defining characteristic of Yavneh became inclusiveness rather than sectarian exclusiveness, which explains why those who continued after 70 CE to call themselves ‘Pharisee’ (‘Perushim’ in rabbinic literature) were regarded as sectarians. This inclusivity is seen in the Mishnah, which was the first Jewish document to express rival views with equal authority, and which appears to ‘agree to disagree’ except when a clear decision was made by the voting of a majority.10

The editors of the legal material did not preserve all points of view, since a consensus was usually reached, but they aimed to preserve the different opinions that formed the route toward this consensus. Therefore the earliest strata of debate were preserved mainly when they served to explain the basis of later decisions, or where early rulings had continued unchanged, but they discarded rulings which had been superseded by later debate or case law.

The editors of Scripture commentaries, by contrast, had the dual motives of explaining the Scripture text and illustrating it interestingly. This meant that, like the legal editors, they often preserved early sources when recording the development of a debate about the meaning of a text. Other early sources were preserved simply because they were interesting, especially if they contained a story or something that could be applied in a sermon. Of course neither set of editors were as single minded as this, and all rabbinic literature contains a rich mix of material from legal discussions, stories and Scripture exposition, woven together in convoluted and ingenious ways.

The aim of this present work is to find the earliest traditions, which is in some ways contrary to the aims of the early editors of rabbinic material, who wished to preserve the conclusions of scholarly debate, rather than their origins. They recorded the early stages of discussions merely in order to understand later developments. The assumption of this present work is that these editors attempted to faithfully transmit early material, because the veracity of later conclusions was partially dependent on the accuracy of the earlier stages. However, caution is always needed, because although the whole ethos of scholarship in rabbinic circles involved accurate memorizing and transmitting of earlier teaching, mistakes and innovations are nevertheless found throughout these traditions.