

ABSTRACT

FROM TRADITION TO CONTROVERSY:  
NEW MODES OF TRANSMISSION IN THE TEACHINGS OF EARLY RABBIS

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The teachings of the early Rabbis are based on the traditions of the Pharisees, but at the same time they reflect a sharp diversion from earlier study and transmission practices, a diversion that is best represented in the dominant role of controversy in the textual culture of the early rabbis. In this article I argue that this change is traceable within early rabbinic literature, corresponding to the first stages of the rabbinic movement during the post-70 CE period. Textual and redactional revisions of early teachings testify to a shift from a tradition-oriented approach, grounded in the Pharisaic heritage, to new textual patterns centered on controversy. Analysis of this new approach reveals the forces that reshaped rabbinic study culture.

In the first section, I offer a new interpretation of Tosefta Eduyot 1.1, and other closely related sources, which address fear of losing the Torah, since it has been splintered into multiple contradictory traditions. These sources justify the creation of the new controversy-centered literary form, which has come to dominate rabbinic literature, such as ‘Rabbi X prohibits, and R. Y permits’. Paradoxically, the systematic preservation of disputes within a shared textual framework has transformed the collection of contradictory teachings into a manageable whole.

The following sections provide a close analysis of Mishnah Eduyot ch. 1. The three sections of that chapter display controversy as the essential textual space for further development of the law. In its redacted form, corresponding to the practice of R. Akiva’s disciples, the chapter presents a manifesto for the value of transmitting controversies, such as those of the Houses of Shammai and Hillel, and the preservation of rejected views. At the same time, the earlier materials underlying each of the sections belong to an earlier Yavnean study-culture, based on the authority of tradition. In this earlier stage, there is no place for the rejected views of Shammai and the House of Shammai, unless they are adapted to the authoritative tradition of the House of Hillel.