

## TALMUDIC TEXT AND IRANIAN CONTEXT: ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF TWO TALMUDIC NARRATIVES

by

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### I. IRANO-TALMUDIC RESEARCH AND THE INTERNAL-HERMENEUTICAL SCHOOL

The past few years have witnessed an expansion of the range of sources that Talmudists regularly employ in their research on the Bavli.<sup>2</sup> Scholars now turn to Iranian epic and folk literature;<sup>3</sup> to Zoroastrian, Manichaean, and Eastern Christian ritual and theological writings;<sup>4</sup> to Sasanian civil

1. I would like to thank the following mentors, colleagues, and friends for their gracious aid in helping me conceive of, construct, and edit this paper: Michal Bar-Asher, David Berger, Yaakov Elman, Shamma Friedman, Gershon Hepner, Geoffrey Herman, Richard Kalmin, Drew Kaplan, Reuven Kiperwasser, Menahem Kister, Jeffrey Rubenstein, Shaul Shaked, P. Oktor Skjærvø, Amram Tropper, Julie Weisman, Barry Wimpfheimer, and the anonymous reader for the *AJS Review*.

2. This achievement must be credited to Yaakov Elman, who has campaigned most intensely for a broadening of focus in talmudic studies. Aside from his many articles listed here, with this goal in mind, he has presented papers and organized sessions at conferences and meetings in the United States, Israel, and Germany.

3. See Geoffrey 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, no. 2 (2005): 283–98. For an earlier example, see Daniel Sperber, “On the Unfortunate Adventures of Rav Kahana: A Passage of Saboraic Polemic from Sasanian Persia,” *Irano-Judaica*, ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1982), 83–100. In an article published in the same volume, E. S. Rosenthal strongly urges Talmudists to study Middle Persian language and literature. See his “La-milon ha-talmudi: Talmudica Iranica,” in Shaked and Netzer, *Irano-Judaica*, 38–134 (Hebrew section).

4. For the Bavli’s response to the theological debates that animated Zoroastrian and Manichaean religious polemic, see Yaakov Elman, “Acculturation to Elite Persian Norms and Modes of Thought in the Babylonian Jewish Community of Late Antiquity,” in *Neti’ot le-David*, ed. Yaakov Elman, Ephraim Bezael Halivni, and Zvi Arie Steinfeld (Jerusalem: Orhot, 2004), 31–56; idem, “Rav Yosef be’idan rit̄ha, *Bar Ilan* 30–31 (2006): 9–20; and idem, “‘He in His Cloak and She in Her Cloak’: Conflicting Images of Sexuality in Sasanian Mesopotamia,” in *Discussing Cultural Influences: Text, Context, and Non-Text in Rabbinic Judaism*, ed. Rivka Ulmer (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007). To my knowledge, no one has compared Manichaean and rabbinic legal or ritual systems.

A preliminary study of the uses of Nestorian literature for understanding the Talmud can be found in Isaiah Gafni, “Ḥiburim nestorianim ke-makor le-toldot yeshivot bavel,” *Tarbiz* 51 (1982): 567–76. Adam Becker has advanced the research on these Christian schools in ways that will directly

law;<sup>5</sup> and to other nonrabbinic sources in an effort to broaden and deepen their understanding of the Bavli and its place in the “splendid confusion” that was Sasanian Mesopotamian society.<sup>6</sup> As Yaakov Elman has pointed out, this research trend serves as a corrective for more than half a century of scholarly neglect, which was only encouraged by a dearth of critical editions of Middle Persian literature and more general studies of Sasanian culture and religions.<sup>7</sup> Now, following a steady output of some long-anticipated editions,<sup>8</sup> and, more significantly, as a result of recent collaboration between Talmudists and Iranists,<sup>9</sup> the coming years hold great promise for a radically new understanding of the Bavli and its world.

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affect scholarship on the Bavli; see his *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). Naomi Koltun-Fromm looks at the relationship between Eastern Christian and rabbinic exegesis in her doctoral dissertation, “Jewish-Christian Polemics in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversation” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1994). More recently, see Naomi Koltun-Fromm, “Zippora’s Complaint: Moses Is Not Conscientious in the Deed! Exegetical Traditions of Moses’ Celibacy,” in *The Ways That Never Parted*, ed. Adam Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 293–307. Daniel Boyarin has generally emphasized the role of Christianity on the formation of Rabbinic Judaism. However, he does not limit his research to the Bavli and Eastern Christian writings. Still, in his “Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia,” in *Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 336–63, he hints most explicitly at the role of *Eastern* Christian learning in influencing what he calls the Bavli’s “indeterminacy.”

5. See Yaakov Elman, “Marriage and Marital Property in Rabbinic and Sasanian Law,” in *Rabbinic Law in Its Roman and Near Eastern Context*, ed. Catherine Hezser (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 227–76; idem, “‘Up to the Ears’ in Horses’ Necks (B.M. 108a): On Sasanian Agricultural Policy and Private Eminent Domain,” *Jewish Studies: An Internet Journal* 3 (2004): 95–149; idem, “Yeshivot bavel u-vatei din parsiiyim ba-tequfah ha-amorayit veba-batar amorayit,” in *Yeshivot u-batai midrash*, ed. Emanuel Etkes (Jerusalem: Mercaz Zalman Shazar, 2007), 31–55; and idem, “Returnable Gifts in Rabbinic and Sasanian Law,” in *Irano-Judaica VI*, ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer (Jerusalem: Makhon Ben Zvi, 2008). See also Maria Macuch, “Iranian Legal Terminology in the Babylonian Talmud in the Light of Sasanian Jurisprudence,” *Irano-Judaica IV* (1999): 91–101; and idem, “The Talmudic Expression ‘Servant of Fire’ in Light of Pahlavi Legal Sources,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 26 (2002): 109–29. For an early example that deals primarily with loanwords, see Ezra Spicehandler, “דינא דמגיטתא ובי דווארי: Notes on Gentile Courts in Talmudic Babylonia,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 26 (1955): 335–39.

6. Following Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Mesopotamia and the Roman East* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 25.

7. Elman, “‘Up to the Ears,’” 96–101.

8. Recent editions that are important for Talmudists include A. V. Williams, *The Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* (Copenhagen: Munksgard, 1990); Firoze M. Kotwal and Philip G. Kreyenbrock, *The Hērbedestān and Nērangestān*, 3 vols. (Paris: Association pour l’Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 1992–2003); Maria Macuch, *Rechtskasuistik und Gerichtspraxis zu Beginn des siebenten Jahrhunderts in Iran: Die Rechtssammlung des Farrohmard ī Wahrāmān* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993); Carlo G. Cereti, *The Zand ī Wahman Yasn* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1995); Mahmoud Jaafari-Dehaghi, *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* (Paris: Association pour l’Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 1998); and Jaleh Amouzgar and Ahmad Tafazzoli, *Le cinquième livre du Dēnkard* (Paris: Association pour l’Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 2000).

9. This collaboration has Talmudists studying Middle Iranian languages with Iranists, resulting in the formation of working groups that consist of Iranists and Talmudists and two recent international

Interestingly, a important parallel trend has pulled the field in a different, if not diametrically opposed, direction. Renewed interest in rabbinic hermeneutics and the modes of amoraic and stammaitic interpretation of the Bible and earlier rabbinic texts has some scholars emphasizing the need to carefully analyze rabbinic data internally before running to the “foreign gods” of Sasanian Mesopotamia. Perhaps the most eloquent expression of this position can be found in Christine Hayes’s *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds*, published in 1997.<sup>10</sup> Responding to Talmudists and historians who, in her view, attribute the evolution of far too many a rabbinic institution and legal innovation to historical circumstances (generally, those of Roman Palestine), Hayes argues for a renewed sensitivity to the “internal” development of rabbinic discourse, and she cautions scholars against irresponsible historical-reductionism of talmudic *sugyot*. Although writing a few years prior to the resurrection of “Irano-Talmudic” research, Hayes takes aim at what is perhaps this school’s most valuable research tool: accounting for the differences between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds. Indeed, in the quest to explain why the Bavli so often diverges from the Yerushalmi in matters of law, theology, and style, Talmudists now consult Iranian sources in order to elucidate the differences between everyday life in Sasanian Mesopotamia and Roman Palestine. Although Hayes does not entirely discount geographic explanations of the Bavli–Yerushalmi divide—the book includes four chapters that do just that—she and the methodological school that *Between the Talmuds* represents clearly prioritize research of rabbinic hermeneutics over the cultural background of rabbinic texts.

On reflection, these two views are not necessarily antagonistic. The fact that the pendulum of scholarly temperaments has swung in opposite directions at the very same time provides Talmudists with the opportunity to engage text and context simultaneously—and to do so with vigor. Instead of privileging one axis over the other, the measured use of advances in the study of rabbinic hermeneutics, together with an ever-increasing appreciation of the Bavli’s Sasanian milieu, can be profitably mined to produce exciting and methodologically sound scholarship.

To that end, I have selected two talmudic narratives that, when carefully probed, exemplify both the challenge and the promise of the marriage of these two research trends. I will argue that careful attention to the hermeneutical engagement of two talmudic storytellers with their sources reveals a similar history of development that can be most profitably explained by recourse to the Bavli’s

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conferences during which Talmudists and Iranists met together—the Sixth Irano-Judaica Conference at the University of Hamburg in September 2006, and a conference entitled “The Talmud in its Iranian Context,” held in May 2007 at the University of California, Los Angeles.

10. Christine Hayes, *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For a brief summary of the positions of both schools, see Beth A. Berkowitz, “Decapitation and the Discourse of Antisyncretism in the Babylonian Talmud,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70 (2002): 743–69. Berkowitz argues for dissolution of the “hermeneuticist”/historian divide and, interestingly enough, grounds the modern scholarly debate in the Bavli’s own struggle. My task in this article is to demonstrate *methodologically* how mutual engagement with hermeneutical and historical tools might appear.

Iranian context. In both cases, older material articulates concern over the legitimacy of two rabbinic practices internally—that is, without mention of any “outsiders” or external forces that challenge, in one way or another, rabbinic authority. However, in a later form that is expressed in the final redaction of the two stories, the preexisting concerns are “externalized” and now refer to encounters between rabbis and Zoroastrians, or, perhaps, “Zoroastrianized” Jews. I argue that the externalization of previously anonymous rabbinic voices and literary characters signifies an intensification of the effect that Jewish–Zoroastrian interaction had on the rabbis and their world.

## II. RAVA AND IFRA HORMIZ (B. NIDDAH 20B)

The first story appears toward the end of an extensive *sugya* concerning rabbinic “blood science”<sup>11</sup>—the diagnostic process of ruling on women’s bloodstains in order to determine whether there is evidence of menstruation and, as a result, the need to abstain from sexual relations. Elsewhere, I have demonstrated how this *sugya* weaves an increasingly complicated web of stringencies and intricacies that render the practical application of rabbinic “blood science” nearly impossible.<sup>12</sup> Instead, the Bavli relegates the practice to certain extraordinary rabbis, such as R. Hanina of Sepphoris, who, through diagnostic talent and even antinomianism, represents a new type of rabbinic hero. While the parallel Yerushalmi *sugya* acknowledges the difficulty of ruling on bloodstains while valorizing the extraordinary aptitude of some rabbis who do so, the Bavli sets out to marginalize the application of “blood science” through, among other rhetorical strategies, praise of the rabbinic “heroes” of earlier generations coupled with a loss of confidence in the skills of contemporary rabbis.

The narrative concerning Rava and the Sasanian queen mother, Ifra Hormiz,<sup>13</sup> in B. Niddah 20b presents us with an interesting case that in some ways depicts Rava as one such rabbinic hero, yet in others betrays deep anxiety about the practice of “blood science.”

אפרא הורמיז אמה דשבור מלכא שדרה דמא לקמיה דרבא הוה יתיב רב עובדיה קמיה ארזיה  
אמר לה האי דם חמווד הוא אמרה ליה לבריה תא חזי כמה חכימי יהודאי א"ל דלמא כסומא  
בארובה הדר שדרה ליה שתין<sup>14</sup> מיני דמא וכולהו אמרינהו ההוא בתרא דם כנים הוה ולא ידע  
אסתייע מילתא ושדר לה סריקתא דמקטלא כלמי אמרה יהודאי בתוויני<sup>15</sup> דלבא יתביתו

11. B. Niddah 19a–21a. This term was coined by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert in her *Menstrual Purity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

12. Samuel Secunda, “*Dashana—‘ki derekh nashim li’*”: A Study of the Babylonian Rabbinic Laws of Menstruation in Relation to Corresponding Zoroastrian Texts” (PhD diss., Yeshiva University, 2007), 61–108.

13. We have no record, Sasanian or otherwise, of a queen mother named Ifra Hormiz, though our sources seldom provide details of the Sasanian royal family. The name appears as a client in a Mandaean incantation bowl. See David Goodblatt, “‘ypr’ hwrmyz Mother of King Shapur and ‘pr’ hwrmyz Mother of Khusro: A Note on the Name ‘ypr’/‘ypr’ hwrmyz,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96, no. 1 (1976): 135–36.

14. Ms Vatican 111 substitutes כמה.

15. Ms Vatican 113 (and similar in Antonin). Mss Vatican 111, Vatican 127 Munich 95:

בתוויני.

Ifra Hormiz, the mother of King Shapur, sent [a sample of] blood before Rava. Rav Ovadiah was sitting in his presence. [Rava] smelled it. He said to her “this is blood of desire!” She said to her son, “Come [and] see how wise the Jews are!” He said to her, “It is quite possible that [he chanced upon it] like a blind man on a window.”<sup>16</sup> Thereupon she sent [Rava] sixty kinds of blood, and he identified them all—[but] the last one was lice blood, and he did not recognize it. [Nevertheless,] the matter was successful<sup>17</sup> and he sent her a comb that exterminates lice. She exclaimed, “O Jews, you dwell in the chambers of the heart!”

The tale can be logically divided into two parts. In the first half, Ifra Hormiz sends the fourth-century Amora, Rava, a sample of her vaginal blood to examine its purity status.<sup>18</sup> Rava correctly rules on this sample of Ifra Hormiz’s blood and earns the queen mother’s praise of the Jews. A transitional passage has King Shapur doubting Rava’s expertise. This leads to the second half of the story, in which Ifra Hormiz tests Rava by sending him sixty samples of blood. Here, Rava nearly fails the examination when he is confounded by the last bloodstain.

16. The term *ke-suma be-arubah* also appears at B. Bava’ Batra’ 12b, where it, too, seems to connote a fortuitous circumstance. However, its precise meaning has not yet been determined. Michal Bar-Asher-Segal, “Ifra Hormiz Imma de-Shavor Malka” (unpublished paper, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2003), 14, lists three possible meanings for the phrase: (1) Rashi’s (ad loc., s.v. *ve-lav ta’ama ka-amar*), that it refers to a blind man who stumbles upon a chimney (following Hosea 13:3). (2) In Middle Hebrew, the term means a ceiling window. Thus, the phrase perhaps refers to a situation where a blind man stands next to a ceiling window yet cannot see in. (3) In Ecclesiastes 12:2, *arubah* refers to the white of the eye. Accordingly, because only the pupil “sees,” the phrase refers to the “blindness” of that portion of the eye.

17. The Aramaic term *ist’aya miltah* (the matter was successful) is ambiguous and may imply heavenly intercession or pure luck.

18. Later, I will discuss the significance of Ifra Hormiz, a non-Jewish woman, sending her menstrual blood to a rabbi for examination. Notably, Ifra Hormiz is depicted elsewhere in the Bavli as participating in Jewish commandments. See B. Bava’ Batra’ 8a (financial support for “a great commandment”—interpreted by Abaye as redeeming Jewish captives) and B. Zevahim 116b (an animal sacrifice to be brought in the name of the Jewish God). Regardless of the historicity of these accounts, they contribute to our understanding of Ifra Hormiz’s character in rabbinic culture. Not only was she seen as in awe of the Jews’ supernatural powers (B. Ta’anit 24b and B. Niddah 20b) and financially supportive of individual rabbis (B. Bava’ Batra’ 10b, which, from a literary perspective, may be connected to B. Hagigah 5b), but also she participated in some Jewish practices as well. Accordingly, I consider the depiction of Ifra Hormiz’s initial sending of menstrual blood to Rava as not simply a test of Rava’s ability, but an expression of genuine concern for her menstrual purity. On the other hand, her subsequent sending of sixty blood samples should be understood as a test, which, like the anecdote recorded at B. Ta’anit 24b, was initiated by her son, King Shapur.

Further research needs to be conducted on the cultural meaning of Ifra Hormiz’s image in rabbinic texts and differing conceptions of King Shapur’s *wife* in Syriac literature. For the time being, see Albert de Jong, “Zoroastrian Religious Polemics and Their Contexts: Interconfessional Relations in the Sasanian Empire,” in *Religious Polemics in Context: Papers presented to the Second International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions*, ed. T. L. Hetteema and A. van der Kooij (Assen: Royal van Gorcum, 2004), 48–63.

Luckily, he unknowingly sends a delousing<sup>19</sup> comb as a gift to the queen mother, which she understands as a subtle hint at the origin of the last blood sample.<sup>20</sup>

### III. R. ELAZAR B. PEDAT AND THE BLOOD OF DESIRE (B. NIDDAH 20B)

The preceding narrative at B. Niddah 20b is nearly identical to the first half of the Rava tale. It depicts the third-generation Amora, R. Elazar (B. Pedat), using his sense of smell to determine that a bloodstain is indeed “the blood of desire.”

דההיא אתתא דאיתא דמא לקמיה דרבי אלעזר הוה יתיב רבי אמאי<sup>21</sup> קמיה ארזיה אמר לה האי דם חימוד הוא בטר דנפקא אטפל לה רבי אמאי א"ל בעלי היה בדרך וחמדתי קרי עליה סוד ה' ליראיו

Because a certain woman brought [a sample of] blood before R. Elazar. R. Ammi was sitting in his presence. [R. Elazar] smelled it. He said to her, “this is blood of desire.” After she left, R. Ammi joined her. She said to him, “My husband was [away] on a journey, and I desired him.” [R. Ammi] applied to [R. Elazar] the verse, “the secret of the Lord is with them that fear him (Psalms 25:14).”

### IV. R. ELAZAR B. R. SHIMON AND THE SIXTY BLOODSTAINS (B. BAVA' MEZI'A'4B)

The second half of the Rava tale shares some structural features with a story told about the fourth-generation Tanna, R. Elazar b. R. Shimon (B. Yoḥai):<sup>22</sup>

יומא חד נפק לבי מדרשא איתי לקמיה שתין מיני דמא טהרינהו כולהו הוו קא מרגני רבנן עליה אמרי אפשר דלית בהו חד ספק אמ' להו אם כמותי הוא יהו כולם זכרים ואם לאו נקבה אחת ביניהם היו כולם זכרים אסיקו להו ר' אלעזר על שמיא

One day [R. Elazar b. R. Shimon] went out to the study hall. They brought before him sixty kinds of blood. He declared them all pure. The rabbis were criticizing him. They said, “Is it possible that there was not among them one [case of] doubt?” He retorted, “If it be as I [ruled], let them all be males; and if not, [let there be even] one female among them.” They were all males. They took [the name] “Elazar” after his name.

19. Literally, “a comb that kills lice.”

20. Rava's gift of a delousing comb should not be seen as bizarre. Because Zoroastrianism commands its adherents to destroy *xrafstar* (noxious creatures), which include lice, the gift would have been quite appropriate. See P. Oktor Skjærnø, “Of Lice and Men and the Manichean Anthropology,” in *Festschrift Georg Buddrus, Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 19 (1994): 269–86; Maria Macuch, “On the Treatment of Animals in Zoroastrian Law,” in *Iranica Selecta*, ed. Alois van Tongerloo (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 167–90; and Mahnaz Moazami, “Evil Animals in the Zoroastrian Religion,” *History of Religions* 44 (2005): 300–317. Notably, an almost “religious” disdain for lice seems to have been absorbed by some Babylonian rabbis. See B. Shabbat 12a: “Rabbah killed [lice], and R. Shesheth killed them. Rava threw them into a basin of water. R. Nahman said to his daughter, ‘Kill them and let me hear the sound of the hated ones’” (emphasis added). See also Elman, “He in His Cloak.”

21. Ms Vatican 113: אסי (in both instances)

22. B. Bava' Mezi'a' 84b. The Hebrew text is a transcription of Ms Hamburg 165.

V. THE LITERARY DEVELOPMENT OF NIDDAH II

When placing the R. Elazar and Rava stories in synoptic columns, we discover that the R. Elazar traditions constitute the primary building blocks of the Rava tale.<sup>23</sup>

<b><u>Niddah 20b (I)</u></b>	<b><u>Niddah 20b (II)</u></b>	<b><u>Bava' Mezi'a' 84b</u></b>
(A) Because a certain woman brought [a sample of] blood before R. Elazar.	(A) Ifra Hormiz, the mother of King Shapur, sent [a sample of] blood before Rava.	
(B) R. Ammi was sitting in his presence.	(B) R. Ovadiah was sitting in his presence.	
(C) [R. Elazar] smelled it. He said to her, "This is blood of desire."	(C) [Rava] smelled it. He said to her, "This is blood of desire!"	
(D) After she left, R. Ammi joined her.		
(E) She said to him, "My husband was [away] on a journey, and I desired him."		
(F) [R. Ammi] applied to [R. Elazar] the verse, "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him."	(F) She said to her son, "Come see how wise the Jews are!"	

*Continued*

23. The critical method that I employ here and throughout the paper assumes the predominance of the role of the *stammaim*—the Talmud’s anonymous redactors—in the shaping and transmitting of the Bavli’s traditions. Building on the research of previous scholars such as Julius Kaplan, Hyman Klein, and Avraham Weiss, this approach was more completely developed by Shamma Friedman and David Halivni-Weiss primarily for talmudic legal passages, and then applied to talmudic narratives by Jeffrey Rubenstein. See, e.g., Shamma Yehudah Friedman, "Perek ha-isha rabbah be-bavli, be-tziruf mevo klali al derekh heker ha-sugya," in *Mehkarim u-mekorot*, vol. 1 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978); David Halivni-Weiss, *Midrash, Mishnah, and Gemara: The Jewish Pre-dilection for Justified Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 76–92; and Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

TABLE 1 (contd.)

<u>Niddah 20b (I)</u>	<u>Niddah 20b (II)</u>	<u>Bava' Mezi'a' 84b</u>
	<p>(G) He said to her, "It is quite possible that [he chanced upon it] like a blind man on a window."</p> <p>(A') Thereupon she sent him sixty kinds of blood,</p> <p>(C') and he identified them all,</p> <p>(D') [but] the last one was lice blood, and he did not recognize it.</p> <p>(E') [Nevertheless], the matter was successful and he sent her a comb that exterminates lice.</p> <p>(F') She exclaimed, "You Jews dwell in the chambers of the heart."</p>	<p>(A') They brought before him sixty kinds of blood.</p> <p>(C') He declared them all pure.</p> <p>(D') The rabbis were criticizing him. They said, "is it possible that there was not among them one [case of] doubt?"</p> <p>(E') He retorted, "If it be as I [ruled] let them all be males; and if not, [let there be even] one female among them. They were all males.</p> <p>(F') They took [the name] "Elazar" after his name.</p>

Let us first examine the relationship between the Rava story (Niddah II) and the one that appears directly before it (Niddah I). Structurally, the two are nearly identical: (A) A woman sends or brings a blood sample to a rabbi. (B) We are told that the rabbi's student is sitting before him. (C) The rabbi examines the blood and declares that it is not menstrual, but rather is the "blood of desire." (F) Rabbinic or Jewish insight is praised.

The similarity between the two narratives is in some aspects related to "the good story worth retelling"—a talmudic literary technique recently examined by Shamma Friedman.<sup>24</sup> As in B. Yevamot 121a, in which an identical shipwreck

24. Shamma Friedman, "A Good Story Deserves Retelling—The Unfolding of the Akiva Legend," *Jewish Studies: An Internet Journal* 3 (2004): 55–93.

legend is told about two different generations of rabbis, the hero of Niddah I is R. Elazar b. Pedat, a second-generation Palestinian Amora who appears with his student R. Ammi,<sup>25</sup> while the hero of Niddah II is the fourth-generation Babylonian sage Rava, who appears with his student Rav Ovadiah. Actually, the mirroring of the tales is so thorough that some talmudic commentators have drawn attention to the fact that Rav Ovadiah is listed at the beginning of Niddah II even though he plays no function at all in the narrative.<sup>26</sup> From a source-critical perspective, Rav Ovadiah's appearance constitutes a type of "literary leftover." Specifically, Rav Ovadiah's appearance in Niddah II simply imitates the role of R. Ammi in Niddah I, who was needed to examine and confirm the aptitude of his master R. Elazar—a task that is missing and presumably unnecessary in the second tale. This should alert us to the possibility that, initially, a tradition told about R. Elazar was reworked to form the first half of the Rava tale.

An examination of the structural relationship between B. Bava' Mezi'a' 84b and the second half of Niddah II yields similar results. Although there are more significant differences between them, these are outlined later. Both contain (A'), the sending of sixty blood samples before a rabbi; (C'), his ruling (with unstated results) or his citation of the purification of all, or nearly all, of these samples; (D'), a moment of doubt concerning his abilities; (E'), a miraculous or lucky confirmation of the ruling; and finally (F'), praise of the rabbi's aptitude through either the exclamation of a laudatory folk saying or the naming of children conceived from that night's sexual union after him.<sup>27</sup>

Daniel Boyarin and Shamma Friedman have examined the complex of R. Elazar b. R. Shimon stories collected at the beginning of the seventh chapter of B. Bava' Mezi'a', in which this story appears.<sup>28</sup> Boyarin argues for the strong literary relationship between two anecdotes there: namely, the sixty mats filled with R. Elazar b. R. Shimon's diseased blood and pus, and the story of the sixty bloodstains.<sup>29</sup> Apparently, the bloodstain story appears to have been worked on to fit the motifs and greater program of the R. Elazar b. R. Shimon literary cycle. This is especially clear when we take into consideration Friedman's research

25. Alternatively, Ms Vatican 113 records "R. Assi." The interchangeability in the manuscripts of these two close colleagues is a common phenomenon. Although R. Elazar and Rav Ammi were close contemporaries, R. Elazar gained recognition as his teacher's colleague (*talmid ḥaver*) and would thereby have obtained a position superior to R. Ammi. See Chanokh Albeck, *Mavo la-talmudim* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1969), 224–28. In any case, the image of R. Ammi sitting in front of R. Elazar is the classic image of a student in the Bavli.

26. Rabbi Shlomo b. Aderet, *Ḥidushei Rashba: massekhet niddah* (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1989), columns 111–12, and R. David Luria (ad loc. in the Vilna edition).

27. The narrator assumes that as a result of R. Elazar b. R. Shimon's declaration that all of the blood samples were pure, the women were permitted to engage in sexual relations with their husbands, from which the "baby Elazars" were conceived.

28. Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 197–226; Shamma Friedman, "La-aggadah ha-historit ba-talmud ha-bavli," in *Sefer ha-zikaron le-Rabi Sha'ul Lieberman*, ed. Shamma Friedman (Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993), 119–64, esp. 122–32.

29. Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 204–206.

on the relationship between the R. Elazar cycle in B. Bava' Mezi'a' and its Palestinian counterpart in Pesikta de-Rav Kahana. Friedman describes how B. Bava' Mezi'a' inherits and ingeniously enlarges and reworks an older Palestinian collection that lacks mention of the bloodstains. In Boyarin's conception, the Babylonian collection invents grotesque elements, such as sixty bloody mattresses and bloodstains, that are barely hinted at in the Pesikta de-Rav Kahana cycle.

A comparison of the B. Bava' Mezi'a' story with Niddah I demonstrates that they, too, are similar. Both narratives contain (A, A'), the presentation of blood samples to a rabbi; (C, C'), his declaration of purity; (D, D'), doubt concerning the ruling expressed explicitly by a group of disgruntled rabbis or implicitly by a student who checks the accuracy of his teacher's ruling; (E, E'), confirmation of the ruling; and finally (F, F'), praise of the rabbi. The shared names (R. Elazar)<sup>30</sup> and nearly identical structures of the two stories suggest that the B. Bava' Mezi'a' anecdote concerning R. Elazar b. R. Shimon's ruling on the sixty samples of blood was drawn from an older tradition similar or identical to that of Niddah I, and then reworked to fit the larger program of the R. Elazar b. R. Shimon story cycle.<sup>31</sup>

Earlier, I proposed that the unnecessary appearance of Rav Ovadiah in Niddah II reveals that the direction of literary development was Niddah I > Niddah II. Now, I suggest that B. Bava' Mezi'a' is strongly related to the R. Elazar tradition found in Niddah I, and that it was reworked to fit its larger literary program. In other words, it is likely that the *stam* composed the entire Rava story at a relatively late date,<sup>32</sup> drawing its material from these two earlier narratives.<sup>33</sup> What we witness in our synopsis—two smaller literary units juxtaposed with a doubly larger unit—is actually true chronologically. Speaking mathematically, Niddah I + B. Bava' Mezi'a' = Niddah II.

## VI. THE MEANING OF THE EVOLUTION OF NIDDAH II

We are now in a position to assess what the storyteller of the Rava narrative may have wished to convey to his audience, as well as to suggest what the tale can tell us about its own context. To do so, we will examine the differences between our story's two sources and its final form. One significant variation is the personification

30. Of course, the stories are about two different rabbis. B. Bava' Mezi'a' concerns the fourth-generation Tanna R. Elazar b. R. Shimon Bar Yoḥai, while Niddah I is about the second-generation Amora R. Elazar b. Pedat.

31. In addition, the fact that both Elazars (B. Bava' Mezi'a' and Niddah I) declare the bloodstains to be pure, while we are not told in the second half of Niddah II whether Rava rules that the samples are pure or impure, indicates that the relationship between the two Elazar tales is at times even "stronger" than the correlation between the B. Bava' Mezi'a' story and its otherwise more direct parallel found in the second half of Niddah II.

32. I assume that it is more compelling to assume that the latter half of the Rava tale was composed from the final form of the B. Bava' Mezi'a' material (i.e., *after* it was reworked to fit the story cycle in B. Bava' Mezi'a') than to propose that the second half of Niddah II was an earlier reworking of Niddah I that was later assimilated into the R. Elazar b. R. Shimon complex in B. Bava' Mezi'a'.

33. As is common in talmudic narratives, there are no clear historical references. Accordingly, we can only assign a relative date to these texts based on source-critical analysis.

of Ifra Hormiz as the anonymous character(s) who in the two earlier narratives brought bloodstains for examination. The storyteller's decision to give a name to previously anonymous characters is an indication of the literary importance of that newly named individual. By supplying the rabbi with bloodstains, the women in the earlier stories merely facilitate a drama in which the rabbinic hero performs as an expert. Now, Ifra Hormiz's entrance into the Rava narrative draws the reader's attention to the interesting dynamic between the rabbi and the source of the blood samples. The problem that traditional and modern scholars have with Ifra Hormiz's "non-Jewishness"<sup>34</sup> may be attributable to their assumption that the story is essentially about Rava, and as an "extra," Ifra Hormiz should blend seamlessly into the "set." However, if Ifra Hormiz's role is an important one, her religion suggests to the audience that the story is about a rabbi and a Zoroastrian *precisely* because it relates to the stimulating dynamic of that encounter.

The structural differences between Niddah II and its antecedents are also significant. While both earlier stories end with unambiguously positive confirmations of the rabbi, the Rava tale contains more serious, open-ended moments of anxiety. Regarding the story's first half, Niddah I concludes after R. Elazar's ruling is confirmed (E) and praised (F). However, immediately following Ifra Hormiz's praise in Niddah II, Rava's skill is questioned by no less than the Sasanian King of Kings himself (G). This line has no parallel in *either* earlier version, in which both anecdotes close after the initial confirmation and praise of the rabbi. It is this crucial moment of doubt that acts as a transition into the second half of the tale, which, I suggest, is drawn from the B. Bava' Mezi'a' narrative. There, too, the primary difference between the earlier and later versions manifests itself at the end of the story. While in the R. Elazar b. R. Shimon story the rabbis merely *question* whether every ruling was correct (D'), in Niddah II the narrator frankly states that Rava was baffled by the lice blood (D).<sup>35</sup> Although R. Elazar's decision is confirmed by the miraculous birth of sixty baby boys in B. Bava' Mezi'a' (E'), Rava never comprehends the correct ruling, and he only unknowingly sends a suggestive gift to Ifra Hormiz. Most significant, King Shapur's accusation that Rava lacks expertise and only accidentally issued a correct ruling is confirmed! Although the overriding purpose of the story is probably to show Rava's incredible

34. Rashi, B. Niddah 20b; s.v. *Ifra Hormiz*; Charlotte Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 260–61; De Jong, "Zoroastrian Religious Polemics and Their Contexts"; and Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 4:37.

35. At this point, it is worth noting that as curious as it might seem to the modern student, Ifra Hormiz's sending of lice blood to Rava should not be read as a sort of "trick" question. The examination of bloodstains was intended to determine whether the blood was uterine, and therefore impure, or whether it stemmed from a wound in the vaginal cavity or from an external source altogether and therefore did not affect the woman's purity status. M. Niddah 8:2 and T. Niddah 7:4 describe lice blood as a potential alternative explanation for the appearance of blood on a cloth, and B. Niddah 14a, 19b, and 58b–59a continue this inclination as well. Indeed, later in the development of halakhah, "lice blood" becomes the typical attribution of blood when rabbinic deciders wish to rule leniently. See, e.g., Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *hilkhot issurei biah* 9:21.

ability to rule correctly on the first and subsequent fifty-nine bloodstains, Rava's lack of success at determining the final bloodstain on his own alerts the reader to some anxiety still present in the narrative.

Another related narrative concerning Rava, Ifra Hormiz, and King Shapur in B. Ta'anit 24b might confirm the observation that although the narrator wishes to demonstrate Rava's abilities when they are tested by King Shapur, there is some residual concern that perhaps the king is indeed correct in his doubt of Rava's aptitude:

ההוא גברא דאיחייב נגדא בכי דינא דרבא משום דבעל נכרית נגדיה רבא ומית אשתמע מילתא  
בי שבור מלכא בעא לצעורי לרבא אמרה ליה איפרא הורמיו אימיה דשבור מלכא לברה לא  
ליהוי לך בי פיקאר<sup>36</sup> בהדי יהודאי דכל מאן דבעיין ממרייהו יהיב להו אמר לה מאי היא בעין  
רחמי ואתי מיטרא אמר לה ההוא משום דזימנא דמיטרא הוא אלא לבעו רחמי האינדא בתקופת  
תמוז וליתי מיטרא שלחה ליה לרבא כוין דעתך ובעי רחמי דליתי מיטרא בעי רחמי ולא אתי  
מיטרא אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם אלהים באזנינו שמענו אבותינו ספרו לנו פעל פעלת בימיהם  
בימי קדם ואנו בעינינו לא ראינו אתא מיטרא עד דשפוך מרובי דמחוזא<sup>37</sup> לדיגלת אתא אבוה  
איתחזי ליה בחלמיה ואמר ליה מי איכא דמיטרח קמי שמיא כולי האי אמר ליה שני  
דוכתיך שני דוכתיה למחר אשכחיה דמרשם פורייה בסכיני

There was a certain man who was sentenced to lashing in Rava's court because he had intercourse with a non-Jewess. Rava beat him and he died. The matter was heard in the court of King Shapur. He wanted to torment Rava. Ifra Hormiz, the mother of King Shapur, said to her son, "Do not have any dispute with these Jews, for everything that they ask of their Master, He gives to them." He said to her, "What is that?" [She responded,] "They ask for mercy and rain comes." He said to her, "That is because it is the season of rain! Rather, they should request rain now in the summer season and let rain come!" She sent [the following message] to Rava, "Direct your intentions, request mercy, and let rain come." He requested mercy and rain did not come. He said before [God], "Master of the world! 'We, with our ears, have heard, O' God, our fathers have told us the deeds You performed in their time, in days of old (Psalms 44:2)'—but we, with our eyes, have not seen [them]!"<sup>38</sup> Rain came until it poured from the rain pipes of Mahoza to the Tigris. [Rava's] father came to him in a dream and said to him, "Is there anyone who bothers heaven so much [that you forced us to help bring the rain]! [Rava's father] said to him, "Change your place!" [Rava] changed his place. The next morning he woke up and found his bed incised with knives.

As in Niddah II, King Shapur doubts Rava's ability, although in this case the issue concerns Rava's ability to bring rain. When the king tests Rava during the summer months, Rava is initially ineffective, and he succeeds only by invoking the

36. [בי פיקאר] Following Ms Herzog. This word is a loanword from Middle Iranian \*paykār, "dispute." See Michael Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Gaonic Periods* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 903 s.v. פיקאר.

37. [דמחוזא] Following Ms Herzog.

38. Cf. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B 25.

miracles that the fathers merited on their own accord and through heavenly intervention. In addition, Rava's "success" is deemed a breach of earthly boundaries, and he nearly pays with his life. Although space does not permit a more extensive comparison of Niddah II and this related narrative, at the very least, it seems that a tradition circulated in Babylonia that doubted Rava's abilities in general and specifically regarding encounters with the king.<sup>39</sup> While these narratives attempt to assure the reader of Rava's ultimate ability against the king's misgivings, both retain some unsettling sentiments as well.

A further similarity between Niddah II and the Ta'anit tales is also worth noting. Both stories appear within the matrix of larger *sugyot* that express doubts about rabbinic abilities. In the case of the B. Ta'anit tale, the subject is rabbinic success—or lack thereof—in praying for rain.<sup>40</sup> Regarding Niddah II, anxiety concerning the ability of rabbis to determine the source of bloodstains is already present in the halakhic discussions of the larger B. Niddah *sugya*.<sup>41</sup> The Gemara describes a rabbi who teaches his students about different blood colors, and ends with Rav Ashi's statement that "[someone] like me, who does not know the difference between this [shade of red] and that—I do not examine blood [colors]."<sup>42</sup> Later, the Gemara describes the different methods of earlier rabbis—including R. Elazar b. Pedat—to determine the source of bloodstains, but a number of later Amoraim claim that only earlier sages were competent to employ those methods of examination.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, R. Zera expresses trepidation about trusting his sight for examining blood when he does not have the ability to understand Babylonian coinage. Finally, we read that even though he presumably had the skill, 'Ulla would refuse to examine blood in Pumbedita because it had its own resident sage, R. Yehuda. This leads into our sequence of stories (Niddah I and II), after which the Gemara concludes with yet another reason for rabbis to decline the examination of blood.

Thus, Rava's lucky ruling and Ifra Hormiz's praise represent the narrator's attempt to close off anxiety about rabbinic "blood science," just as the story about Rava praying for rain has similar goals. However, there is no denying the unsettling "loose end" that remains untied at the conclusion of Niddah II. I would argue that this represents evidence of a disruption in the fabric of the storyteller's world, which in this case is stammatitic culture. What might lie behind this disruption of rabbinic power and confidence? To return to a previous point, why must this story be transformed into a Jewish–Zoroastrian encounter? An approach to

39. See, e.g., B. Eruvin 104a; B. Bava' Bata' 127a; B. Zevahim 94b; and B. Niddah 68a. I am grateful to Yaakov Elman for these references. For further discussion, see his "The Socioeconomics of Babylonian Heresy," in *Studies in Mediaeval Halakhah in Honor of Stephen M. Passamanek*, ed. Alyssa Gray and Bernard Jackson (Lanham, MD: Jewish Law Association, 2007).

40. B. Ta'anit 24a–24b.

41. Regarding the relationship between halakhic *sugyot* and the narratives emended and adjacent to them, see Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, 265–67; and Barry Scott Wimpfheimer, "Legal Narratives in the Babylonian Talmud" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2005).

42. B. Niddah 20a.

43. B. Niddah 20b.

these questions may be sought by fusing the two innovations of the Rava–Ifra Hormiz tale together. More specifically, it is possible to see the tale’s moments of doubt as a *result* of the rabbinic encounter with Zoroastrian purity laws.

## VII. ZOROASTRIAN LAWS OF MENSTRUAL PURITY

The maintenance of purity and the avoidance of sources of impurity, including corpses, “noxious creatures,” and menstruating women, constituted a central feature of Zoroastrianism from Young Avestan times (the first half of the first millennium BCE), through the Middle Ages, and into the modern period.<sup>44</sup> The Zoroastrian menstrual laws were based on Indo-Iranian purity beliefs,<sup>45</sup> which received a distinctly Zoroastrian recasting in the Young Avestan book the *Widēwdād*, and underwent further elaboration and intense development in the different layers of the Pahlavi *Widēwdād* (PV)—its Sasanian Middle Persian Zand<sup>46</sup>—in thematically based legal compilations such as *Šāyest nē šāyest* (Permitted and Not Permitted) and in later medieval texts.<sup>47</sup> Still, for the most part, Sasanian Zoroastrianism has bequeathed a few sources to modern scholars with few sources that they can use to reconstruct its legal and ritual system—even the one conceived of by a minority, elite, priestly class. The world inhabited by Sasanian Zoroastrianism was “pervasively oral,” and it seems likely that much of Zoroastrian tradition was lost because it was not written down.<sup>48</sup> This fate was probably accelerated by Islamic persecution and conversion in the centuries following the Arab conquest, the ascendance of “book culture” in Islamic lands, and the resultant decline of oral transmission. Most of the ritual texts have come down to us in the form of manuscripts no older than the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and they frequently contain technical terms whose meaning has been long forgotten.

The most basic treatment of the menstrual purity laws in Sasanian Zoroastrianism can be found in the sixteenth chapter of the Pahlavi *Widēvdād*. Like all Zands, it consists of at least three separate layers: a Pahlavi translation of the Avesta; glosses that clarify obscure, often slavishly rendered words in that translation; and extended discussions between named and anonymous Zoroastrian

44. See Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

45. See Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 1:294.

46. Alberto Cantera, in *Studien zur Pahlavi-Übersetzung des Avesta* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), 164–239, proves the Sasanian provenance of the Zand.

47. These include the end of the fifth book of the *Dēnkard* and scattered comments in post-Sasanian responsa (*rivāyats*).

48. This term follows Yaakov Elman’s description of the Babylonian rabbinic community in “Orality and the Redaction of the Babylonian Talmud,” *Oral Tradition* 14 (1999): 52–99. For a brief discussion of the centrality of orality in Zoroastrianism, see Philip Kreyenbroek, “The Zoroastrian Tradition from an Oralist’s Point of View,” in *K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, Second International Congress Proceedings (5th to 8th January, 1995)*, ed. H. J. M. Desai and H. N. Modi (Bombay: K.R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1996), 221–37. See also my “The Sasanian *Stam*: Orality and the Composition of Babylonian Rabbinic and Zoroastrian Legal Literature” (forthcoming).

authorities. While scholars have compared the first two layers to the biblical targumim, the extended discussions display the highest degree of similarity with rabbinic compilations such as the Mishnah and Tosefta in both style and content.<sup>49</sup>

### VIII. THE THREE DISCHARGES: *ĀHRAG*, *DAXŠAG*, AND *XŌN*

The opening verse of the sixteenth chapter of the Pahlavi *Widēwdād* explains what Zoroastrians must do when a woman begins to menstruate. The Avesta employs three adjectives—*cišrauuaiti*, *daxštauuaiti*, and *vohunauuaiti*—there and elsewhere when describing menstruating women.<sup>50</sup> Despite the ambiguity of the meaning of *cišrauuaiti* and *daxštauuaiti*, it is clear that each word in the triad refers to indications of menstruation. Thus, *daxštauuaiti* roughly means “with signs (of menstruation),” and *vohunauuaiti* quite certainly denotes “with blood.” The Zand slavishly translates and then glosses each word as follows:

... *āhragōmand* [*kū zard*]<sup>51</sup> *daxšagōmand* [*tahīgōmand*] *xōnōmand* [*daštān*]  
 ...  
 ... of *āhrag* [that is: yellow]<sup>52</sup> of *daxšag* [(that is) *tahīg*] of blood [(that is) menstruation] ...

The glosses here are unanticipated in that they appear to render each Avestan-synonymous adjective differently. According to the Zand, the glosses *daštān* and *zard* apparently represent two different menstrual discharges—one regular (and presumably red), and one yellow. Although the term *tahīg* is itself ambiguous, its appearance elsewhere in the chapter to denote some sort of menstrual discharge<sup>53</sup> suggests that the Zand’s three glosses may be read as a short list of various menstrual discharges consisting of yellow, blood-red, and the undefined *tahīg*.<sup>54</sup> Again, these

49. See, e.g., Dan Shapira, “Studies in Zoroastrian Exegesis” (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1998), for a comparison to the biblical targums. See the brief comments of James Russell, “The Sage in Ancient Iranian Literature,” in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 91.

50. Pahlavi *Widēwdād* (PV) 15.7, 16.5, 16.6, 16.14, 16.17., 18.67, and 18.69.

51. Following the convention in Iranian studies, glosses are marked with square brackets.

52. It is possible that *zard* is not what we call “yellow,” but rather is a specific color *property*. See, e.g., *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag*, ed. Fereyduun Vahman (London: Curzon Press, 1986), 141, 207: “And I saw many people whose heads and beards were shaved and their faces were pale [*zard*], bodies rotten all over, and reptiles were creeping over their bodies.” Notably, this use of *zard* is similar to Hebrew *yarok* (green-yellow, but when describing human expression, it probably means “pale”). See, e.g., T. Niddah 5:3.

53. There are three meanings for the word *tahīg* in the sixteenth chapter of PV. One is “airspace” (perhaps this should be read as *tūhīg*, as it is spelled elsewhere in manuscripts). *Tahīg* may also be a legal term referring to an extra day of waiting after the cessation of the menstrual flow—as it clearly means in later Pahlavi literature. Finally, it can refer to a type of menstrual discharge. While this final meaning is only a possibility in PV 16.11.2–4 and 16.12.3, it is conclusive in 16.14.

54. Shaul Shaked has tentatively suggested that *tahīg* might be some sort of colorless substance, again related to its “primary” meaning of “emptiness” (private communication, June 2005). In other words, *zard* may mean “pale,” and *tahīg* may mean “clear.”

occur despite the fact that the Avesta clearly is not doing anything other than using three adjectives to describe a menstruant. Apparently, the rabbis were not the only religious group in late antiquity who sought to attribute various menstrual colors to their scripture through the exegesis of redundant terms.

Significantly, in both cases, this form of exegesis may be considered omniscient; that is, rabbinic and Zoroastrian exegetes offer new and distinct meanings of scriptural terms in order to avoid perceived redundancies.<sup>55</sup> As Yaakov Elman and Yuhan Vevaina have demonstrated, omniscience is not only a Jewish phenomenon, as first pointed out by James Kugel,<sup>56</sup> but here and elsewhere can be found in the work of Avestan commentators as well.<sup>57</sup> In the sense that omniscience implies a distinctly reverential posture of exegetes toward the text they are interpreting, its appearance in both Zoroastrian and rabbinic works of late antiquity is yet another important area of study for joint collaboration of Iranists and Talmudists. In the specific context of the menstrual laws, it contains a further layer of significance. From a legal-exegetical perspective, the rabbis did not “need” to derive a complex taxonomy of menstrual colors from the biblical text. Like the Samaritans, they could have read the passages in Leviticus that describe menstruants and applied a more basic approach in which women themselves determine whether their discharges are menstrual, nonmenstrual, or undetermined.<sup>58</sup> Instead, already beginning in tannaitic literature and developing in the Talmudim, the rabbis chose to develop an area of expertise entirely unanticipated in the Bible. This, in turn, required the rabbis to engage in a high level of exegetical acrobatics in order to ground the bloodstain taxonomy in the biblical text.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, the Zand chose to link these various discharges directly to the

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Alternatively, Oktor Skjærvø has suggested that *tahīg* renders Avestan *daxštauuaiti* on account of the Zoroastrian mythological origins of menstruation. Specifically, Bundahišn 4.5 describes the world’s first onset of menstruation as a *sign* of Ahriman’s kiss of the primal whore. This resulted in some kind of invisible (*tahīg*) impurity that forever accompanies menstruation.

55. Space does not permit me to delineate the rabbinic exegesis of the bloodstains. See Sifra Leviticus; Sheratzim 11:4; Zavim 4:1; Sifre Deuteronomy 152; Y. Niddah 2:3 (50a); B. Niddah 19a; and my discussion in *Secunda*, “*Dashtana*,” 62–85.

56. See Elman, “Acculturation to Elite Persian Norms,” 40 n. 13; Yuhan Vevaina’s doctoral dissertation, “Studies in Zoroastrian Exegesis and Hermeneutics with a Critical Edition of the ‘Sudgar Nask’ of ‘Denkard’ Book 9” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2007), 99–135; and James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 103–104.

57. For a similar example, see PV 18.67 regarding a man who copulates with a menstruate: *kē nārīg ī čihragōmand ud daxšagōmand xōnōmand wēnāyihā [kū wēnēd kū daštān] āgāhīhā [kū dānēd kū wināh] ...*

When (a man copulates with) a woman who is of *čihrag*, *daxšag* and blood, observantly (*wēnāyihā*) [he observes that she is a menstruant woman] (and) knowingly (*āgāhīhā*) [he knows that that it is a sin] ...

The Zand explains the seemingly redundant Avestan terms of cognition by rendering them as knowledge of the facts and knowledge of the law, respectively.

58. See, e.g., Iain Ruairidh Mac Mhanainn Bóid, *Principles of Samaritan Halacha* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 144.

59. See Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 103–27.

Avestan verse instead of relegating them to common-sense knowledge. While the Zoroastrian system did not undergo anywhere near the level of development and intensity of discourse that the rabbinic system did, the derivation of various discharges through omnisignificant exegesis represents a similar need to attach scriptural authority to this aspect of the menstrual laws.

The Zand's interpretation of *čihrag* as yellow, and *daxšag* as *tahīg*, appears later in the chapter as well. In PV 16.14–15, the Avesta discusses the punishment for having sex with a menstruant. In contrast to 16.13, which describes a woman who hides evidence of menstruation, 16.14–15 deals with a case in which the woman's status as a menstruant is eminently clear:

O Orderly creator .... He who at a prepaid price(?) mingles his body in action (with that) of a woman with signs, with menses, with blood, when her sign is noticeable, when her menses are clear, what is the penalty for it? Then Ahura Mazda said: The first he approaches, the first he sits down with, one should apply thirty strokes with the horse whip, thirty with the bastinado....<sup>60</sup>

The Avesta contains an interesting play on words. In order to express the certainty of the woman's impure status, the Avesta employs the same adjectives it used previously to describe a menstruant: *yat hē ciθra daxštəm bauuaiti yat hē daxšta ciθrəm bauuaiti* (when her sign is noticeable, when her menses are clear).

The Pahlavi Zand takes this verse out of its plain meaning and translates as follows:<sup>61</sup>

*dādār ka nāirīg \*čihragōmand daxšagōmand xōnōmand was bār pad kāmag-kunišnīh tan gumēzēd kū-š was bār abāg hamkarzag bēd*  
*tā ka ān ī ōy čihrag daxšag bawēd [kū az zardīh abāz ō tahīg wardēd]*  
*ayāb ān ī ō daxšag čihrag bawēd [kū az tahīg abāz ō zardīh wardēd].*  
*kadār \*ōy ast tōzišn*  
*u-š guft Ohrmazd kū sīh pad abar zanišnīh abar zanišnīh asp-aštar sih srōšō-čaranām.*

Creator: When a woman of *čihrag*, *daxšag*, of blood, mingles her body in willful action many times [that is she comes into (sexual) contact many times with him]. Until when the *čihrag* becomes *daxšag* [that is, it changes from yellow back to *tahīg*] or that of *daxšag* becomes *čihrag* [that is, it changes from *tahīg* back to yellow].

What is the atonement (for) that?

And Ohrmazd said: thirty strokes \*should be struck upon him for the crime (with) the horsewhip, (and) thirty (with the) bastinado.<sup>62</sup>

60. For a related passage, see PV 18:67.

61. See Jehangir C. Tavadia, *Šāyast nē Šāyast: A Pahlavi Text on Religious Customs* (Hamburg: Friederichsen, de Gruyter, 1930), 79, in reference to this passage: "which gloss, it may be added, does not explain the original."

62. PV 16.14–15.

The Zand’s initial translation of the Avesta is quite direct. The word *bawēd*, the present-singular form of the Pahlavi verb for being (*budan*), predictably renders Avestan as *bauuaiti*. Yet the Zand’s gloss for *bawēd*, namely *wardēd*, connotes “turning” or “changing,” and it emphasizes another aspect of the Pahlavi verb *budan*—that of “becoming.” Therefore, instead of understanding the phrase to mean “when her sign [*ciθra/cīhrag*] is noticeable, when her menses [*daxšta/daxšag*] are clear,” the Zand perceives *čīhrag* as physically *changing* into *daxšag* and vice versa. Like the opening verse of the chapter, this section also implies that *čīhrag* and *daxšag* are two different substances and not simply repetitive adjectives that describe a menstruant. Accordingly, once again *čīhrag* is glossed as *zard* (yellow) and *daxšag* as *tahīg*.

I suggest that in an effort to give a sense of divine authority to the decisions that Zoroastrians had to make regarding vaginal discharges, the Zand links the substances to scripture. However, as I stated previously, unlike the rabbis, the Zoroastrian priests did not devise a complex system of pure and impure discharges that led to a new kind of ecclesiastical expertise. We only have hints in the Pahlavi *Widēwdād*, and one explicit statement in *Šāyest nē šāyest*,<sup>63</sup> that express an actual position on examinations of bloodstains. Again, the Zand in the opening verse of PV 16 implicitly considers regular (red), yellow, and *tahīg* discharges impure because they require a woman who experiences them to get herself to the *daštānistān* (menstrual “hut”). The Zand in PV 16.11 also treats *tahīg* as an impure substance.<sup>64</sup>

*Šāyest nē šāyest* 3.14–18 closely follows the laws of *tahīg* outlined in PV 16.11. A synoptic study of *Šāyest nē šāyest* 3 and PV 16 reveals that *Šāyest nē šāyest* 3.19 is based on PV 16.11.2. *Šāyest nē šāyest* 3.19 states,

*čīhrag ka gōn bē wašt ān ī pēš ān-iz ī pas az daštān bē āyēd rēmanīh  
ēdōn bawēd čiyōn daštān*

(Regarding) *čīhrag*: When the color has changed, that which comes before and also that which comes after menstruation is impure. It is as (regular) menstruation.

The *Šāyest nē šāyest* passage appears to be interpreting a phrase from PV 16.11.2, *ud harw čiš ēdōn bawēd čiyōn daštān*, or “and everything is like menstruation.”<sup>65</sup> This clause is apparently understood to mean that all “things” (*čiš*)—or discharges

63. 3.19.

64. In PV 16.11.1, Kay-Ādur-Bozēd interprets the Avestan statement in 16.11 to rule that a menstruant must wait at least four days before examining herself, and only then may she purify herself, at the earliest, on the fifth day. In PV 16.11.2, Sōšāns explains that purification within the first three days is impossible because there is a concern for *tahīg*—in other words, that she will emit this particular substance and it will render her menstrually impure. In addition, *tahīg* discharge is the concern that forces a woman to wait an extra day following the cessation of her menstrual flow, provided that this occurs within nine days of the flow’s commencement.

65. In the larger context of PV 16.11.2 as it has come down to us, the phrase refers to a woman whose period has started again, either after a break in her menstrual flow or after she has menstruated through an entire cycle. PV considers both of these cases (*harw čiš*) as if she has began her menstrual

(*čihrag*)—are to be considered impure. *Šāyest nē šāyest* either reflects a different version of the Pahlavi *Widēwdād* or, alternatively, reinterprets it to mean that the undefined “thing” in the phrase *harw čiš* (everything) refers specifically to discharges.

Despite the fact that in an extensive passage, PV 16.2 is concerned with the legal parameters of the onset of menstruation, it is striking that there is no indisputable mention in the Zand or in subsequent medieval responsa of women or priests checking the *appearance* of vaginal discharges. Even though Zoroastrian law was careful about determining the exact moment of menstrual impurity, and, accordingly, there are two explicit references to examinations in that passage (PV 16.2.3 and 16.2.5), these two cases seem to relate to verifying simply whether there is an emission at all and not to the particulars of a discharge’s appearance.<sup>66</sup>

#### IX. THE RESULT OF RABBINIC AND ZOROASTRIAN DIFFERENCES ON RULING ON BLOODSTAINS

In sum, Zoroastrian law considers, but rejects, legal differentiation between the colors of vaginal discharges. Thus, we might say that rabbinic concern over ruling on bloodstains, which is already present in other parts of the *sugya* at B. Niddah 19a–21b, is a looming concern for the narrator of the Rava and Ifra Hormiz tale precisely because the connotations of that encounter were a great source of anxiety. The narrator’s attempt to allay this concern betrays the rabbinic lack of confidence to rule on bloodstains. While this lack of confidence might previously have demonstrated a form of basic religious piety (stringency in the face of doubt) or an awareness of the “decline of the generations,” it becomes acute in daily contact between Jews, who were lenient in this matter, and Zoroastrians, who were more stringent.

Although the tale is clearly a literary construction that does not record an actual historical event, it does preserve important information regarding its narrator and his world. First, at the risk of stating the obvious, the story confirms our knowledge that Babylonian rabbis recognized the significance of menstrual impurity in Zoroastrian life.<sup>67</sup> It also goes far beyond this by expressing a two-pronged rabbinic fantasy: first, that the rabbinic menstrual impurity laws are essentially superior to the competing Zoroastrian system; and second, that rabbis are consulted by Sasanian royalty regarding purity matters. At the same time, in the

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cycle anew (*ēdōn bawēd čiyōn daštān*), and she must wait an extra day (*tahīg*) before purification is possible. However, it seems that *Šāyest nē šāyest* understands or uses this phrase differently.

66. An interesting method of checking an aborted substance for signs of human development is discussed in PV 5:49 and in subsequent Zoroastrian literature. It is worth noting that this method, which consists of soaking the fleshy “knot” in bull’s urine, is similar to methods recommended in the Bavli (B. Niddah 22b) that have the woman soak unidentified birth-like discharges in lukewarm water. Still, there is no similar technique recommended for determining the nature of vaginal discharges—a matter certainly more common and important for everyday Zoroastrian observance.

67. See B. Ta’anit 22a; and B. Avodah Zarah 18b, 24b.

form of two moments of doubt, the tale retains traces of anxiety concerning these very claims: Do the Jews really curry royal admiration, and are rabbis truly unasailable in their diagnosis of bloodstains?

X. RAV KAHANA AND THE *MIN* (B. SANHEDRIN 37A)

The same dual focus on internal hermeneutics and external circumstances might be applied to another talmudic story to reveal a remarkably similar development. Once again, we find older, “anonymous” rabbinic concerns “externalized” and placed in the mouth of a character who apparently represents Zoroastrianism:

אמר ליה<sup>68</sup> ההוא מינ' לרב כהנא אמריתו נדה שרי לאתיחודי בהדי גברא איפשר אש בנעורת ואינה מהבהבת אמ' לי התורה העידה עלינו סוגה בשושנים שאפילו כסוגות<sup>69</sup> שושנים לא יפרצו בנו פרצות

A certain *min* said to Rav Kahana, “You say that a menstruant is permitted to seclude herself with [her] husband. Is it possible for fire to be near flax without singeing it?” [R. Kahana] responded, “The Torah testifies of us, “Hedged with lilies (Songs 7:3).” That even like hedges of lilies they will not make breaches among us.

I. H. Weiss and, more recently, Eli Ahdut and Yaakov Elman have argued persuasively that the anonymous “heretic” (*min*) here is a Zoroastrian<sup>70</sup>—or at least someone who espouses Zoroastrian views.<sup>71</sup> They have also explained that at root of the debate is the *daštānistān*, or menstrual “hut” in which Zoroastrian women must sit from the onset of menstruation until purification at least five days later.<sup>72</sup> The *min* challenges the rabbinic menstrual laws by claiming that if menstruants are not segregated, husbands and wives will not be able to avoid intimacy. Rav Kahana responds by claiming that the Torah testifies of the Jews that they are compared to hedges of lilies. All Jews, even those as (spiritually)

68. [אמר ליה. Following Ms Herzog. However, Ms Munich 95, ed. Barko, Yalqut Shimoni, and Ra'avan all connect this passage with the previous one and read: ליה ... והיינו כדאמר.

69. בסוגה בשושנים. Following Ms Herzog. Ms Munich 95: 'בסוג' של שוש. ed. Barko: בסוגה בשושנים. Ra'avan: כסוגה של שושנים.

70. I. H. Weiss, *Dor dor ve-doreshav* (Vilna: Rom, 1921), 2:14; Eli Ahdut, “Jewish-Zoroastrian Polemics in the Babylonian Talmud,” in *Irano-Judaica IV*, ed. Shaul Shaked and Netzer (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1999), 29–30 [Hebrew numbering]; and Elman, “He in His Cloak,” 136–37.

71. Recent work by Yaakov Sussman demonstrates that previous claims that *min* connotes only Christian groups are unfounded. See his “Heqer toledot ha-halakha u-megillot midbar Yehudah: hirkhurim talmudiyim rishonim le-'or megillat 'miqsat ma'ase torah,” *Tarbiz* 59 (1990): 11–76. See also Christine Hayes, “Displaced Self-Perceptions: The Deployment of ‘Minim’ and Romans in B. Sanhedrin 90b-91a,” in *Religious and Ethnic Communities in Later Roman Palestine*, ed. Hayim Lapin (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 1998), 249–89. For a more general study of the phenomenon of literary deployment of “Others” in rabbinic texts, see Hayes, “The ‘Other’ in Rabbinic Literature,” in Fonrobert and Jaffee, *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, 243–69.

72. For the *daštānistān*, see J. J. Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees* (Bombay: British India Press, 1922), 170–73; and Secunda, “*Dashtana*,” 210.

frail as lilies, can be trusted not to have sex while secluded with their menstruant wives.<sup>73</sup>

## XI. THE SOURCES OF THE RAV KAHANA TALE

Since ancient times, the Song of Songs has been interpreted allegorically. Most fundamentally, the interplay between the book's male and female lovers has been read as an expression of the relationship between God and the Jewish people. Similarly, the rabbis have read a whole host of characters into the text, such as Gentiles, Moses and Aaron, various Jewish leaders, and the Jewish court system.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, Palestinian sources understand the beginning of Songs 7:3 as referring to the Sanhedrin—the highest Jewish court:

שררך אגן הסהר שררך אלו סנהדרין מה תינוק זה כל זמן שהוא במעי אמו אינו חי אלא מטיבורו כך אין ישראל יכולין לעשות דבר חוץ מסנהדרין שלהם אגן הסהר אדרה דאזורה אבון בר חסדי אמר אית אתרין דקריין וצווחין לזורה סהרא אל יחסר המזג אל תחסר סנהדרין מעשרים ושלשה דבר אחר אל יחסר המזג אל תחסר סנהדרין מופלא שלה דבר אחר אל יחסר המזג אל תחסר סנהדרין זה שהוא ממזג לה את ההלכה כהיא דתנינן תמן מזג שני חלקים מים ואחד יין מין השרוני ד"א אל יחסר המזג לא נחסר מזגא דעלמא המד"א ה' רועי לא אחסר  
 "Your navel is like a round goblet (Songs 7:3)"—this refers to the Sanhedrin. Just as a fetus, as long as it is in its mother's womb, it does not live except through its navel [cord], so too Israel cannot do [any]thing except through their Sanhedrin. "A round goblet [*agan ha-sahar*]"—the threshing floor of enlightenment [*adrah de-azharah*].<sup>75</sup> Avun b. Hisdai said, "There are places

73. Our interpretation follows Ms Herzog and the larger redactional scheme of the *sugya*. However, Rashi (ad loc., s.v. *sugah*) explains that the hedge of lilies refers to lenient biblical *legislation*, such as the menstrual laws, which permits a husband and his menstruant wife to be secluded together despite the danger that they might become intimate. Rashi's interpretation does not take into account Rav Kahana's opening phrase, "the Torah testifies of us ..."—which implies that the lily metaphor is applied to the Jews themselves and not to their laws. More problematic, according to Rashi's explanation the continuation of the *sugya* is incomprehensible. The *sugya* proceeds by citing Reish Laqish and R. Zera's teachings as offering alternatives to Rav Kahana's teaching:

ריש לקיש אמר מהכא כפלה הרמון רקתך אפילו ריקנין שבך מלאין מצוות כרמון רבי זירא אמר מהכא וירה את ריח בגדיו אל תיקרי בגדיו אלא בגדיו  
 Reish Laqish said from here, "your temples (*rakkatekh*) are like a pomegranate split open (Songs 4:3)." Even the emptiest (*rekanin*) among you are as full of meritorious deeds as a pomegranate [is of seeds]. R. Zera said from here, "And he smelled the smell of his raiment (*begadav*) (Genesis 27:27)." Read not *begadav* (his raiment) rather, *bogedav* (his traitors).

The phrase "rabbi X said from here (פלוני אמר מהכא)," means that Rabbi X suggests an alternative proof-text to convey the same idea as the previous authority. If Rav Kahana's statement is concerned with the weakness of some biblical prohibitions, it is hard to see how Reish Laqish and R. Zera's description of the value of "empty" and "traitorous" Jews supports his idea.

74. See Daniel Boyarin, "Shnei mevo'ot lemidrash shir hashirim," *Tarbiz* 56 (1986–87): 479–500.

75. See Michael Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 36, s.v. אדר. According to the Mishnah, the Sanhedrin met in a

that call and term the moon, “*sehara*”.<sup>76</sup> “In which no mingled wine is wanting [yehaser ha-mezeg]”—the Sanhedrin should not lack twenty-three (members for a quorum). Another opinion: “In which no mingled wine is wanting”—the Sanhedrin should not lack its *mufla*.<sup>77</sup> Another opinion: “In which no mingled wine is wanting”—The Sanhedrin should not lack this one who “dilutes the Law.” As it is taught there [in a Mishnah],<sup>78</sup> “‘*mezeg*’ means two parts water and one part wine using Sharon wine.” Another opinion: “In which no mingled wine is wanting.”—Let us not lack the butler of the world,<sup>79</sup> as it says, “the Lord is my shepherd; I will not lack (Psalms 23:1).”<sup>80</sup>

As is typical in midrash, the beginning of the next stich is interpreted differently in a number of sources.<sup>81</sup> “Your belly is like a heap of wheat” is seen as referring to the book of Leviticus, the people of Israel, or, once again, the Sanhedrin. However, all the sources interpret the final phrase, “like a hedge of roses,” as somehow related to the challenge of observing the menstrual laws.

I have described the Palestinian exegesis of Songs 7:3 in some detail in order to demonstrate an interesting structural correlation between these sources and B. Sanhedrin 37a. Rav Kahana’s discussion with the *min* takes place in a *sugya* that is primarily concerned with the seating arrangement of the Sanhedrin. M. Sanhedrin 4:3, the Mishnah that is the focus of the *sugya* in which the Rav Kahana anecdote is found, requires the Sanhedrin to sit in a semicircle. Accordingly, R. Aha b. Hanina begins the *sugya* by searching for a biblical proof-text for this requirement. He subsequently quotes a *baraita* that is quite similar to the midrash found in Songs Rabbah 10 and is later expanded in the Pesikta Rabbati parallel. Once again, the lover’s navel is interpreted as a metaphor for the Sanhedrin—though here it supports the Sanhedrin’s location on the Temple Mount. Similarly, the word *sahar* is understood via a homonym—*sehara* (the moon). In addition, *mezeg*, the diluted wine, is employed to require a quorum of twenty-three members. The image of the belly, which most Palestinian sources do not relate to the Sanhedrin, in the Bavli is connected to the benefit derived from the Sanhedrin. It is possible that, initially, the Bavli even connects the phrase “hedged with lilies”

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chamber on the Temple Mount (M. Sanhedrin 11:2). The rabbis refer here to the Temple Mount as a threshing floor since according to tradition, King David bought the land from Arvana the Jebusite who used it for that purpose. See II Samuel 24.

76. This is probably a reference to the semicircle seating arrangement of the Sanhedrin. See textual parallels.

77. The meaning of this term is contested. See Z. A. Steinfeld, “Mufla shel beit din,” *Sinai* 82 (1978): 24–40.

78. M. Niddah 2:7.

79. The meaning of this term is unclear. See Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, 298 s.v. מוּפְלָא.

80. Canticles Rabbah 7:3. Cf. Pesikta Rabbati, *Parshat Ki Tissa* §10.

81. Cf. Canticles Rabbah 7:3; Psalms Rabbah 2:15; Pesikta Rabbati; Ki Tissa 10; Avot de-Rabbi Nathan A (ARNA) 2; Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B (ARNB) 3; and B. Sanhedrin 37a.

to the Sanhedrin.<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, Rav Kahana's response to the *min* is based on an alternative reading of the conclusion of Songs 7:3 that is related not to the Sanhedrin but rather to the menstrual laws.<sup>83</sup>

In other words, the Bavli's structure generally follows the Palestinian midrashic model in which Songs 7:3 is initially understood as referring to the Sanhedrin, and is later connected to Israel and the menstrual laws. This is explicated in Avot de-Rabbi Nathan B (ARNB), which introduces the "menstrual interpretation" as a preferred alternative to reading "hedged with lilies" as a metaphor for the sages.<sup>84</sup> According to our understanding of Rav Kahana's response to the *min*, the Bavli also shifts the meaning of Songs 7:3 in the same direction by first interpreting the verse as referring to the highest court and then to the lowest element of Jewish society.

Another element of the Rav Kahana anecdote is also expressed most clearly in the ARNB parallel. Unlike the Bavli, which cites the midrashic treatment of Songs 7:3 because of its reference to the Sanhedrin, ARNB is primarily interested in the lily metaphor as it relates to rabbinic enactments aimed at protecting the menstrual laws from even inadvertent violation. Indeed, as a unit, ARNB 3 is devoted to a discussion of "biblical fences"—that is, biblical enactments aimed at protecting more serious prohibitions from being transgressed. The chapter opens with two examples of such fences. First, there is the prohibition against secluding oneself with a close relative in order to prevent a violation of the incest laws. Second, there are the rules against any kind of playful contact with a menstruant. This leads into the exegesis of Songs 7:3, cited earlier.

Although all of the Palestinian sources highlight the lack of social pressure to keep the menstrual laws because of the fact that the temptation to transgress them occurs in the privacy of one's bedroom, the passage in ARNB explicitly

82. I assume this based on this *derasha's* placement in a midrashic collection devoted solely to the Sanhedrin, and also based on parallels with ARN. Nevertheless, the meaning of the clause is somewhat unclear. See also Raphael N. N. Rabinovitz, *Dikdukei sofrim*, 2 vols. (New York: M.P. Press, 1976), Sanhedrin, 21, note *daled*.

83. Note that Ms Herzog does not record the linking terminology, "ve-haynu ke- (and that is like ...)" found in other manuscripts and witnesses that introduce the Rav Kahana anecdote as *supporting* the first exegesis of Songs 7:3.

84. ARNB 3 (ed. Schechter 112, cf. Hans-Jürgen Becker, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan: Synoptische Edition beider Versionen* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006], 323) states,

סוגה [בשושנים] אלו חכמים ותלמידי' [שהם] סגים את ישראל בתפלתם [מפני] הפורעניות. אם כן למה נאמר סוגה בשושנים אלא אשתו נדה בבית עמו שמא ילך לו עליה, מי ממחה בידיו. אלא פירות שאינן מעושרות עמו בבית שמא יאכל מהם מי ממחה בידיו. אלא המצות שישראל עושים [בסתר] שהן [רכות] כשושנים לכך נאמר סוגה בשושנים.

"Hedged with lilies"—these are the sages and students who protect (*sagim*) Israel from misfortune with their prayers. *If so*, why does it say, "hedged with lilies?" Rather his wife is with him in the house. Perhaps he will go to her—who will protest? Or if there are untithed fruits with him in the house, perhaps he will eat from them—who will protest? Rather, these are the commandments that Israel performs [in private] which are soft like lilies. Therefore it says, "hedged with lilies" [emphasis added].

contrasts the stringent “fence” that forbids seclusion with relatives with the permission granted to a husband and wife to be alone even when she is menstruating. Thus, ARNB calls the fence aimed at protecting the menstrual laws a “weak fence,” as a man may be alone in his house with his menstruant wife even though no one is around to prevent them from becoming intimate.

Of course, the most fundamental connection between the Rav Kahana anecdote and the Palestinian sources is the understanding that “hedged with lilies” somehow refers to the menstrual laws. The root of this association is explicated in some of the Palestinian parallels:

א"ר<sup>85</sup> לוי בנהג שבעולם אדם נושא אשה בן ל' שנה בן מ' שנה  
משמוציא יציאותיו הוא בא לזקק לה והיא אומרת לו כשושנה אדומה ראיתי ופורש ממנה מיד  
R. Levi said, “According to the custom of the world a man marries a woman  
when he is thirty [or] forty years old. After spending his money [on the  
wedding feast] he comes to unite [himself] to her. And [if] she says,  
“I have seen [a drop of blood] like a red lily,” he separates himself from  
her immediately.<sup>86</sup>

What is particularly interesting about this source is that although it stems from the ancient association of red lilies with menstruation, the actual midrashic mechanism reads the lilies in terms of the flowers’ *softness*, and it understands the metaphor as expressing the vulnerability of certain “soft,” in other words, vulnerable, commandments. While Rav Kahana’s response to the *min* also focuses on the flowers’ “softness” and does not explicate the lily–menstruation association, it departs from the Palestinian sources and identifies the lily metaphor with morally weak Jews.

## XII. THE REWORKING OF THE SOURCES OF THE RAV KAHANA TALE

In sum, the Bavli passage and the Palestinian sources share much in terms of content and structure, namely the lily–menstruation association, the structural similarity of the interpretation of Songs 7:3, and, finally, the concern that the menstrual laws are vulnerable because of the privacy granted to a husband and wife.<sup>87</sup> At the same time, the Rav Kahana narrator reworks his sources in a distinct way. First, an initially “internal” concern is “externalized” through its transformation into a dialogue between a rabbi and a Zoroastrian-style *min*. In addition, the lily

85. Canticles Rabbah 7:3.

86. This dramatization draws from a Leviticus Rabbah tradition (19:6 and parallels) about the Judean King, Yohayahāin, who withstood a similar test after being granted a conjugal visit with his wife in prison.

87. We should also add that Richard Kalmin has recently demonstrated that stories told about *minim* in the Bavli are often taken from Palestinian sources. See his *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 98–101. Because these *minim* stories are subsequently reworked in the Bavli, the evidence that they provide has more bearing on rabbinic Sasanian Mesopotamia than on rabbinic Roman Palestine.

metaphor is shifted from referring to commandments to referring to Jews. An interesting feature of the ARNB parallel is that although it raises the issue that the menstrual laws are in constant danger of transgression because of seclusion, it does not solve the problem. In other words, the passage is essentially descriptive—it states that there are certain “biblical fences” that are weaker than others, and leaves the discussion at that.<sup>88</sup> This is in contrast to Rav Kahana’s response, which solves the problem by claiming that the Torah testifies to inherent Jewish piety.

As in the Rava-Ifra Hormiz tale, the “Zoroastrianization” of previously anonymous characters or concerns signifies that the Jewish–Zoroastrian encounter constituted a new source of anxiety for old problems. Here, a concern that already existed in Palestine is placed “in the mouth” of a Zoroastrian-style *min*—that is, someone who represents an *external* threat to rabbinic authority. Recent research by Christine Hayes has demonstrated that talmudic narrators strategically employ “Others,” such as Romans and *minim*, in order to express controversial ideas that lie outside normative rabbinic tradition but were indeed entertained by the rabbis—or at least their constituents. It seems plausible that the presence of Zoroastrian menstrual “huts” in Babylonia encouraged some Jews to consider adopting the stringency of forbidding seclusion with a menstruant. The narrator of the Rav Kahana anecdote first marginalizes this suggestion by placing it in the mouth of a *min*. He then responds to the argument by expressing a form of religious pride. The narrator implicitly claims that although, when secluded, a man and woman normally cannot be trusted to keep their sexual passions in check, the Torah assures that “we Jews”—even the lowly ones—are able to resist this temptation.

The tale thus simultaneously acknowledges the libidinous dangers of permitting menstruating women to remain at home with their husbands as well as Zoroastrian pragmatism in relegating them to menstrual “huts”—while it claims that Jews need not worry about these issues. This, too, can be related to the dynamics of the Rava–Ifra Hormiz tale. Like the Rav Kahana anecdote, the Rava story also attempts to instill confidence in the exceptionality of Jews—here, rabbis—to diagnose bloodstains successfully against a background of rabbinic and Zoroastrian unease with this very practice.

The goal of this paper has been to demonstrate through source critical and “contextual” analysis that both tales mirrored the dynamics of Sasanian Mesopotamia and its complex net of cultural and religious tensions. Beyond our immediate conclusions, we hope that the paper will encourage further research concerned with the Babil and its place in the culturally effervescent world of Sasanian Mesopotamia.

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88. It is possible that this description is intended to act as a warning. Still, no warning is explicated.