

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11335-0 - Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster

Julia Watts Belser

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

POWER, ETHICS, AND ECOLOGY IN JEWISH LATE ANTIQUITY

Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster

Rabbinic tales of drought, disaster, and charismatic holy men illuminate critical dimensions of power, ethics, and ecology in Jewish late antiquity. Through a sustained reading of the Babylonian Talmud's tractate on fasts in response to drought, this book shows how Bavli Ta'anit challenges Deuteronomy's claim that virtue can assure abundance and that misfortune is an unambiguous sign of divine rebuke.

Employing a new method for analyzing lengthy talmudic narratives, Julia Watts Belser traces complex strands of aggadic dialectic to show how Bavli Ta'anit's redactors articulate a strikingly self-critical theological and ethical discourse. Bavli Ta'anit castigates rabbis for misuse of power, exposing the limits of their perception and critiquing prevailing obsessions with social status. But it also celebrates the possibilities of performative perception – the power of an adroit interpreter to transform events in the world and interpret crisis in a way that draws forth blessing.

Julia Watts Belser is Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies in the Department of Theology at Georgetown University. Her articles have appeared in numerous journals, including the *AJS Review*; the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*; the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*; *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*; and the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11335-0 - Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster

Julia Watts Belser

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11335-0 - Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster

Julia Watts Belser

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Power, Ethics, and Ecology
in Jewish Late Antiquity

Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster

JULIA WATTS BELSER

Georgetown University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11335-0 - Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster

Julia Watts Belser

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107113350

© Julia Watts Belser 2015

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2015

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Belser, Julia Watts, 1978– author.

Power, ethics, and ecology in Jewish late antiquity : rabbinic responses to drought and disaster / Julia Watts Belser.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-11335-0 (hardback)

1. Droughts in rabbinical literature. 2. Rain in rabbinical literature. 3. Disasters in rabbinical literature. 4. Rabbinical literature – History and criticism. I. Title.

BM496.9.D76B45 2015

296.1'250836334 – dc23 2015014689

ISBN 978-1-107-11335-0 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11335-0 - Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses
to Drought and Disaster

Julia Watts Belser

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

To Devorah,
with gratitude for uncountable gifts



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11335-0 - Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster

Julia Watts Belser

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11335-0 - Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster

Julia Watts Belser

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> ix
Introduction	1
Encountering the Bavli: An Introduction for Readers New to the Babylonian Talmud	24
1 Covenantal Ecology and the Discourse of Natural Signs	34
2 Discerning Divine Favor: The Art of Interpretation and the Ambiguity of Natural Signs	59
3 Merit in the Midst of Danger: Falling Walls, Faltering Houses, and the Power of Performative Perception	84
4 Charisma and Ritual Fasting for the Sake of Rain: Parrhesia, Penitence, and Intimacy before God	116
5 Confusing the Fathers: Charisma and the Limits of Human Power	149
6 Hiddenness and Holiness: Gender, Class, Concealment, and the Critique of Rabbinic Status-Seeking	184
Conclusion: Power and Perception in Bavli Ta'anit	212
<i>Bibliography</i>	217
<i>Subject Index</i>	231
<i>Index of Ancient Sources</i>	237

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11335-0 - Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster

Julia Watts Belser

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11335-0 - Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster

Julia Watts Belser

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

A book comes into being bearing the imprint of many hands. Over the years I have written this book, many people have offered invaluable gifts of intellectual and material support. First and foremost, I thank Daniel Boyarin, my teacher, whose scholarship and example have blazed a path that allowed me to imagine my own place within the field, whose critical engagement has improved this book immeasurably, and whose steadfast support has sustained me through the years.

My work has been supported by the friendship and generosity of many scholars. Josh Holo read the manuscript at an early stage, asking questions that sparked an entirely new line of inquiry. Richard Kalmin, Dina Stein, and Azzan Yadin-Israel gave generously of their time to read and comment on portions of the manuscript. Reuven Kimelman, Jeffrey Rubenstein, David Seidenberg, and Zvi Septimus offered comments in response to papers delivered at the Association for Jewish Studies and the Society of Biblical Literature that have been particularly significant for my thinking. Gratitude and appreciation go to Ruth Haber, my *havruta* for several of the years during which I wrote this book. From the very first day of an early graduate seminar, her friendship lit up the pages of the Talmud – and her insights into the text and tales of Bavli Ta’anit have indelibly shaped my own.

I also acknowledge with gratitude the tremendous generosity of several institutions and fellowships that have supported my work. The Berkeley Fellowship at the University of California, Berkeley, made possible my graduate study and offered generous support for the writing of my dissertation. Particular thanks are due to Naomi Seidman, Deena Aranoff, and Maureen Maloney at the Graduate Theological Union, as well as Sandy Richmond at the University of California, Berkeley. I also thank my teachers and friends at the Academy for Jewish Religion, California, particularly Tamar Frankiel, Daniel Bouskila, and Eli Schochet.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11335-0 - Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster

Julia Watts Belser

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

I began work on this book at Missouri State University, where I was nourished by warm and vibrant friendships with many excellent colleagues. Victor Matthews, Jack Llewellyn, and Steve Berkwitz were particularly instrumental in supporting and funding my research endeavors. My work was facilitated by the administrative excellence of Jane Terry and Carolyn Mayer in the Religious Studies Department, as well as the exceptional Marah Baldwin, my graduate assistant. A Dean's Research Fellowship and a Summer Faculty Research Fellowship provided valuable support for my writing during these years.

The Women's Studies in Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School granted me a research fellowship during the 2011–12 academic year, offering both an invaluable crucible for scholarship and precious time to devote myself to research and writing. I am grateful to Ann Braude for her generous mentorship and intellectual insights, Jacob Rhoads for impeccable administrative assistance and warm hospitality, as well as Bernadette Brooten for her friendship and good counsel.

I brought this book to completion at Georgetown University, where I have benefited tremendously from the friendship and intellectual engagement of wonderful colleagues.

In particular, I thank Jonathan Ray, Tod Linafelt, Theresa Sanders, and Chris Steck, S.J., in the Theology Department for their encouragement and support in bringing this book to fruition. Mike Friedman provided exceptional research assistance and unstinting attention to detail in all matters bibliographical. Amy Phillips, Jewish Studies librarian at the Woodstock Theological Library, has gone above and beyond to secure critical resources for Talmud scholarship. Carole Sargent in the Office of Scholarly Publications offered invaluable guidance in navigating the complicated waters of academic publishing, and her continued support and wise counsel have been a tremendous boon. A Junior Faculty Research Fellowship provided generous financial support that facilitated my completion of the manuscript.

I have shared portions of this book with my students in a variety of courses and seminars: Midrash, Talmud and the Jewish Bible, Jewish Sages and Sinners, Jewish and Christian Identities in Late Antiquity, and Jewish Feminist Ethics. My students' comments, questions, and lively conversation have sharpened my thinking and spurred me to greater clarity. They have also afforded me the great privilege and joy of opening up the world of Talmud to a new generation of readers.

It has been a great pleasure to work with Laura Morris at Cambridge University Press. Her enthusiastic support for the book, her warmth and personal kindness, and her editorial insight have been a great boon. The anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press offered insightful feedback that truly

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-11335-0 - Power, Ethics, and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster

Julia Watts Belser

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

xi

improved the final work. I thank them both for their detailed and generous comments on my manuscript. Alexandra Poreda, Elizabeth Shand, and the rest of the editorial and production staff at Cambridge University Press have been wonderful to work with, and I am grateful for their dedicated efforts on my behalf. I thank Minaketan Dash at Aptara for outstanding production management services, Litty Santosh and Sujit Thomas for excellent copyediting, as well as Eve Levavi Feinstein of Nisaba Editing for the creation of the index.

Finally, I acknowledge with tremendous gratitude my parents, my partner, and the friends whose love and encouragement has sustained me to this day: to Kern and Gisela Watts, for their steadfast support and abundant generosity, to Josh Johnson, for love and laughter that shapes the very tenor of my days, to Sofia Betancourt, for wisdom and friendship that have illuminated every crossroad, and to Devorah Greenstein, whose careful eye and vibrant spirit have touched every page.

Thank you.