This collection of studies is about differences between the rabbinic Palestinian literature and its parallels in the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli). The fact that differences exist may be considered banal, and therefore it is legitimate to inquire why such a volume is at all necessary. To explain this it is helpful to note that a vast part of the Bavli comprises texts that have Palestinian parallels. These include citations of the Mishnah, of baraitot, and of sayings attributed to Palestinian sages up to the fourth century (which include biblical interpretation, midrash, as well as legal discussion, halakhah). Recently, scholars have even argued that Palestinian tractates form the foundation of Babylonian ones.¹ The reason for this enormous volume of Palestinian traditions which the Babylonians incorporated in their composition is likely their self-perception as being the heirs to this sacred canon. In a tradition formulated in extreme terms, the Babylonian rabbis convey the notion that they are responsible not only for the texts they composed in their own land after the Mishnah was published, but also that all the wealth of knowledge that was produced in Palestine between the biblical period and the publication of the Talmud would not have been possible without intensive Babylonian support: “In the beginning, when the Torah was forgotten from Israel, Ezra went up (to the Land of Israel) from Babylon and restored it. (When) it was again forgotten, Hillel the Babylonian went up and restored it. (When) it was again forgotten Rabbi Hiyya and his sons went up and restored it” (bSuk 20a). The ideology voiced in this tradition is that the entire rabbinic Palestinian corpus is in fact the Torah of Babylonia. This of course makes it authoritative for the Babylonians and worthy of citation in their own composition (the Bavli).

In addition, over the course of time, the Babylonians who composed the Bavli became convinced that not only is their knowledge the foundation of the Torah of the Land of Israel, but also that their interpretation of the Mishnah (the Bavli) is more authentic and divinely blessed than that of their Palestinian brethren (the Yerushalmi). Historically speaking, this claim gained credence in Babylonian eyes as the Bavli triumphed over its Palestinian counterpart in becoming the most prominent canonical Jewish text.

1 Theorizing Diaspora

The Babylonian–Palestinian axis is a particular case of what was conceptualized in the last decades among scholars of cultural studies as “diaspora studies”; in fact, diaspora studies were constructed first and foremost with the Jewish case in mind, though not necessarily the Palestinian–Babylonian example. Rather, the Jewish diaspora in Medieval through Modern times was in view.

When more than 150 people are declared a unified group, a tribe, a nation, we have an imagined community. The imagined community, regardless of whether it was created because of political, economic or other reasons, drives or motivations, shares a narrative that serves as a basis for its self-definition as a group; this could be a story of a common ancestor, stories about shared events in the past, or a divine command. Throughout human history, the imagined community to which people belonged constantly grew in size. From a natural group of some 150, it grew to a few tens of thousands in a common ancient city (Babylon, Nippur), several hundreds of thousands in an ancient nation (Solomon’s kingdom), or a few millions in an ancient empire (the Assyrian).

The importance of narrative in creating a sense of a unified group becomes very clear in cases of diaspora. Migrations happened, of course, throughout the history and prehistory of the human race, and groups of humans separated from their land of birth, migrated and intermixed with other groups.