RABBINIC JUDAISM
CONVERTING THE MISSIONARY IMAGE OF ABRAHAM: 
RABBINIC TRADITIONS MIGRATING FROM 
THE LAND OF ISRAEL TO BABYLON

Moshe Lavee

1. Introduction

This paper compares the traditions from the two divergent rabbinic milieus of Late Antiquity—Babylon and the land of Israel (Palestine), and shows a change in the image of Abraham as a proselytizer. The past decades have seen an important development in the study of rabbinic literature, leading to a growing recognition of the contribution of late redactors and transmitters to the shaping of rabbinic traditions. Accordingly, we will examine the rabbinic narratives concerning Abraham’s mission to the nations, recognizing that rabbinic literature is a literary corpus that evolved through centuries of creative redaction and the flexible transmission of orally cited materials. Such an approach will shed new light on the place of the missionary image in rabbinic thought. By uncovering the work of late redactors and transmitters, we will be able to portray the important shift that occurred, as rabbinic traditions migrated from the land of Israel to Babylon, during the first half of the first millennium. Only after identifying the literary processes demonstrated in the rabbinic corpus can we reconsider their implications concerning the question of the missionary nature of Judaism in Late Antiquity.  

1 S.J.D. Cohen, ed., The Synoptic Problem in Rabbinic Literature (BJS 326; Providence, R.I., 2000); J.R. Rubenstein, ed., Creation and Composition: The Contribution of the Bavli Redactors (Stammim) to the Aggada (Tübingen 2005).

2 Throughout this paper, I will use descriptive language, showing how traditions from the land of Israel were “treated” in the Babylonian Talmud. I will claim, for example, that the Babylonian Talmud replaced traditions about Abraham with others, speaking about Torah scholars. My language should not be misunderstood as a reconstruction of the intentional deeds of a certain Babylonian redactor. I do not intend to claim that someone held the rabbinic Palestinian texts, as we witness them today, and deliberately changed them. I only wish to portray the end result of the complicated and multifaceted processes...