



**Gregg Gardner.** *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 251 pp. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-09543-4.

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Charity is one of the most important concepts in Judaism. The most famous definition of charity in Jewish thought is that of Maimonides, in his "Eight Levels of Giving" ("Laws about Giving to Poor People," *Mishneh Torah*, 10:7-14). Ironically, the highest level of charity might not even be considered as charity today. Maimonides suggests "charity" options such as giving an indigent an interest-free loan, forming a partnership with him, or finding a job for a poor person so that he or she will be able to support themselves. The lowest level of charity is giving out of pity, most likely to a beggar, a type of giving that has generated opposition in some circles today.[1] Avoiding the pitfalls and problems of giving to beggars, and finding different, viable charity solutions are core issues of Gardner's study.

Gardner enters a field that has not suffered neglect as of late.[2] Is there a need for another book on Jewish charity? The answer to this question is encapsulated in one sentence: "The study of organized charity in Judaism is inextricably intertwined with the study of material culture" (p. 63). Finally! While this truism is self-evident in the academic circles that the author of this review frequents, unfortunately the study of relevant material culture and its meaning is often ignored in the study of ancient Judaism.[3] While Gardner's study, using material culture, makes a significant

contribution to the study of charity in rabbinic Judaism, it also serves as a methodological model for future research not only on this topic in particular, but also on the social history of ancient Jewish life.

Gardner sets out to explore the traditions on organized charity in the earliest texts of rabbinic Judaism. For the Tannaim, the early rabbinic sages, organized charity was a means to end begging in order to solve the problems created by giving alms directly to the poor. The first chapter, the introduction, deals with the problems of begging, discusses various usages of the Hebrew *tsdaqah*, and summarizes research on the history of the study of organized charity in ancient Palestine.

Chapter 2 ("The Poor and Poverty in Roman Palestine"), explores the social, historical, and economic contexts in which the early rabbinic movement formulated its ideas on charity. This is done based on sources contemporary to, but also extraneous to, rabbinic traditions, such as archaeology, epigraphy, and Graeco-Roman sources. Poverty manifested itself in two forms. The first was physiological—a lack of basic necessities such as food, clothing, or shelter—and the second was a dearth of assets that left one poor in terms of social standards of the time interpreted in light of personal "value judgements." This was "relative" poverty and related to the quality of life that had been

lost. The rabbis developed two means for ameliorating these states of poverty. The first was the *tamhui*, a type of household dish which morphed into a "soup kitchen" and the second was the *quppa*, a type of basket, which addressed the second type of poverty, the relative, value-judgement type. How a dish and basket became institutions of rabbinic Judaism will greatly occupy the author in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 ("From Vessels to Institutions") explores the details of the process of the transformation of the *tamhui*-dish into a "soup kitchen" and of the *quppa* from a basket into a "charity fund." The stress in this chapter is on institutionalization of these practices and Gardner bases his analysis on ideas from economics. One irony of this system is that later on, the Amoraim would use these existing and efficient institutions to direct funds to the rabbinic movement itself.

The next few chapters continue to study the *tamhui* and the *quppa* in detail. Chapter 4 ("*Tamhui*, The Soup Kitchen") deals with the "soup kitchen." This was an inclusive charity and was open to residents or nonresidents who might have wandered into town. Tannaitic traditions of the *tamhui* reflect a tradition of charity based on the treatment of guests, who might have also been itinerant poor. The rabbis also made sure to mandate provision of sufficient food to fulfill commandments with special needs for meals, such as the Sabbath. The *tamhui*, though, was more than just hospitality based on the host's discretion, but was regulated by the institution set up by the rabbis. Also, *tamhui* was totally without expectations of reciprocity. Thus, while modeled on hospitality it replaced it, as hospitality would have placed the poor person in a position of debt and dependency to the host.

Chapter 5 ("*Quppa*, The Charity Fund") examines the specific alms that the *quppa* offers. Unlike the standardized, "same size fits all" *tamhui*, the *quppa* provides alms that are individualized to each person's particular needs, which are defined

by social status. The conjunctural poor who have lost their place in society should be restored to their previous economic and social status. This might have required at times a good deal of funding and thus the Tannaim established that there should be no limit to the amount that one should give.

Chapter 6 ("Charity with Dignity") explores how the *quppa* elevates the dignity of the local conjunctural poor.[4] This strengthens the local community, the poor beneficiaries, and those who considered beggars and poverty to be unsightly. The process just described was often facilitated by the charity supervisor, the *gabbai tsedaqah*, the subject of chapter 7 ("The Charity Supervisor"). The charity supervisor, who ran the *quppa*, functioned along the lines of a tax collector who can mandate and demand payments. In distributing the funds, the supervisor was similar to a judge who must assess the claims of the poor before a decision is reached and alms are distributed. Eventually, this civic office would become associated with the rabbinic movement. The final chapter briefly describes post-Tannaitic developments in the Jewish and Christian world.

Up until now, the summary has been straightforward: this is an interesting and important book. What, however, makes it unique? I pointed out above that I was especially impressed by the author's statement that the study of charity is intertwined with the study of material culture. I should like to briefly expand upon this idea to give the reader somewhat of an understanding of what I see to be the unique nature of this work. Normally this would be the place in my review where I present a number of points of disagreement and make suggestions for general corrections or improvement. I shall not do this because I have no points of disagreement.

Although much of the book revolves around the *quppa* and the *tamhui*, chapters 3-4 place these concepts within the framework of the study of material culture. Not every bowl or jug in one's

house evolved into a legal entity. In fact only these two implements did. The *tamhui* and the *quppa*, according to the author, had certain physical properties that made them unique and attractive choices to be concrete manifestations of charitable institutions. Gardner shows the dual nature of the development of a *quppa*, the wicker basket that would have been found in every household. The weave of the baskets was tight to allow it to hold small objects, including coins. It was relatively large, yet small enough to be carried by one person. It also had a secondary usage and manifestation. *Quppot* were discovered in ancient synagogues, not as baskets, but as boxes, apparently serving as synagogue treasuries, to be filled with coins. Everything seemed to come together to make this an appropriate vessel for collecting and distributing alms to the conjunctural poor.

In the case of the *tanhui*, the soup kitchen, what is important is not the shape or size of the dish. From dish to soup kitchen does not require much of a leap of imagination. How much food, though, and what kind, is necessary to provide relief for biological poverty? To answer these questions, Gardner gives a detailed discussion of everyday life as it relates to food and sustenance. Bread, legumes, olive oil, fish, vegetables, wine, the nature of a weekday meal as opposed to a Sabbath or festival meal are all described in great detail. Moreover, since we saw above that the *tamhui* was connected to hospitality, Gardner describes and analyzes the details of lodging and hospitality. All of this is done in relation to rabbinic literature, relevant Roman literature, archaeology, material culture, and semiotics—the meaning of these objects. I know of very few scholars who have tackled matters of socio-halakhah in a similarly comprehensive manner.

Gardner has provided an important book that goes far beyond the study of charity. Gardner has combined the best of Israeli scholarship with the best of US and European scholarship. His work serves as a model for future studies of the social

and religious history of the Jews in ancient society and should be studied by anyone interested in ancient Judaism.

#### Notes

[1]. On the question today, see for example Derek Thompson, "Should You Give Money to Homeless People?," March 22, 2011, *The Atlantic* website, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/03/should-you-give-money-to-homeless-people/72820/>; and Dave Hill, "Don't give money to beggars—help them instead," December 6, 2013, *The Guardian* website, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/06/dont-give-money-beggars-help-them>. (Both accessed December 25, 2016).

[2]. Yael Wilfand, *Poverty, Charity and the Image of the Poor in Rabbinic Texts from the Land of Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix; Social World of Biblical Antiquity 2/9, 2014); and see my review in *Review of Biblical Literature* 9 (2015), [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/10090\\_11186.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/10090_11186.pdf) (accessed December 25, 2016). See also Rivka Ulmer and Moshe Ulmer, *Righteous Giving to the Poor: Tzedakah ("Charity") in Classic Rabbinic Judasim* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias; Gorgias Handbooks, 2014).

[3]. Material culture and archaeology are not the same. See, for example, Joshua Schwartz, "The Material Realities of Jewish Life in the Land of Israel, c. 235-638," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Volume Four: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 431-456; and James Deetz, "Material Culture and Archaeology—What's the Difference?" in *Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things*, ed. Leland Ferguson (Lansing, MI: Society for Historical Archaeology; Special Publication Series, Number 2, 1977), 9-12.

4. For a modern example of restoring dignity to the poor which combines both *quppa* and *tamhui*, see Raphael Minder, "In Spain, New Restaurants Nourish the Needy, and the Soul," De-

cember 19, 2016, *New York Times* website, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/19/world/europe/in-spain-new-restaurants-nourish-the-needy-and-the-soul.html> (accessed December 25, 2016) on the Robin Hood restaurants in Spain that serve free meals to homeless in the evenings through profits made during the day. This is not just a matter of food, or *tamhui* but also of *quppa*, as some of the diners said that eating in a restaurant restores their dignity.

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