The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism

This book examines the origins of communal and institutional almsgiving in rabbinic Judaism. It undertakes a close reading of foundational rabbinic texts (Mishnah, Tosefta, and Tannaitic Midrashim) and places their discourses on organized giving in their second to third century C.E. contexts. Gregg E. Gardner finds that the Tannaim promoted giving through the soup kitchen (tamhui) and charity fund (quppa), which enabled anonymous and collective support for the poor. This protected the dignity of the poor and provided an alternative to begging, which benefited the community as a whole — poor and non-poor alike. By contrast, later Jewish and Christian writers would see organized charity as a means to promote their own religious authority. This book contributes to the study of Jews and Judaism, history of religions, biblical studies, and ethics.

Gregg E. Gardner is Assistant Professor and the Diamond Chair in Jewish Law and Ethics at the University of British Columbia. He earned his PhD from Princeton University and MA degrees from Princeton University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He held a Doctoral Dissertation Completion Fellowship from the Charlotte W. Newcombe Foundation (2008–09), a Starr Fellowship in Judaica at the Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard University (2009–10), and a Mellon/American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship at the Cogut Center for the Humanities at Brown University (2010–11). Gardner is the coeditor of Antiquity in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Greco-Roman World (2008). His work has been published in such journals as Jewish Quarterly Review, Journal for the Study of Judaism, and Journal of Biblical Literature.
The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism

GREGG E. GARDNER
University of British Columbia
For my parents,
Francine Iris Gardner and Dr. Marshall Keith Gardner
“And the glory of children is their parents”
Proverbs 17:6
Contents

Acknowledgments xi
Abbreviations and Conventions xv

1 Introduction 1
   The Problem of Charity 1
   Begging in Late Antiquity 5
   The Problems: Beginnings and Ends 7
      The Ends of Organized Charity 8
      The Beginnings of Organized Charity 10
   The Reality of Organized Charity 22
   Tsedaqah and “Charity”: Some Definitions 26
   Charity and Other Forms of Support 32
   Organized Charity as an End to Begging 33
   Organizing Charity: The Structure of This Book 35
   Appendix: A Brief Introduction to Tannaitic Literature 39

2 The Poor and Poverty in Roman Palestine 42
   Economy and Poverty in Roman Palestine 43
   The Third-Century Crisis 47
   The Poor and Poverty: Realia 48
      Food 49
      Clothing 52
      Shelter 53
   Two Poverties 56
   Urbanization and Urban Life 59
   Conclusion 62

3 From Vessels to Institutions 63
   Introduction 63
   Vessels and Institutions 64
CONTENTS

Tamhui: From Dish to Soup Kitchen 67
Quppa: From Basket to Charity Fund 69
Institutions 75
From Vessels to Institutions 79
Conclusion 82

4 Tamhui, The Soup Kitchen 84
Introduction 84
Daily Alms 85
Bread 86
Legumes 87
Olive Oil 89
Biological Poverty 91
Provisions for the Sabbath and Passover 91
Three Meals 92
Fish 93
Vegetables 94
Wine at the Passover Seder 95
Conclusion 97
Lodging for the Poor 98
Hospitality 99
Communal Hospitality and the Synagogue 104
Hospitality and the Origins of the Tamhui 105
Conclusion 109

5 Quppa, The Charity Fund 111
Introduction 111
Clothing, Money, and Food 112
Clothing 112
Money 114
Bread 116
Wives, Slaves, and Horses 118
Wife 118
Slave and a Horse 121
The Poor’s Needs 125
Unlimited Giving 128
Prodigious Giving 129
The “Usha Ordinance” 134
Conclusion 137

6 Charity with Dignity 139
The Conjunctural Poor 139
The Quppa as a Civic Institution 142
Anonymous Giving 151
## CONTENTS

Empathy for the Conjunctural Poor’s Dignity  
153  
Conclusion  
155  

7 The Charity Supervisor  
157  
Introduction  
157  
Charity Supervisor  
158  
Collection  
163  
Distribution  
167  
The Poor Who Refuse Alms  
167  
Imposters  
169  
Supervisors as Judges  
172  
Supervisors as Communal Officials  
175  
Instructions for Handling Funds  
176  
Conclusion  
179  

8 Conclusion: After the Tannaim  
180  
Organized Charity in Palestinian Amoraic Texts  
180  
The Tamhui and Quppa in Palestinian Amoraic Texts  
181  
The Urgency of Poverty  
183  
Organized Charity and Authority  
185  
Conclusion  
192  

Bibliography  
193  
Ancient Sources Index  
219  
Subject Index  
229
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the many friends, colleagues, and institutions who helped make this book a reality. This book began its life as my doctoral dissertation written in the Department of Religion at Princeton University. My dissertation advisor, Peter Schäfer, provided expert guidance, mentorship, and erudite feedback as this project evolved from a paper for his graduate seminar, to a thesis proposal, through many drafts, and finally to the completed dissertation. He always encouraged me to follow my own interests and explore new ideas, while ensuring that I remained true to the sources and focused on what they can – and cannot – tell us. Likewise, my debt to my two tireless and generous readers, Martha Himmelfarb and AnneMarie Luijendijk, is beyond measure. They provided exhaustive and insightful comments on numerous drafts, which were followed up with long and enjoyable discussions. The elaborate feedback and supportive mentorship that I received from John Gager and Simeon Chavel was likewise invaluable. Altogether, I could not have asked for a better team to guide me through my doctoral work, as these scholars and friends brought to life the words of Mishnah Avot 1:6: “Appoint for yourself a rav; acquire for yourself a haver.” Together with my cohort of graduate students and the Department of Religion's amazing staff, I could not have hoped for a more supportive and nurturing environment.

I received generous financial support for my doctoral studies from Princeton University, particularly the Department of Religion, Graduate School, Program in Judaic Studies, Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, and Program in the Ancient World. I was fortunate to receive a Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship from the Charlotte W. Newcombe Foundation for my final year of writing (2008–09).

Upon completion of my doctorate, I had the opportunity to research the topic further and revise my work as Harry Starr Fellow in Judaica and Alan M. Stroock Postdoctoral Fellow at Harvard University (2009–10), and as an
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Andrew W. Mellon Foundation/American Council of Learned Societies Recent Doctoral Recipients Fellow at Brown University in 2010–11. I thank Shaye Cohen, Eric Nelson, Bernard Septimus, and the Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard. At Brown, I thank Katharina Galor, Michael Satlow, Michael Steinberg, and the Cogut Center for the Humanities. My fellow Fellows in these programs provided lively and stimulating intellectual environments. This book was completed at the University of British Columbia, and I express my deep gratitude to my wonderful colleagues and the excellent staff in the Department of Classical, Near Eastern, and Religious Studies, who have supported my work in too many ways to possibly list.

I am very grateful to Ra’anan Boustan, Franco De Angelis, David Downs, Ari Finkelstein, Adam Gregerman, Jonathan Kaplan, Tzvi Novick, Jonathan Schofer, and Moulie Vidas for providing feedback on chapters of the manuscript as it took shape. Jordan Rosenblum has always been ready to exchange ideas, and his work has had an important impact on my own. Tracy Ames, Jamie Carrick, Justin Glessner, Courtney Innes, and Lisa Tweten provided valuable research assistance. The manuscript as a whole was greatly improved by comments from the two anonymous reviewers for the Press; I thank them for their time, effort, and investment in my work.

In addition to those already mentioned, this project benefited from conversations with and support from Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, Aryeh Amihay, Antje Ellermann, Laura Fisher, Eric Gregory, Cam Grey, Alan Jacobs, Joel Kaminsky, Joshua Karlip, Eitan Kensky, Lee Levine, Eric Meyers, Yoni Miller, Vered Noam, Annette Reed, Seth Schwartz, Aharon Shemesh, Benjamin Soskis, Jeffrey Stout, Nathan Sussman, my colleagues in the 2012–13 Early Career Faculty Fellowship of the American Academy for Jewish Research, and the participants in the Religious Competition in Late Antiquity program unit of the Society of Biblical Literature. My writing group in Cambridge – Rachel Greenblatt, Jane Kanarek, Yehuda Kurtzer, and Claire Sufrin – provided not only valuable feedback on my work, but also essential structure to my writing process. Various portions of this project were presented and workshopped at the annual meetings of the Association for Jewish Studies and the Society of Biblical Literature, the Judaism in Antiquity workshop at Harvard, and the Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins at the University of Pennsylvania. I thank the organizers for the opportunity to present my work and the participants for their feedback. Perhaps needless to say, all remaining errors are my responsibility alone.

Special thanks to the Diamond Foundation of Vancouver for supporting Jewish studies at the University of British Columbia and my work as the UBC Diamond Chair in Jewish Law and Ethics. I am very grateful to Lewis...
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Bateman, Elda Granata, Paul Smolenski, Shaun Vigil, and others at Cambridge University Press, as well as my copy editor Hillary Ford and Anamika Singh for their hard work and enthusiasm in turning this manuscript into a book.

I also extend my gratitude to the staff at Princeton’s Firestone Library, Brown’s Rockefeller Library, Harvard’s Widener Library and the Andover-Harvard Theological Library, and the Koerner Library at the University of British Columbia for providing the resources that I needed for this project.

Last, but certainly not least, I owe a special debt to my family. I thank my parents, Fran and Keith, to whom this book is dedicated, and Kevin, Scott, Joy, Brandon, and Brooke Gardner, and Cindy, Don, Sam, Lacey, and Rhodes Brown for their support and love. Yael Deborah was born as I was finishing the dissertation and Jonah Edward was born just before we moved from Boston to Vancouver. Curious to know what Daddy was working on, they would hop onto my lap, take over my keyboard, and helpfully type the first letters of their names again and again. Yael and Jonah, I owe every $y$ and $j$ in this book to you. I love you and thank you for making sure that I do not lose sight of what is truly important. I never could have undertaken or completed this project without my wife, Rabbi Carey A. Brown. She read and commented upon multiple drafts of the entire manuscript, was my constant sounding board for ideas, and provided me with the support and strength that I needed to finish. Carey, you mean more to me than I can possibly put into words. I consider myself unbelievably lucky to have you as my partner on this journey.

Gregg E. Gardner
Abbreviations and Conventions

All translations of rabbinic texts, unless otherwise noted, are my own and based on the following Hebrew and Aramaic editions of the primary texts: the Kaufmann manuscript of the Mishnah; Lieberman’s Tosefta – where incomplete, I have used Zuckermandel’s edition; Horovitz-Rabin’s Mekhilta; Weiss’s Sifra; Kahana’s Sifre on Numbers, Finkelstein’s Sifre on Deuteronomy, Schäfer’s Jerusalem Talmud; and the Vilna edition of the Babylonian Talmud.¹

Unless otherwise indicated, translations of the Hebrew Bible are according to the New Jewish Publication Society Translation, with my modifications.²

Translations of the Apocrypha and New Testament are according to the New Revised Standard Version. References to Greek and Latin sources, unless


otherwise noted, refer to their respective editions in the Loeb Classical Library series.

I have employed a general-purpose style of transliterating Hebrew and Aramaic words when the fully reversible style (with diacritics, etc.) is unnecessary. For common names (e.g., Judah, Shimon) and terms that appear in standard English dictionaries (e.g., midrash), I have used conventional spellings and roman type. References to rabbinic texts are abbreviated as follows: m. – Mishnah; t. – Tosefta; y. – Jerusalem Talmud or Yerushalmi; b. – Babylonian Talmud or Bavli (all followed by the name of the tractate); Mekilta – Mekilta of Rabbi Ishmael; SifreNum – Sifre on Numbers; and SifreDeut – Sifre on Deuteronomy. All other abbreviations are according to Alexander et al., SBL Handbook of Style, which I have also endeavored to follow for citations, spellings, and other conventions.3

In this book, rabbis and Tannaim refer to the editors and redactors of early rabbinic or Tannaitic compilations, as methodological difficulties limit what can be known about any particular individual or individuals depicted within the texts.4 Mishnah indicates the entire corpus of six orders; each order contains about ten tractates, each tractate is divided into chapters; and each chapter consists of numerous mishnayoth (singular: mishnah) or pericopae. A pericope is divided into multiple lemmata; a lemma is defined as the smallest group of words that convey a coherent thought.5 I have enumerated lemmata only as necessary.