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Abstract: Ifra Hormiz and the use of mini-corpora in the study of the Babylonian Talmud

Ifra Hormiz is mentioned in five short stories in the Babylonian Talmud, each time accompanied by a description: “the mother of Shapur Malka,” Shapur the King. In this paper, I wish to examine the stories about Ifra Hormiz from a literary angle. I will suggest that an intra-talmudic, comparative literary analysis of these stories can offer a new perspective on their creation, and that we can better reveal and highlight the differing agendas and motifs of stories that have similar literary nuclei when we examine them as part of a broader corpus of similar stories. This examination will shed light on the stories’ anonymous authors, their intended audiences, and the ways they chose to address gender issues and their attitude towards the Persian rulers of their times.

Keywords: Rabbinics, Babylonian Talmud, Ifra Hormiz, Shapur II

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Ifra Hormiz is mentioned in five short stories in the Babylonian Talmud, each time accompanied by a description: “the mother of Shapur Malka,” Shapur the King. Based on the figures mentioned alongside her, we can situate her literary character at the time of the Sassanian King Shapur II, who ruled over the Persian Empire from 309–379 CE.¹ Her name probably means, “the radiance

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¹ Talmudic stories relate interactions between rabbis and both Shapur I and II. See Jacob Neusner, “Babylonian Jewry and Shapur II’s Persecution of Christianity from 339 to 379 A.D.,” Hebrew Union College Annual 43 (1975): 77–102;

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of the god Hormiz,” which David Goodblatt described as “a good Iranian name,” found in
epigraphic sources from Mesopotamia\(^2\) and incantation bowls.\(^3\)

Though the name Ifra Hormiz does not appear in contemporary, non-Jewish sources,
historical chronicles do reference female figures close to Shapur II who had special connections
to Jews. One source even claims that Shapur’s mother was of Jewish descent while another notes
that his wife was favorable toward the Jews (and thus hostile to Christians).\(^4\) Shapur was reported
to have come to power as a baby and to have been crowned while he was still in his mother's
womb. Talmudic scholars have drawn various connections between these traditions and the
Talmudic narratives surrounding Ifra Hormiz, even connecting them to the story of the Exilarch’s
daughter marrying King Yazdeghird.\(^5\) Neusner suggested that Shapur’s crowning as a baby may
have been the background for the powerful presence of his mother, Ifra Hormiz, in his life
according to the Talmudic stories.\(^6\) Tal Ilan, however, preferred to regard all these traditions as
manifestations of the literary motif of “the foolish king’s powerful womenfolk, who take over and
dictate his policy.”\(^7\)

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Alyssa M. Gray, “The Power Conferred by Distance from Power,” in *Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammain) to the Aggada*, ed. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 64–67. Interestingly, these literary interactions put Shapur I in contact with first generation Amoraim, while Shapur II is depicted alongside third and fourth generation Amoraim, fitting the historical timeline of both these rulers.


\(^3\) Dan Levene, “…And by the name of Jesus…”: An Unpublished Magic Bowl in Jewish Aramaic,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1999): 283–308

\(^4\) *Narratio de Beato Simeon bar Sabba’e*, col. 806, line 20 — col. Line 9: “The Jews, people who always are against our people, those killed the prophets, crucified the Messiah, stoned the apostles, always thirst for our blood, found for themselves the opportunity calumiate, for they had access to queen. For she was of their way of thinking.” See Jacob Neusner, “Babylonian Jewry,” 83; Isaiah M. Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia in the Talmudic Era* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1990), 43-44


\(^7\) Tal Ilan, *Massekhet Ta'anit: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 252.
In this article, I examine the stories about Ifra Hormiz from a literary angle. I will suggest that an intra-talmudic, comparative literary analysis of these stories can offer a new perspective on their creation. This examination will shed light on the stories’ anonymous authors, their intended audiences, and the ways they chose to address gender issues and their attitude towards the Persian rulers of their times.

To put it bluntly, we know very little about the actual authors of rabbinic traditions. Many Talmudic traditions are attributed to specific, named sages who supposedly lived in specific places and times, but even assuming these Talmudic attributions can be taken at face value (which is not necessarily the case), the literary redactors of the traditions within which these sayings are found still remain basically unknown to us. In each case, someone took certain sages’ sayings and set them in a passage, within a specific literary context. Often, it can be shown that this smaller unit was later incorporated into yet another, larger passage (sugyah).

Furthermore, when we turn to the Talmudic stories about these named sages, rather than the halachic discussions incorporating their actual sayings, their authors are even harder to access. Recent research has expanded our tools for discerning the anonymous redactors’ fingerprints in the creation of the final product called the Babylonian Talmud. However, the redactors of the smaller units out of which they built their final oeuvre remain very much a mystery. Were they the same named rabbis who appear in the Talmudic text? The later redactors? Others? What was their aim in crafting these stories? Who was their intended audience? Were the stories meant for a scholastic setting or a communal one? There are so many unknowns when it comes to the evolution of the Talmud into the complete literary corpus that stands before us.

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8 See for example the various essays Rubenstein, ed., *Creation and Composition*
However, scholars have shown that an examination of the units themselves can sometimes advance our understanding of its creation, at least in that specific case. From there, we can begin to shed light on the bigger picture. For example, David Rosenthal has demonstrated that a story in the beginning of tractate Avodah Zarah may have its origin as a synagogue sermon for the final day of Sukkot and the feast of Simchat Torah, based on a connection between the verses that form the basis of the derashah in the passage and the annual Torah reading cycle.9 Meanwhile, Jeffrey Rubenstein has identified certain agendas that appear consistently across various stamaitic passages, which he takes as evidence for broader theological tendencies characteristic of the later redactors of the Talmudic materials.10

In this paper, I will examine an artificial corpus: the five stories of Ifra Hormiz that appear in the Babylonian Talmud. In my view, by examining this corpus, stitched together from scattered passages in the anthology that is the Talmud, we can uncover literary structures employed in creating these traditions. I will suggest that these stories share a similar structure, but differ in its application. And those similarities and differences can teach us something about the creators of these traditions, their possible intended audiences, and their attitudes toward both gender and their Persian rulers.

The creation of mini-corpora of Talmudic stories, out of the great ocean of Talmudic traditions, is obviously not a novel concept. Scholars of rabbinic literature have often turned to creating such corpora on specific topics, figures, or literary structures.11 However, I wish to stress

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11 To name just a few see recently: Balberg, Mira, and Haim Weiss, When near becomes far: old age in rabbinic literature (New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2021); Neis Rachel, The sense of sight in Rabbinic culture : Jewish ways of seeing in Late Antiquity (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2016); Simon-Shoshan, M.,“Stories of the law: Narrative discourse and the construction of authority in the Mishnah (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
that in addition to the organizing concept of the corpus, in this case, the figure of Ifra Hormiz, the corpus itself holds a set of unique tools to address additional, wider, questions.

Before we turn to the stories themselves, a caveat: I do not approach the stories about Ifra Hormiz as historical representations of interactions between rabbinic figures and the Persian royal family. This does not mean that there might not be a historical kernel to the stories, but in any case I regard these stories as literary creations composed by the Talmudic authors and seek only to examine them as literary phenomena and to understand their mechanisms. They sometimes carry historical significance, as well, but not due to the stories’ content, but rather for what they contribute to our knowledge of the historical setting of the persons that composed them and their aims.\(^\text{12}\)

B. Niddah 20b

Let us begin with b. Niddah 20b.\(^\text{13}\) Here, in the context of a discussion of the halakhic rules regarding vaginal discharges, primarily during menstruation,\(^\text{14}\) we hear that the Persian Queen Mother sent a sample of blood to Rava:

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\(^\text{12}\) For example, some have argued that though certain \textit{minim} stories in the Talmud are not historical, they can demonstrate the rabbinic authors’ knowledge of contemporaneous Christian theology and biblical interpretation, which is valuable historical information in itself. The stories do not shed light on their protagonists, but rather on their storytellers, See Michal Bar Asher Siegal, \textit{Jewish-Christian Dialogues on Scripture in Late Antiquity: Heretic Narratives of the Babylonian Talmud} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019).

\(^\text{13}\) Cited according to MS Vatican 113, as found in The Academy of the Hebrew Language’s \textit{Ma’agarim: The Historical Dictionary of the Hebrew Language} (http://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il/). See the following footnotes for other manuscript variants.

Ifra Hormiz, the mother of King Shapur, sent blood to Rava. R. Obadiah was sitting in his presence. He smelt it. He said to him: “This is blood of lust.” After she left, she said to her son: “Come and see how wise the Jews are.” He said to her: “Perhaps by chance?” She then sent him sixty different types of blood. He identified them all, [but] the last one was lice blood with which he was not acquainted. Luckily, he sent her [as a gift] a comb that exterminates lice. She said: “You Jews dwell in the chambers of the mind.”

After Rava successfully identifies the sample she sent, Ifra Hormiz says to her son: "See how wise the Jews are." Shapur, however, doubts the findings and wonders whether Rava may have come to the correct answer by chance, rather than by virtue of actual expertise in this physiological field. To test him, Ifra sends Rava another sixty blood samples of different types, all of which he correctly identifies. Well, almost all of them: Rava is unable to identify the last sample. But nevertheless luck is on his side; the gemara’s words are סתייעיא מילתאא , “things worked out for him.” He decides to buy the queen a gift, choosing a lice comb. Because the sixtieth blood sample
is from body lice, Ifra believes that Rava has identified it, and thus the whole array of blood types, correctly. Ifra Hormiz’s concluding remark is: “The Jews dwell in the chambers of the heart/mind.”

The expression King Shapur uses to question whether Rava reached his conclusion by chance is: דילמא כסومة בארובא. Shapur’s clear intent is to suggest that Rava—the סומא, “blind man”—stumbled onto his conclusion inadvertently, but what does the saying mean precisely? Specifically, what is the meaning of the word אropolis in this context? The medieval commentator Rashi interprets the phrase as depicting a blind man who accidentally found his way down the chimney, based on the other occurrence in the Talmudic corpus, b. B. Batra 12b. He translates אropolis as a chimney, a pipe which conducts smoke out from a furnace. Thus, for example, Hosea 13:3 reads: כְּמֹץ יְסֹﬠֵר מִגֹּרֶן וּכְﬠָשָׁן מֵאֲרֻבָּה, “Like chaff swirling from a threshing floor like smoke escaping through a chimney.”

A second meaning of אropolis is a skylight, a window in the ceiling through which light enters a building. So, for example, we find in b. Yoma 35b: עלה )הלל( ונתלה וישב על פי אropolis so that he might hear the words of the living God from the mouths of Shemaiah and Avtalion.” According to this meaning, it is not clear how the expression can apply to blind person making an accidental find. Perhaps the suggestion is that the blind person manages not to fall from such window, or that a blind man stands in the window but cannot see, i.e. he stands in the place of sight but himself sees nothing.

A third possible understanding of אropolis is based on Ecclesiastes 12:3: בּוֹתוְחָשְׁכוּ הָרֹאוֹת בָּאֲרֻ, "and those looking/the seers in their sockets grow dim." Here אropolis refers to the eye sockets. The verse depicts old age, in which “the seers in the sockets”—the eyes—grow dim. According to this meaning, the expression כסومة בַּאֲרֻבָּה would refer to one who is “blind in the [eye]socket,” that is,
a blind person whose eyes remain in their sockets but no longer see. The blind man in the saying might have eyes, but anything he “sees,” any results he achieves, are solely by virtue of chance. However we interpret the literal meaning of this expression, it clearly reflects the doubt that Shapur casts on Rava’s identification of the blood sent by Ifra.

Rava smells the blood and identifies it as דם חימוד “blood of lust.” This term appears only here in the entire rabbinic corpus, though it seems to connect to the notion in rabbinic medical thought that a woman can bleed from sexual excitement. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what kind of physical phenomenon the rabbis were identifying as the blood of lust. Tirzah Meacham proposes that it referred to the “upsetting of the monthly cycle,” while Fonrobert suggests the possibility that the rabbis were projecting male physiology onto women. Since Rava’s process of identification of the “blood” seems to be based on smell rather than sight, I tend to think that this “blood of lust” should be identified as the kind of emission that has a distinct smell. It might simply be female lubrication produced during sexual arousal in anticipation of sexual intercourse. After all, the meaning of the word “blood” in the rabbinic lexicon is not limited to actual, red blood. As we know from discussions in this very tractate, the rabbis labeled as “blood” many different kinds of vaginal fluids, varying in colors from black to green (m. Niddah 2:6).

The story thus portrays Rava as an especially skilled specialist, who has a deep understanding of physical processes in the female body and the emissions they produce. This case is a particularly impressive example of his prowess, since he identifies the woman’s thoughts

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27 The concept appears in the passage immediately preceding this story and in another passage in b. Niddah 66a, where it is said that a woman who receives a marriage proposal might bleed from lust.
29 Fonrobert, 262n39
30 See Meacham and Fonrobert
and desires from the fluid she examines. Interestingly, we have external evidence that the rabbis were known for these skills: Jerome writes that the “heads of their synagogues” determine by sight or taste if female blood is pure or impure.\textsuperscript{31} Scholars have discussed the curious matter of the tasting of blood,\textsuperscript{32} but in light of the description in our story, we can suggest that the act of smelling might have looked like tasting to an outsider who was not familiar with rabbinic practice, or that it was, as Fonrobert suggests, a “polemical distortion” meant to ridicule and disgust.\textsuperscript{33}

Shai Secunda suggests that the fact that Ifra discusses her menstruation cycle with her son implies that King Shapur had an intimate relationship with his mother.\textsuperscript{34} He shows that this accords with the general Zoroastrian view of incestuous marriages as a meritorious religious act. But regardless, this prompts the question: why did Ifra Hormiz, a non-Jewish, Persian queen, send a blood sample to Rava? This is especially puzzling since rabbinic sources consider gentle menstrual blood ritually pure, as can be seen, for example, from m. Niddah 4:3.\textsuperscript{35} The Medieval commentator, Rashi assumed that she was a pious woman who had begun practicing the Jewish menstrual laws as part of a conversion process. Secunda also suggests that Ifra Hormiz sent this blood for her own use, but also as part of a broader conversation related to the parallel Zoroastrian preoccupation with blood identification and menstrual prohibitions. According to his reading, “even the most powerful Zoroastrian woman in the land realizes that her religious authorities have

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Epistle to Algasia 121.10.19
\item \textsuperscript{33} Fonrobert, Menstrual Purity, 116 and 260n34.
\item \textsuperscript{35} See Secunda, Talmud’s Red Fence, Chapter Two.
\end{enumerate}
not developed the sufficient expertise for ruling on bloodstains, so she is willing to submit to a rabbi’s technical prowess.”

However, Ifra Hormiz’s literary role as a woman sending blood samples to a rabbinic figure, has to do less with her own observance of the blood laws, in my view, and more to do with her position as a non-Jewish queen. My argument ultimately stems from the story’s literary structure. Ifra Hormiz is depicted as performing a scientific experiment: she sends blood to the rabbi and draws conclusions based on the results. Her son points out to her, quite rightly, that her methodology is flawed. Anyone familiar with the modern, empirical model of scientific process knows that one criterion to ensure valid results is the ability to replicate an experiment multiple times and that evidence of the same result is what reinforces the inductive conclusion. Indeed, Ifra Hormiz is convinced by her son’s argument and pursues additional evidence by sending the additional sixty blood samples to Rava.

Sixty is a typological number in the literature of the ancient world, indicating a particularly large quantity. Notably, the large number of divisors of sixty led to its becoming the base of the Babylonian cuneiform numerals, following the Sumerian and Akkadian numeral systems. Since it is hard to imagine that Ifra had sixty halakhic questions just lying around waiting for Rava's

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36 Ibid., 103. Secunda (ibid., 98–102) suggests that the Ifra Hormiz story was composed at a relatively late date and drew from two related traditions about a sage named R. Eleazar, one in the passage immediately preceding the story of Ifra Hormiz here and one in b. Meṣi’a 84b. In making this argument, he follows on the work of Daniel Boyarin, Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 197–226, and Shamma Yehuda Friedman, “On the Historical Aggadah of the Babylonian Talmud,” in Saul Lieberman Memorial Volume, ed. Shamma Yehuda Friedman [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary of America Press, 1993), 119–64. While I see the similarities between these texts, I am not convinced that they are enough evidence to definitely prove this literary reconstruction.

37 Obviously, I do not mean to anachronistically suggest that Ifra Hormiz was preforming scientific experiments based on modern scholarly assumptions!


ruling, it seems clear to me that the story should be read as a literary depiction of a test put to the Jews by the Persian monarchy, in the figure of Ifra Hormiz.

More importantly, the geographical center of the story moves back and forth several times between the royal house and the study house, with Ifra as the mediating figure between these two worlds. This polarity signals that the story is concerned with the relationship between these two worlds, with one putting the other to the test over its supposed expertise. The key evidence, to my mind, that this story is not fundamentally about Ifra Hormiz’s personal observance, is her own language. Notice that she does not say to Shapur after Rava passes the first test, “Come and see how great Rava is,” but, “Come and see how wise the Jews are.” After he has identified (as far as she knows) all sixty additional blood samples, she does not say, “Rava dwells in the chambers of the mind,” but, “The Jews dwell in the chambers of the mind.” Rava's actions are presented as a particular case from which Ifra Hormiz draws conclusions concerning the abilities of all Jews. In this story, King Shapur sits in one place—the Persian royal house—and doubts the skills of a rabbi; a rabbi sits in another place—the Jewish study house—and performs the tasks that are asked of him. Ifra Hormiz is the one who connects these two worlds. Moreover, she is in fact the initiator of the relationship, which propels the whole story. She sends blood, draws conclusions, replicates the experiment, and summarizes her final conclusions, which are the dramatic ending to the story.

B. Ta‘anit 24b

To demonstrate my main point regarding literary structures in the Talmud, I will now to turn to another story featuring Ifra Hormiz, this time in b. Ta‘anit 24b.40

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40 According to MS Jerusalem, Yad Harav Herzog
A certain man was sentenced by the court of Rava to receive lashes. Rava had the man lashed until he died. The matter reached the house of King Shapur. They wished to punish him [lit. to inflict pain]. Ifra Hormiz, his mother, said to him: “Do not have a dispute with the Jews, because whatever they ask of their Master, He grants them.” He said to her: “For example [lit. what]? —He gives them rain. —It comes in the winter, let them ask now, in the Tamuz cycle [=July-August] [for it] to come. She sent [a massage] to Rava: “Concentrate your mind.” 54 He said: “‘O God, we have heard with our ears [our fathers have told us, a work though didst in their days, in the days of old]’ (Psalms 44:2). [But] we have not seen with our eyes.” The rain came in such a way that the gutters of Mahuza 55 poured into the Tigris. Rava’s father came and appeared to him in a dream [and] said: “Can one trouble

41 The words "משום דבעל גויה" were added here in MS Herzog by another hand and are found in the first printed editions. MS Oxford 366 reads "דבעל גויה", while the Vilna edition has "בעל כותית". The words are missing in MS London (BL Harl. 5508 (400)), Munich 140, Munich 95, and Vatican 134.

42 MS London: "עסק דברים"; MS Munich 140, Munich 95, Vatican 134, MS Oxford 366, and printed editions: "עביד".

43 MS London: "עביד"; MS Munich 140, Munich 95, Vatican 134, MS Oxford 366, and printed editions: "עביד".

44 Added in MS London: "ב pracy רחמי ואתא מיטרא אמ' לה ההוא..."; MS Munich 140, Munich 95, Vatican 134, and first printed editions have: "ב pracy רחמי ואתא מיטרא אמ' לה ההוא...".

45 All other MSs and printed editions have: "שלחה".

46 Added in MS London: "ובעי רחמי ואתא מיטרא בעא רחמי ולא אתא מיטרא..."; MS Munich 140, Munich 95, Vatican 134, and first printed editions have: "ובעי רחמי ואתא מיטרא בעא רחמי ולא אתא מיטרא...".

47 In all MSs and printed editions: "עב רבו של עולם".

48 All MSs quote the verse in its fuller version.

49 MS London and Munich 95: "אבל בענינו לא ראינו...". MS Munich 140, Oxford 366, and Vatican 134 are missing these words.

50 MS London and Vatican 134: "דציפורי..."; MS Munich 95: "מצפרי..."; MS Munich 140 and Oxford 366 are missing the word.

51 In all MSs and printed editions: "רבע שיעל".

52 All MSs quote the verse in its fuller version.


54 Here in all other MSs Rava attempts to ask for rain, but this first attempt fails; only then does he use the verse to ask for the rain. More on this below.

55 Some MSs have the rain pour from the city of Tzippori in Palestine to the Tigris.
heaven so much? Change your bed.” He changed his bed. He saw\textsuperscript{56} [his bed] had been cut\textsuperscript{57} with knives.

This story, like the passage in Niddah, deals with the geographical axis between the Persian royal house and the rabbinic study house and the same trio of protagonists: Rava, King Shapur and Ifra Hormiz. The story begins when Rava orders a man to be flogged, and this person dies in the course of his punishment. The reason for the flogging is not mentioned in MSs London, Munich 140, Munich 95, and Vatican 134. But the printed editions as well as MS Oxford (and MS Herzog, in added words) add that he was punished for having intercourse with a non-Jewish woman. Tal Ilan assumes that this explanation was present in the original version of the story and subsequently omitted in the other manuscripts as a result of “Christian censorship.”\textsuperscript{58} However, I tend to think it much more likely that the words were added in these few versions to fill in the missing reason for the man’s punishment. In my view, this reason involves relations with a non-Jewish woman precisely because the rest of the story will feature a non-Jewish woman. This suggestion is strengthened by another Talmudic passages in which a rabbinic figure flogs a man, b. Berakhot 58a: “R. Shila flogged a certain man for having intercourse with a non-Jewish woman.”\textsuperscript{59} I propose that the story in Ta’anit was corrected to match the story in Berakhot, especially in light of the involvement of a non-Jewish woman, Ifra Hormiz, in this story.

When Shapur learns of the flogging, things become complicated. Performing a de facto execution goes beyond the legal autonomy of the Jews in Sasanian Persia, which became much

\textsuperscript{56} All other MSs versions have here that the discovery was made the next day.
\textsuperscript{57} For this translation I rely on Sokoloff, \textit{Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic}, 1059. Other MSs have here: דמרשם, “to be incised”; see \textit{ibid.}, 1096.
\textsuperscript{58} Ilan, \textit{Ta’anit}, 249.
\textsuperscript{59} MS Oxford 366.
more circumscribed at that time. Before the king seeks to harm Rava, Ifra intervenes and warns her son against causing trouble for the Jews because of their special relationship with God. Interestingly, this story featuring Persian protagonists contains, in the words of the Persian queen, according to this manuscript, the word פיקאר which is a Middle Iranian word meaning “dispute,” and unique in the Talmudic corpus. It was replaced in other manuscripts with the better known גֵּיהָ דְבָרִים.

Shapur, ever the doubter, asks her the basis for her assertion that God grants the Jews whatever they ask. She cites the example of rainfall, which accounts for the story’s context in tractate Ta’anit. Shapur answers her with further skepticism: rain falls naturally during the winter months. How does she take this as a sign of a special bond between God and the Jews? He asks for verification of her conclusion: an experiment to prove her claim of a special connection with God. If this is the case, then Rava should be able to bring about rainfall during the summer months, when this story supposedly takes place. As in the Niddah story, proof of Ifra’s claim must to be confirmed by subsequent experiments, performed under new conditions, providing better and more reliable data.

The desert climate of much of the Near East and the region’s dire dependance on rain, makes the ability to bring rain through prayer an important and well-known trait of ancient and late antique holy men, from the biblical Elijah to monastic and rabbinic figures. Josephus tells us about Onias who could bring rain, echoed in the stories of Ḥoni Hame’agel in m. Ta’anit 3:8. The monastic Abba Xoius stretched out his hands in prayer and “immediately it rained” (Abba Xoius 2, PG 65:312); and b. Mo’ed Qatan 28a tells us that Rabbah and R. Ḥisda were both righteous

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60 For a survey see Jacob Neusner, “Judeo-Persian Communities III. Parthian And Sasanian Periods,” Encyclopædia Iranica, XV/1:96–103; Neusner, History of the Jews in Babylonia.
61 Sokoloff, Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, 903.
because they could pray for rain and it would come.\textsuperscript{62} Certain rabbis’ abilities to bring rain, such as Rava, should thus be understood in light of this background: his ability to bring rain, especially in summertime, is a clear sign of his closeness to God and a sign for Ifra Hormiz of his people’s abilities as God’s favorites.\textsuperscript{63}

Thus, Ifra sends a message to Rava and instructs him to ask for rain. Rava does so, and heavy rain falls. According to most manuscript versions, Rava’s first request for rain through prayer fails. Only his second attempt, invoking Psalms 44:2, brings the rain: 

אלהים באזינו שמענו אבותינו ספרו לנו פעל פעלת בימיהם בימי קדם

“O God, we have heard with our ears, our fathers have told us, a work though didst in their days, in the days of old.” Interestingly, Psalms 44 is a communal complaint that God is allowing his chosen people, who have not sinned, to be threatened and slaughtered by the nations (גוים). This closely matches Rava’s own situation, standing in danger from the non-Jewish, Persian royal family and asking for help from his God in order to demonstrate that God will grant him what he needs. Though this help does not come as easily as Ifra suggests, since it takes Rava two attempts to succeed and is nearly murdered over it.

Indeed, that night Rava’s dead father reveals himself in a dream and informs Rava that this miraculous request upsets God and is unworthy. The reluctance to ask God for miraculous proofs, even when one has the capacity to have such favors granted, is well known from biblical sources, such as Deuteronomy 6:16 and Isaiah 7:12, as well as Ben Sira 3:26 and Matthew 4:7, among many others. In this case, the God provides the miracle, but we are told that God is not happy about it. God might give his people what they ask for, but that does not mean that one should make the


\textsuperscript{63} However, they are not always successful in their rain-making requests! Rava himself fails to bring rain in a passage just prior to the Ifra Hormiz story in \textit{b. Ta’anit} 24a–b.
request. Rava’s father thus advises him to make his bed elsewhere that night. This turns out to save Rava’s life: the next morning, he finds knife marks on his pillow. The sixteenth-century commentator Maharsha\(^{64}\) interprets this as an attack by demons who were sent to harm Rava, but this part of the story can probably be better read as a continuation of the political tension between Shapur and Rava that is at the center of the plot: at night, the king’s messengers come to harm the rabbi who dared perform corporal punishment in his rabbinic court. Thanks to his father’s supernatural intervention, Rava is saved from the attempted murder.

**Niddah and Ta’anit compared**

When we compare these two stories, we find a parallel literary structure. The protagonists are the same in both cases: Rava, Shapur, and Ifra Hormiz. In both, we see an axis moving from the Persian royal palace to the rabbinic study house and back again. Similarly, Ifra is the mediator between the two worlds in both stories and makes statements that point to the broader import of the central encounter. Ifra does not warn her son, "Do not trifle with Rava," but, "Do not trifle with the Jews." Thus, both stories serve as a symbolic depiction of a confrontation between Babylonian Jews and their Sasanian rulers.

The stories’ structures are similar. They begin with a statement about the abilities of the Jews, regarding menstrual laws and identifying various discharges and regarding the bringing of rain. Ifra draws a conclusion and her skeptical son wants further evidence, an additional experiment to provide more accurate data—test more blood samples, and bring rain in the summer, rather than the rainy season. Rava performs the enhanced experiment, with apparent success. However, in

\(^{64}\) In situ
both stories, the experiment, which seems to the Queen Mother to provide the expected results, is in fact a kind of illusion. In Niddah, it is only with great luck that Rava appears to have identified all of the blood types correctly, when in fact he did not. In Ta’anit, God only provides rain upon Rava’s second request; and, more importantly, even when God does bring rain, he is not happy with the request. The resulting attempted murder of Rava is presented as punishment for his testing God. As a result, the Jews in these narratives, and also we, as readers, we know that God actually does not simply “give the Jews everything they want.”

Alongside these structural parallels, we should also note differences between these stories. First and foremost, one key element is missing in Niddah that is present in Ta’anit: God’s intervention for the benefit of Rava. In the latter story, God is very much present. He saves the Jews from the gentiles, as promised in Psalms 4; he enables the miracle, though we see behind the curtain, through Rava’s dream of his father, that his actions are seen as problematic and deserving of punishment. In comparison, in Niddah, God does not appear at all, which I would suggest is rather extraordinary. After all, the fact of Rava’s buying the lice comb is presented with the words אסתרי מילתא, “the thing was aided”—a lucky chance. This could have easily been framed as an act of divine intervention.

What I am attempting to demonstrate here is the analytical value that lies in defining mini-corpora within the Talmudic literary world and comparing literary structures within those corpora. In this case, the comparison of these two texts within the mini-corpus of Ifra Hormiz narratives demonstrates that the two stories are indeed very similar in structure but also brings to light a real difference in literary genre: namely, one story relies on God while the other does not.

Let us begin with the similarities. Both stories are examples of the rabbis’ literary engagement with interactions between rabbis and the Persian elite. Both depict one member of the
Persian court who is willing to recognize the greatness and expertise of the Jews, and a second who is skeptical. In both cases, the Jews, represented by Rava, “win”; that is, they manage to successfully complete the trial set out for them, or so it seems. For, finally, in both stories, we, the readers, know that the whole truth is more complicated.

The literary genre to which the two stories belong is the classic tale of the oppressed minority recounting heroic acts of tricking his masters. As post-colonial studies have taught us, in social power dynamics between any two groups with social or political gaps between them, the group that is excluded from the hierarchy of power will find ways to try and overcome this exclusion. James C. Scott coined the term “Hidden Transcripts,” to describe the phenomenon where oppressed groups employ strategies of resistance, but these can often go unnoticed by the oppressing groups. One such way is presenting a façade of professionalism to the power-holders, while presenting to members of one’s own group the ways in which that perfect façade is in fact flawed. Adele Marian Holoch writes about the destabilizing and subversive importance of such literature:

Humor helps those who deploy it to resist victimhood and enact a psychological rebellion against the circumstances of colonialism and its legacies, and facilitates a sense of

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65 While I am being careful not to use the term “subaltern” here to mean simply oppressed populations or groups who are not part of the established structures of political representation, I am still very much thinking through the tools offered by subaltern studies. See, for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.


67 I am reminded, when reading such talmudic stories, of Kathryn Stockett’s novel, *The Help*, about the life of African-American household workers in Jackson, Mississippi in the 1960s. In this novel, a white young woman (Eugenia “Skeeter” Phelan) helps record the workers’ stories about their white employers in the Jim Crow South. A post-colonial reading of this narrative reveals a society that uses humor, mutual support, and secret-keeping to combat racial discrimination and bias. The black women joke behind their employers’ backs about their faults, their demands, and a whole set of events and experiences that they can never and will never know. See Ingrida Eglė Žindžiuvienė and Teodor Mateoc, “Views on Racial Categorization in William Faulkner’s and Kathryn Stockett’s Novels,” in *History, Memory and Nostalgia in Literature and Culture*, ed. Regina Rudaiytė (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 264–87.
community through laughter among both those who deploy it and those who enjoy it as audience members.  

Both of the stories of Ifra Hormiz we have examined so far should be viewed as part of this genre of literature. They are both tales told by a minority about its relations with the ruling class. They are rabbinic retellings of the Persian rulers’ attempts to test and examine their qualities and the Jews’ victories in these encounters, despite close brushes with failure, which remained unknown to the Persians.

Such stories also serve other purposes. When discussing Urdu humor, Christina Oesterheld has stressed that in addition to other forms of articulation, “humorous modes not only provide comic relief, ease tension and repression, and provide entertainment, they also serve to express very serious concerns, to make bitter truths easier to stomach and to voice discontent, doubts and reservations.” In the Talmudic stories, tensions between the rabbis and the Persian court are clearly marked by the power dynamics between the two, whether over expertise in female physiology or over autonomist authorities of corporal punishments. In Ta’anit, the danger is quite clear from Rava’s attempted murder in the final act. The stories employ humor or “behind the scenes” difficulties, revealed to the reader but not to the Persian antagonists in the story, in order to cope with the imminent dangers that living as a religious minority presents.

Alongside their many similarities, the two stories also differ in important ways. Let us envision the settings in which these two tales of Jews “tricking” their gentile rulers might be told. Taking some creative license, I can imagine the story in Niddah—in which God plays no role at

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all—being told in a Jewish pub in Nehardea, as listeners laugh out loud when the gift of the lice comb (!) saves Rava at the last moment. Meanwhile, one can imagine the God-centered Ta’anit story being preached from a synagogue pulpit in Pumbedita, with the teller wagging a finger while warning listeners to balance the need to deal carefully with the Persians while also avoiding angering God. I am taking liberties here, of course, and I absolutely do not intend these scenarios to be taken literally, but I am suggesting that the differences in the stories’ literary structure, and the “religious” nature of one story relative to the other, might suggest something about their compositional history and their Talmudic Sitz im Leben.

My comparative reading within the artificially created mini-corpus can thus suggest something about the stories’ creation, how they were designed, or where they were told, and to whom.

Let us take another difference between the stories in Niddah and Ta’anit: the character of Ifra Hormiz herself. In the Niddah story, Ifra initiates the test. In fact, she drives the entire story: she contacts Rava, creating the link between the Persian palace and the rabbinic study house, and she draws conclusions after each step about the Jews’ abilities. In Ta’anit, however, while Ifra is still the connecting factor between the Persian royal house and the bet midrash, she does not have independent power. Ifra is not the main character of this story; rather, the plot revolves around the political tension between two male characters—Rava and King Shapur. The story begins with Rava in his study house and ends with an attempt on his life by the king’s emissaries (according to my reading). Ifra is a marginal figure, and moreover, her test of Rava’s abilities is not the motivating action of the story. Here, she asserts to her son, Shapur, her formed conclusion. She is already "on the side" of the Jews, and her role here is to seek to save both them—from the wrath of her son—and her son—from the consequences of his entanglement with the Jews. She does not
need to test the Jews’ abilities like she did in the Niddah story. Rather, it is her son who demands proof. Her actions also fail to affect the subsequent chain of events: according to the reading I suggested earlier, Shapur still sends assassins after Rava. He was evidently not sufficiently impressed by the floods in the month of Tammuz, after all.

The stories thus differ in the ways they represent the female protagonist. In one, Ifra, the Queen Mother, is presented as strong, independent-minded, enterprising and active, testing and reaching conclusions about the Jews. She starts the story and ends it. In the other, we find a marginal queen, who pleads with her son for the benefit of the Jews, but who has no real influence on the course of events. Comparing these stories within the mini-corpus allows us both to notice their similar structures and also to note the differences in both theological genre and gender representation of the queen. More importantly, I wish to stress that defining this corpus allows us to do more than just compare these two stories; indeed, we can highlight such patterns in the corpus as a whole, as we shall now do.

b. B. Batra 8a and 10b

Next, let us take two additional stories in which Ifra Hormiz appears, Baba Batra 8a and 10b:70

[8a] Ifra Hormiz, the mother of King Shapur, sent a bag of denars to R. Joseph. She said to him: “It should be used for [carrying out] an important commandment.” R. Joseph was sitting and examining [the matter] what would be considered an

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70 According to MS Hamburg 165
71 All other MSs and printed editions read רב יהודה; MS Paris 1337 has only רב שמעון. It seems that the version reading R. Joseph is a mistake influenced by the name of the protagonist of the story.
important commandment. Abbaye said to him: “Since R. Samuel b. Joseph has
taught that money for charity is not to be taken from orphans even for the
redemption of captives. From here we conclude that the redemption of captives is
an important commandment.”

[10b] Ifra Hormiz, the mother of King Shapur, sent four hundred bags of denars to
R. Ammi. He did not accept them. She sent them to Rava, and he accepted them.
When R. Ammi heard, he was angry. He said: “Does he not [hold by the verse],
“When its branch is dry, they are broken; women come and make a fire of it’”
(Isaiah 27:11)? And Rava? He did this so as not to offend the government [lit. for
peace with the government].

In both stories, situated a few pages apart in the same tractate, Ifra Hormiz sends a bag containing
a substantial amount of money to a rabbinic figure. In both stories, the rabbi accepts it. Both stories
present Ifra Hormiz as having close relationship with these rabbinic figures, in line with what we
saw in the stories in Niddah and Ta’anit. However, though both stories are short, there is a
difference between the two: in the first (b. B. Batra 8a), the money that is sent to R. Joseph is
accepted without hesitation, while in the second (b. B. Batra 10b) that story centers around R.
Ammi’s refusal to accept the money and Rava’s decision to accept it.

Notice that after each story I continued to quote a brief statement from the anonymous
layer of the Talmud: in the first story, “From here we conclude that the redemption of captives is
an important commandment,” and in the second, “And Rava? He did this so as not to offend the
government [lit. for peace with the government].” In both cases, this sentence situates the story
within its broader context: the story in b. B. Batra 8a is part of a discussion of charity toward


73 The Vilna edition reads here משום שלום מלכות, “for peace with the government,” imported from the anonymous layer appearing later in the talmudic sugyah.
orphans and the importance of the redemption of captives; The story in b. B. Batra 10b is cited in connection with a discussion of the reward that charity confers upon non-Jews.

In the latter story, this distinction between the layers—the narrative itself and the anonymous layer of the Talmud—is important. The story itself depicts two different rabbinic approaches to accepting money from the gentile authorities: the Palestinian Rabbi, R. Ammi, refuses to take money from the Queen Mother, while the Babylonian rabbi, Rava, accepts it. The anonymous layer attempts to harmonize these two views by suggesting that Rava only took the money to appease the Persian court. In the story itself, R. Ammi justifies his refusal by reference to Isaiah 27:11:

ברך קצירה הח الداخل נשים באורות היא לא עם ביניהם הוא על כן לא ירחמו עשהו ויצרו
לא יחננו.

When its branch is dry, they are broken,
Women come and make a fire of it;
Because he is not a people of understanding,
That is why his maker does not show him pity, And his creator shows him no favor.74

This verse is part of a longer section known as the “Little Isaiah Apocalypse,” Isaiah 24–27. It is notoriously difficult to understand and is often considered “one of the most difficult sections to interpret in the whole book of Isaiah.”75 This part of the passage describes the ruins of a city whose inhabitants have no understanding; that is, they do not understand the need to repent. The trees of that city remain dry and desolate, and women use the branches for kindling.76

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74 Translation according to J. J. M. Roberts and Peter Machinist, First Isaiah (Augsburg: Fortress Publishers, 2015), 335.
75 Ibid., 306.
76 This verse has a grammatical difficulty: the noun, קצירה, “branch,” is singular, while the verb, תשברנה, “they are broken,” is plural. However, since the noun in this case is a collective, it seems reasonable to assumes that it is indeed the subject Ibid., 340. The broader unit within which the verse is situated is known as עון יעקב, “the iniquity of Jacob.”
R. Ammi, however, seems to be reading this verse in reference to the situation at hand. Ifra Hormiz is the woman who comes and makes a fire out of the dry branches, which symbolize the desolation not of Israel, but of the non-Jewish Persians. But why is R. Ammi angry at Rava for accepting the money from Ifra Hormiz? To understand the meaning of his admonishment, let us examine the verse from Isaiah and this narrative within its broader Talmudic context.

This story is situated within a discussion of whether non-Jews derive reward from acts of charity in the same way that Jews do. The sages acknowledge that the powerful nature of charity indeed makes it reasonable to consider this possibility. Here, R. Ammi seems to suggest that by accepting the gift from Ifra Hormiz, Rava is allowing her to perform an act of charity, thus enabling her to reap the rewards of this important commandment. He is upset because he does not believe that one should enable non-Jews to receive such a reward, and he admonishes Rava using the language of Isaiah 27:11. And indeed, the theme of the destruction of Israel enemies does indeed appear in the Isaiah chapter as well (see for example verse 1: “On that day Yahweh will punish…”), though probably not directly here. In R. Ammi’s reading, Ifra Hormiz is akin to the women in the verse, who take the dry branches representing desolation (the disfavored status of non-Jews) and make something positive out of them (using them as kindling; performing acts of charity. The verb "מאירות" “to make fire,” is understood here to mean a positive action, a saving gesture). But, how did R. Ammi come to read this verse in reference to Ifra Hormiz specifically?

In my view, R. Ammi is performing a midrash on this verse. The first part of Isaiah 27:11 reads: הבוש קצירה תשברנה, “When its branch is dry, they are broken.” The root of the verb "תשברנה" is "שבור", "to break,” which is phonetically similar to the name of Ifra Hormiz’s son, King Shapur...
(or Shabuhr), from middle Persian (ʃʌhpʊhr), or as it is transcribed in the Talmud, שבר מלאה. By drawing out the linguistic connection between the dryness and the desolation described in the verse and the name of King Shapur, R. Ammi implicitly describes the king’s reign as dry and desolate. The second part of the sentence depicts a path for redemption: through the positive, redemptive acts of the women, who make a fire of the dry branches. By extension, Ifra Hormiz’s acts of charity offer salvation for the dry, broken reign of King Shapur. R. Ammi thus asks Rava, “Do you not understand what Isaiah is telling you? You are enabling King Shapur’s redemption through female charity!”

My suggestion is strengthened when we consider that both rabbinic and early Christian writers in late antiquity employed similar reading techniques, which connected the first names of well-known figures with phonetically similar words in biblical verses. For example, early Christian writers frequently read the word ישועה in verses such as Isaiah 12:3—ושאתם מים בששון ממעיני ישועה “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation (yeshu’ah),” to refer to Jesus (Yeshu’a). Similarly, the rabbis would read verses such as Genesis 49:10—עד כי יבוא שילה “until he to whom it belongs (shiloh) shall come”—or Lamentations 1:16—כי רחק ממני מנחם משיב נפשי, “No one is near to comfort me (menahem), no one to restore my spirit”—to indicate that the name of the messiah is שילה, “Shiloh,” or מנחם, “Menahem.”

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78 For a similar midrashic phenomenon that relies on names, see Shamma Yehuda Friedman, “Nomen est Omen—Dicta of Talmudic Sages which Echo the Author’s Name” [in Hebrew], in These are the Names, Studies in Jewish Onomastics, vol. 2, ed. Aaron Demsky, (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press 1997), 51–77; Nachman Levine, “On Talmudic Name Wordplay: A Literary Device and its Significance” [in Hebrew], JSIJ 11 (2012): 39–59. I intend to expand on this topic, and this example, in a forthcoming article.


The connection between the verb להאיר, “to shine, cast light” and the commandment of charity is also found elsewhere in rabbinic literature. For example, the tannaitic midrash Mekhilta Derabbi Ishmael, Yitro, Amaleq 2 reads:

Something similar you find in the matter of giving charity. How so? If the poor man stretches out his hand towards the householder, and the householder gives willingly, then “the Lord gives sight to the eyes of both.” If, however, the poor man stretches out his hand towards the householder, and the latter is unwilling to give, then “the Lord is the maker of them all.” He who had made the one poor will in the end make him rich, and He who had made the other rich will in the end make him poor.82

This passage cites Proverbs 29:13—

"The poor and the oppressor have this in common: The Lord gives sight to the eyes of both”—in reference to a situation in which a rich man gives charity to a poor man. Notice the underlining assumption seems to be that the rich man is איש תככים, “the oppressor,” and yet when he gives charity, both he and the poor man are redeemed. This redemption is connected to the Biblical phrase, “The Lord gives sight to the eyes of both”; literally, he “lights [their] eyes.”מאיר עיני.Sneshem. I think the same midrashic move takes place in R. Ammi’s reading of Isaiah 27:11. Here, the verb מאירות, in reference to the women bringing light, is read metaphorically in connection to Ifra Hormiz’s act of charity: through her monetary gifts, Ifra Hormiz brings light to her undeserving son, the desolate king whose name, שבר מלך, literally means “broken.”

81 MS Oxford 151.
82 Translation according to Jacob Z. Lauterbach, Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933), 288.
The story itself ends here, before the anonymous layer begins its work of homogenizing the opinions of R. Ammi and Rava. The original narrative thus presents two opposing opinions regarding cooperation with the Persian court. The Palestinian rabbi, R. Ammi, opposes it and cites a verse as biblical authority for his view, while the Babylonian rabbi, Rava, accepts the monetary gift from Ifra Hormiz. We do not know how Rava reacted to R. Ammi’s admonition, and the fact that this admonition concludes the story leaves the reader with a strong impression that R. Ammi has won the argument. At the same time, Rava is a recurring figure in the stories about Ifra Hormiz and her interactions with contemporary rabbis, and we can assume that the composer of these tradition also took pains to make clear that Rava was in favor of such intimate relations with the Persian court, or at least with its Queen Mother.

**B. Batra and the Ifra Hormiz Talmudic Corpus**

Looking carefully at both stories in b. B. Batra as part of the larger Ifra Hormiz corpus, I wish to stress again the usefulness of the corpus as a whole for highlighting literary structures. In both stories, Ifra Hormiz sends money to rabbis, and the nucleus of the stories seems identical. However, in b. B. Batra 8a the money is accompanied by an instruction from Ifra Hormiz that it be used to fulfill an important commandment, whereas in b. B. Batra 10b the money is apparently sent with no strings attached. The money itself is first rejected by R. Ammi and then finally accepted by Rava, who is rebuked by R. Ammi for receiving charity from a gentile woman.

Notice the important differences in the depiction of Ifra Hormiz. In the first story, she initiates a halakhic discussion in the study house, while in the second her gift merely serves as a test case for the question of whether it is permissible to take money from a gentile woman. In the
first case, Ifra Hormiz is an independent and powerful woman who sets the criteria for using the money she sends as a gift. No one questions whether one may receive money from her, and the discussion revolves around the challenge she sets forth for the funds’ use. In the latter case, by comparison, Ifra Hormiz is simply a stand-in for her religion and gender, and her gift is to be refused or accepted based on these parameters alone.

But, as we saw, the corpus as a whole already demonstrated similar differences in the depiction of Ifra Hormiz in two other stories in this corpus: the passages from Niddah and Ta’anit. There, as well, I highlighted the similar literary nucleus shared by the two the stories, as well as the differences in their depictions of Ifra Hormiz herself. While the story in Niddah depicted Ifra Hormiz as a leading character, initiating action and advancing the plot, questioning and navigating between her son and Rava, the story in Ta’anit stripped her of these qualities and made her a foil for the male characters.

I thus suggest that examining the stories of Ifra within this wider corpus allows us to compare and contrast pairs of stories such Niddah and Ta’anit, or the two stories in B. Batra. But the corpus as a whole then allows us to expand upon these conclusions by comparing two sets of stories: Niddah and Ta’ait, on the one hand, and the B. Batra stories, on the other. By examining the literary depiction of the figure of the Persian Queen Mother across this entire corpus within the Babylonian Talmud, we get a glimpse into the complex origins of the multifaceted Talmudic work. The literary design of each of these traditions sheds light on the different emphases of the stories themselves, the choices made by their composers, and the nature of their intended audiences. In the Ifra Hormiz corpus, we see issues play out related to depictions of gender, power dynamics in the Persian Empire, and perhaps even some of the differences between contemporary Palestinian and Babylonian sages.
Zevahim 116b

The last story in the Ifra Hormiz corpus in the Babylonian Talmud is found in b. Zevahim 116b:83

Ifra Hormiz, mother of King Shapur, sent a three-year-old calf95 to Rava with the request, “Offer it for me as a sacrifice for the sake of Heaven.”96 [Rava] said to R. Safra and R. Aḥa b. Huna, "Go, take two young men of the same age,97 look where the sea has thrown up a sandbank,98 take new firewood, produce fire from the new flint,99 and offer it for her as a sacrifice for the sake of Heaven.”

Ifra Hormiz sends a three-year-old calf to Rava to be sacrificed. Of course, the story is situated in the Persian Empire, and long after the destruction of the temple. Indeed, the context of the story in the local sugyah is a discussion of whether non-Jews may offer sacrifices outside of Israel. The

83 MS Columbia.
84 This seems to be a repetition of part of her name. It does not appear in other MSs.
85 All other MSs: דשבורא.
86 Printed versions: MS Munich 95, Vatican 120-121 and MS AIU 147 read instead of דשבורא.
87 MS Munich 95: “to Rav”; MS AIU 147: קולמי דרבנים; Vatican 120-121: “to the rabbis”; “to Rabbah.”
88 MS Munich 95: אמרה לה; Vatican 120-121: אמרה לה; “[she said to him];”
89 MS Munich 95: קרביה נהלי; MS AIU 147: קרביה נהלי; Vatican 120-121: קרביה נהלי.
90 תلقبו פי אבא ורב אחא בר הונא.
91 MS Munich 95: ממלא.
92 MS Munich 95: ויאים; MS AIU 147: ויאים; Vatican 120-121: ויאים.
93 MS Munich 95 and Vatican 120-121: ממלא; MS AIU 147: ממלא; Venice printed edition: ממלא.
94 MS Munich 95: ויאים ויאים德国; MS AIU 147: ויאים ויאים; Vatican 120-121: ויאים ויאים.
95 See Sokoloff, Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, 1198.
96 Sokoloff, Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, 815.
97 Sokoloff, Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, 280.
99 Sokoloff does not know how to translate this unique word; Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, 640. I am following Rashi’s suggested gloss, “foisil,” ancient French for a tool to ignite fire.
Talmud presents an anonymous rabbinic dictum that Jews are prohibited to sacrifice outside of Israel, while non-Jews are permitted:

פיכך כל אחד ואחד הולך ובונה בני ישראל מצווין על שחוטי חוץ ואין הגוים מצווין על שחוטי חוץ. לוכך כל אחד ואחד יละคร חלבו ולא יребוה.

The Israelites are commanded [against] sacrifices slaughtered without, but non-Jews are not commanded [against] sacrifices slaughtered without. Therefore, each one may build himself a *bamah* and offer thereon whatever he desires.

The Talmud then brings the statement of R. Jacob b. Aḥa, in the name of R. Assi, that one may not assist non-Jews in performing their sacrifices nor act as their agent. Rava\(^{100}\) counters this by arguing that one may still instruct them in the act. It is in this context that the story of Ifra Hormiz is brought, demonstrating that Rava in fact does not refuse Ifra Hormiz when she sends him a calf to sacrifice. On the contrary, he creates an infrastructure for sacrificial offerings in Babylonia. This story muddies the distinction between “instruction” and “assisting” or serving as an agent, and as the story unfolds we see that he instructs R. Safra and R. Aḥa b. Huna to perform the act for Ifra Hormiz.

The sacrificial process which Rava creates for his colleagues to perform does not conform to rabbinic halakhah, but is clearly revolves around new/young/unused: the wood, the flint, the young men, and even the liminal space of the sandbank. Simcha Gross has recently suggested convincingly that these practices accord with the limited, but still helpful, information that is available about Zoroastrian sacrificial practices.\(^{101}\) Gross compares the location of the sacrifice on a sandbank to parallel practices of digging holes to contain the sacrificial blood and prevent it from

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\(^{100}\) According to the MSs versions. The printed editions read “Rabbah.”

\(^{101}\) Gross, forthcoming.
polluting the ground. The use of new firewood parallels practices known from Zoroastrian literature meant to maintain the fire’s purity. The two young men remind Gross of Sasanian coins which depict two men flanking the fire altar. Finally, Gross chooses to translate ואפיקו נורא מימגאגא חדתא as “transfer a fire from a new vessel,” rather than my “produce fire from the new flint,” which is based on Sokoloff. This allows him to find yet another parallel here, to the Zoroastrian practice of seeding new fires from old fires.

A short note on the sandbank as a location for the sacrifice: the Jewish population of Babylonian was centered around the narrow area between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers. Here, however, Rava asks that the calf be taken to “the sea.” We cannot know where the Talmudic tradition imagined the story taking place, but seaports on the Persian gulf, such as Mashmahig, a port city near modern-day Bahrain, are indeed mentioned elsewhere in the Talmud.102

**Zevaḥim and the Ifra Hormiz Mini-Corpus**

In the context of the mini-corpus as a whole, this story contains a similar pattern to the one in b. B. Batra 10b: here too, a Palestinian rabbi—R. Jacob b. Aḥa—seeks to maintain distance between Jews and non-Jews, while the Babylonian rabbi—once again Rava—takes a position that allows for connection and shared activity with non-Jews. But in contrast to B. Batra 10b, I think this last story clearly belongs to the genre within the mini-corpus that depicts Ifra Hormiz as an independent woman who can affecting the halakhic agenda in the rabbinic study house, rather than the “flat” character who appears in B. Batra 10b. She is not merely a non-Jewish object to either cooperate

with or ignore. In this case, she causes Rava to enable non-Jewish sacrifice in Babylonia, possibly even according to Zoroastrian practices.

Conclusion

In this article, I have offered an examination of the “mini-corpus” of Ifra Hormiz stories in the Babylonian Talmud. In addition to offering a reading of each of the stories individually, I have offered a comparative reading of them as a group to demonstrate the benefits that the identification of such a corpus can provide scholars of the Babylonian Talmud. I showed the similarities in literary structure, as well as differences in genre and the depiction of various characters. In particular, I highlighted two different ways that these texts portray the character of Ifra Hormiz—both as Persian royalty and as a female character in a largely male world—and how her depiction offers a deeper understanding of rabbinic approaches to issues of gender, power dynamics with non-Jewish Persians, and even distinctions between Babylonian and Palestinian rabbis.

We can better reveal and highlight the differing agendas and motifs of stories that have similar literary nuclei when we examine them as part of a broader corpus of similar stories. This type of reading brings the character and design of the traditions into sharper relief. Of course, this is a classic example of the characteristics of popular literature, in which stories retain a certain, basic structure but change in various ways according to the needs and agendas of a new context. This kind of comparison can be undertaken within the broader rabbinic corpus, as I have done here, but it can also be applied to examine the ways that stories move from one culture to another, retaining a similar structure but changing to fit their new textual and cultural context.
At the end of the day, such literary readings in the rabbinic tradition give us a much-needed window into the different ways these stories deal with issues relating to gender, power, and theology. And they also provide a way to better understand their composers and intended audiences.