

Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond
Workshop on 'Converting Practice'
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"A Matter of Court: The Babylonian Talmud and the Establishment of Jewish Conversion Procedure"

Abstract

The performance of conversion to Judaism by a rabbinical court was a common practice. This lecture is aimed at presenting the foundational period of the institution. We will examine various sources from rabbinic literature in order to point to the development of the idea of court-facilitated conversion, probably in Babylon circa the 4th century. The creative transmission of rabbinic tradition reinterpreted earlier traditions, suggesting a slightly different chronological prism, according to which the institution was already known in the second century. This case is another brick in the demarcating wall constructed during the foundational rabbinic period, and especially developed in Babylon. The later canonical status of the Babylonian Talmud made those developments central to Jewish practice to this very day.