

Richard Kalmin
Migrating Tales:
The Talmud's Narratives and
their Historical Context

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In recent decades there has been a renewed interest in studying Talmudic texts as self-contained literary units that were carefully structured and edited. Scholars using this approach tend to analyze rabbinic literature outside of its historical context. Other scholars, however, prefer to explore how traditions preserved in rabbinic literature respond to, or influence, non-Jewish texts and traditions. Richard Kalmin's latest book is a remarkable contribution that fuses both of these approaches by studying the literary elements of Talmudic passages alongside non-Jewish parallels. These parallels, Kalmin suggests, reflect cultural sharing between rabbinic and non-rabbinic communities. Kalmin studies eight legends that are preserved in the Babylonian Talmud alongside an array of parallel traditions in texts deriving from the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire. He argues that these traditions were shared in communities that were home to Christians, Jews, and pagans. The book ultimately makes a compelling case for looking beyond the rabbinic world when studying Talmudic legends.

According to Kalmin, the fourth century CE saw an increase in rabbinic awareness of cultural material that was circulating in the Roman east. This increased awareness led to the refashioning and incorporating of non-rabbinic material into rabbinic texts. As rabbinic authors synthesized non-rabbinic traditions with their own material, they reworked these traditions and incorporated them into their own new arguments. Cultural exchange between the rabbis and others in the Roman east went in both directions; some Talmudic tales in turn influenced non-Jews.

In his lucid and accessible writing style, Kalmin examines eight cases of Talmudic legends which show parallels to non-rabbinic sources. In chapter one, he explores the legend about the biblical prophet Isaiah being sawed in half. Kalmin traces the tradition from its first appearance in *The Ascension of Isaiah*, which he regards as a first or second-century CE document likely composed in

the land of Israel, and then onward in the Yerushalmi, in the writings of the Church Fathers, in texts written by Persians, and in the Babylonian Talmud. Kalmin views the parallel traditions found in these texts as evidence of increasing "cultural unity" in the fourth century (p. 52). In his second chapter, Kalmin argues that rabbinic sources appropriated Christian texts regarding the exorcist St. Bartholomew by depicting Bartholomew himself as a demon. In chapter three he considers the legend of the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, which began in the third century BCE. Kalmin studies accounts of the translation preserved in the Babylonian Talmud and in Jewish texts such as The Letter of Aristeas and the writings of Philo and Josephus, alongside Christian texts written in Greek, Latin, and Syriac. Fourth-century CE sources seem to pick up on the legend and expand it.

In chapter four, Kalmin explores the trope of Solomon's interactions with demonic figures that makes its way into the Talmud as well as into The Testament of Solomon, along with early Christian texts found at Nag Hammadi. In chapter five, perhaps the book's most elegant and complex chapter, Kalmin studies how the legend of the prophet Zechariah's murder in the Jerusalem Temple is mentioned in non-Jewish legends that were written from the first through the thirteenth century. Kalmin in chapter six explores traditions regarding the Pharisees. He shows that legends about the Pharisees in the Babylonian Talmud have parallels with legends in Josephus and in the New Testament. In the seventh chapter, Kalmin focuses on the theme of astrology, using bShab 156a-b as a starting point, and compares it with passages in the Yerushalmi, in Genesis Rabbah, and in Tannaitic midrashim, and then moves on to non-Jewish sources. He traces the rabbinic idea that Jews, unlike Gentiles, are not governed by astrological forces. Kalmin notes that some Roman sources use the term *mazla* (which can be translated as a constellation or heavenly body) in the same way that fourth-century rabbis do. Kalmin in his final chapter notes similarities between Talmudic accounts about Alexander the Great and the Alexander Romance, a collection of legends about the adventures of Alexander the Great. Kalmin suggests that the Alexander stories in the Talmud critique the human desire to strive for as much as possible, for humans will never truly be satiated.

The eight legends studied by Kalmin do not emerge from the same non-Jewish traditions. The legend of Isaiah's death, for example, is preserved in Christian, Muslim, and Persian sources. Traditions about the Pharisees found in the Babylonian Talmud have parallels in the Jerusalem Talmud, the writings of Josephus, and the New Testament. The diverse traditions that Kalmin studies, therefore, cannot necessarily be taken together to make general conclusions about the non-rabbinic sources that he is using.

While Kalmin does not offer precise dates for the Talmudic material he studies, he isolates original (and sometimes competing) sources by locating shifts between Aramaic and Hebrew. This distinction is especially important to his work on the Bartholomew tradition in chapter two and on the Alexander Romance in chapter eight. According to Kalmin, a switch in language may indicate

the presence of both earlier and later sources, perhaps prompted by a later rabbi's dissatisfaction with an earlier source.

Kalmin relies on the parallels between Talmudic statements that are attributed to fourth-century rabbis and statements appearing in contemporaneous non-rabbinic sources. These connections indicate an increase in cultural sharing among rabbis and non-Jews in the Roman east. Most of the book's eight chapters compellingly make this point, but some chapters give rise to further questions. For example, in chapter six Kalmin compares passages in the Talmud about the Pharisees with passages in the New Testament. However, the New Testament authors were likely in closer cultural contact with the rabbinic community than authors of Roman and Persian sources. It is therefore harder to make the case that there was conscious borrowing in this instance; perhaps these legends were simply "in the air."

Kalmin's work also raises important questions regarding parallels between non-rabbinic legends in the Greek, Latin, Syriac, Persian, and Arabic texts and legends that also appear in the Babylonian Talmud. Do these variations evince distinctive qualities that are specific to the communities behind the texts? Such patterns, if they exist, could shed light on what kinds of changes these communities made to earlier legends.

These questions aside, Kalmin's excellent book will serve as a rich resource for students of rabbinic literature who seek to understand how legends were borrowed and retold among rabbis and non-Jews in the Roman east. This book will also serve as a methodological guide for scholars interested in studying cultural sharing among a wide range of traditions.