5:17, arguably according to the Syriac Peshittā version.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the various versions of *Toledot Yeshu*, which emerged at some point in Late Antiquity, possess much knowledge about Christian traditions, and at times particularly Syriac traditions, which they parody at length.<sup>20</sup> Despite connections such as these between Syriac Christians and Babylonian Jews, the results of Syro-Talmudica have not been as earth shattering as at least some scholars had initially expected. As A. Becker wrote in 2013, “With few exceptions, there are no smoking guns, no simple parallels, no Syriac tales that serve as potential sources that clearly and definitively explain obscurities in rabbinic texts.”<sup>21</sup> This is, however, slowly starting to change with several more recent studies showing how Syriac literature, at least occasionally, does in fact provide the proverbial key to unlock our understanding of passages in the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>22</sup> But, even when such ‘smoking guns’ – or even slightly less direct comparisons – are deemed plausible, the identification of such parallels should not become an end in itself without asking second-order questions of *how* and *why*. As P. Schäfer, among others, has argued, identifying “influence” necessarily comes with understanding how “the recipient actively digests the transmitted tradition, transforms it, and creates something new.”<sup>23</sup> By avoiding the search for parallels for their own sake, Syro-Talmudica, which is still very much in its infancy, can circumvent many of the pitfalls that attended the exciting but problematic beginnings of Irano-Talmudica. We are convinced that further reflection on the methodological – if not theoretical – underpinnings of Syro-Talmudica, as well as Irano-Talmudica, will only enhance our scholarship: What are we doing? Why are we doing it? How could we do it better?<sup>24</sup> Such reflection is one of the principal aims of this volume.

<sup>19</sup> P. Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); H. Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature* (TSAJ 139; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2011), 137–166, *passim*; Y. Paz, “The Torah of the Gospel: A Rabbinic Polemic against The Syro-Roman Lawbook,” *HTR* 112 (2019): 517–540.

<sup>20</sup> See D. Stökl Ben Ezra, “An Ancient List of Christian Festivals in Toledot Yeshu: Polemics as Indication for Interaction,” *HTR* 102 (2009): 481–496.

<sup>21</sup> Becker, “Polishing the Mirror,” 901.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Gross, “A Persian Anti-Martyr Act: The Death of Rabbah Bar Nahmani” as well as several contributions in this volume.

<sup>23</sup> See his *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 232, and surrounding discussion.

<sup>24</sup> To quote Becker once again: “... to take advantage of these [Syriac] sources, scholars must reflect methodologically and theoretically on the nature of comparison as well as on the cultural conditions of antiquity that make comparisons historiographically productive” (Becker, “Polishing the Mirror,” 897).

While comparative scholarship often defaults to searches for ‘smoking guns’, this is hardly the only type of comparative study. Rather, Syriac literature and the Christian communities that produced it provide a corpus of texts and a range of historical and social data that are linguistically, chronologically, and geographically proximate to that of the Babylonian Talmud with which to contextualize Babylonian Jews. As a first step, we will mention here one alternative approach to the search for parallels that we find particularly promising: to investigate how Syriac Christians and Babylonian Jews (as well as other communities) responded to common stimuli within their Sasanian context.<sup>25</sup> This approach does not look for influence or depend on interaction between Syriac Christians and Babylonian Jews, but rather in this approach the two groups serve as foils for one another, enabling scholars to find meaning among dissimilarities as well as similarities. Becker has used this methodology in analyzing the East Syriac School of Nisibis and the Babylonian Yeshivot.<sup>26</sup> A similar methodology has been employed by Herman in his studies of the Jewish *resh galuta* and the East Syriac Catholicos.<sup>27</sup> Such an approach opens further avenues of exploration, such as studies that do not select a single community as a starting point but instead view them with a significant level of abstraction to ask broader questions about the experience of non-Iranian or non-Muslim minorities in the Sasanian and Islamic Empires, respectively.

So far in this section we have focused exclusively on how scholars of Jewish studies have looked to Syriac texts to illuminate our understanding of Babylonian Judaism. Scholars in Syriac studies have, in turn, looked to Jewish texts to further their research in Syriac Christianity. This line of enquiry has, however, developed along a different trajectory.

Syriac Christianity, as well as Christianity writ large, shares of course a common heritage with Judaism. So, perhaps it is only natural that scholars in Syriac studies have often looked to this common heritage to explain various features of Syriac Christianity, especially in the early period. The most straight-forward example of this is the Old Testament Peshiṭta: There is now general consensus that the Old Testament Peshiṭta was translated directly from Hebrew, and on this basis, as well as others, most Syriac scholars maintain that the text was translated by Jews and only later – even if only *slightly* later – adopted by Syriac Christians.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See Becker, “Polishing the Mirror,” 900–901; A. M. Butts and S. Gross, *The History of the ‘Slave of Christ’: From Jewish Child to Christian Martyr* (PMAS 6; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2016), 8 fn. 21; Gross, “Irano-Talmudica and Beyond.” For an application of this approach, see S. Gross, *Empire and Neighbors: Babylonian Jewish Identity in its Local and Imperial Context* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> Becker, “The Comparative Study of ‘Scholasticism’ in Late Antique Mesopotamia;” idem, “Bringing the Heavenly Academy Down to Earth.”

<sup>27</sup> See Herman, *A Prince without a Kingdom* and especially his contribution below (pp. 145–153).

<sup>28</sup> The classic articulation of this argument is M. P. Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). See, published around the same

Thus, with the Old Testament Peshiṭta, we have a part of the Syriac tradition that diachronically derives from Judaism.

This connection has been further developed in a now classic study by S. P. Brock in which he compares the Syriac phrase *'etgli 'al* 'it was revealed *over*' to similar phrases in the Jewish Targumim, especially in Targumim of Palestinian provenance.<sup>29</sup> According to Brock, this feature of the Syriac language first entered Syriac Christianity by way of Jewish converts (for him, the same ones who served as the pivot for the Old Testament Peshiṭta), and it is in this way that the feature was then transmitted to fourth-century Syriac authors, such as Aphraḥaṭ (fl. 336–345) and Ephrem (d. 373), as well as beyond. For Brock, this transmission from Judaism into Syriac Christianity was not limited – and this is important – to this single linguistic feature, but rather this feature is representative of a broader pathway from Judaism into Syriac Christianity. In Brock's words:

... it would seem best to posit the existence ... of other Christian communities in the area of northern Mesopotamia whose origin was in Judaism, and whose orientation remained decidedly Jewish in character. Such a view would seem to accord best with the evidence, of which the phrase *'etgli 'al* considered here is just a single strand. It will have been from such communities that at least most of the Jewish features in fourth-century Syriac writers derive, and, one might add, it was thanks to them that narrative haggadic techniques continued to live on in Christian Syriac literature for some centuries.<sup>30</sup>

According to this argument, which we will label 'the inheritance model', "Jewish features" such as the "narrative haggadic technique" that is found in Syriac texts like the two fifth-century metrical homilies (*mēmṛē*) on Abraham and Isaac, to which Brock alludes here, are due to the Jewish heritage of Syriac Christianity, having been transmitted from Judaism into an early Syriac Christian community "whose origin was in Judaism" through fourth-century Syriac authors such as Aphraḥaṭ and Ephrem up to the fifth century.<sup>31</sup>

This inheritance model, if accepted, would seem to offer *prima facie* a good deal of explanatory power. It could, for instance, perhaps explain the many

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time, S. P. Brock, "The Peshitta Old Testament. Between Judaism and Christianity," *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 19 (1998): 483–502. We should mention that ter Haar Romeny has put forward a slightly-different proposal: Instead of Weitzman's 'Jews on their way to Christianity', ter Haar Romeny maintains that the translators were 'Christians who were just recently Jews' – the wordings in scare-quotes are ours (R. B. ter Haar Romeny, "Hypotheses on the Development of Judaism and Christianity in Syria in the Period after 70 c.e.," in H. van de Sandt [ed.], *Matthew and the Didache. Two Documents from the Same Jewish-Christian Milieu?* [Assen: Van Gorcum, 2005], 13–33). This does not, however, affect our argument here, since the Old Testament Peshiṭta would still be explained by the Jewish heritage of Syriac Christianity. For discussion of this debate, see Gross, pp. 121–144, in this volume.

<sup>29</sup> S. P. Brock, "A Palestinian Targum Feature in Syriac," *JJS* 46 (1995): 271–282.

<sup>30</sup> Brock, "A Palestinian Targum Feature in Syriac," 282.

<sup>31</sup> The two fifth-century metrical homilies on Abraham and Isaac to which Brock alludes are edited with an English translation in S. P. Brock, "Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac," *Le Muséon* 99 (1986): 61–129.

commonalities between Ephrem's exegesis and Jewish texts: There are so many of these commonalities in fact that Narinskaya, the most recent author of a book on the topic, labeled Ephrem "a 'Jewish' Sage"<sup>32</sup> The inheritance model has also been used to explain the alleged 'Jewish' nature of Syriac asceticism.<sup>33</sup> Or, to take one final example, Rouwhorst in a frequently cited study invokes the inheritance model to explain 'Jewish' features of Syriac liturgy as well as relatedly of church architecture.<sup>34</sup>

Several of the underlying presuppositions of the inheritance model have, however, been undermined by recent scholarship. One series of challenges arises from scholarship on 'The Ways that Never Parted'.<sup>35</sup> In most of its iterations, the inheritance model assumes a *relatively early* split between Judaism and Syriac Christianity. For Brock, for instance, there is an early point where Christian communities in northern Mesopotamia "remained decidedly Jewish in character," but – and this is crucial to the model – this shortly gave way so that by the fourth century Christianity and Judaism were distinct, reified entities.<sup>36</sup> Recent scholarship has, however, questioned whether the distinction between 'Christians' and 'Jews' were widespread, if operative at all, before the fourth century in the Roman Empire.<sup>37</sup> This is not to say of course that some authors as early as Justin Martyr (d. 165) or even Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. 108) were not trying to reify a distinction between 'Christians' and 'Jews' but only that such a reification was not pervasive at the time of their writing. It has further been suggested that the distinction between 'Christians' and 'Jews' would have materialized even later in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire and especially in the Sasanian empire.<sup>38</sup> In addition,

<sup>32</sup> E. Narinskaya, *Ephrem, a 'Jewish' Sage: A Comparison of the Exegetical Writings of St. Ephrem the Syrian and Jewish Traditions* (Studia Traditionis Theologiae 7; Turnhout: Brepols, 2010). The present authors have many issues with Narinskaya's study (for one example, see fn. 88 below). See also the review of J. E. Walters, in *Hugoye* 16 (2010): 195–198. We should also mention the earlier work of T. Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis 1–11 in the Genuine Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian, with Particular Reference to the Influence of Jewish Exegetical Traditions* (Lund: Gleerup, 1978).

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, the classic statement in A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East* (CSCO 184, 197, 500; Leuven: Peeters, 1958–1988), vol. 1, 9–10, as well as the extended discussion, with many references, in Gross's contribution below (pp. 121–144, esp. pp. 134–140).

<sup>34</sup> G. Rouwhorst, "Jewish Liturgical Traditions in Early Syriac Christianity," *VC* 51 (1997): 72–93.

<sup>35</sup> The classic statement is A. Y. Reed and A. H. Becker (eds.), *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (TSAJ 95; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> It is crucial to the model because otherwise fourth-century Syriac authors would not need to derive their Jewish traditions from an earlier time period, as Brock has it.

<sup>37</sup> Immensely influential in this regard has been D. Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), esp. 1–41.

<sup>38</sup> See the intriguing but still largely unrealized suggestion in A. H. Becker, "Beyond the Spatial and Temporal Limes: Questioning the 'Parting of the Ways' Outside the Roman Empire," in Becker and Reed, *The Ways that Never Parted*, 373–392.

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