In Jerusalem, just north of the Old City, nestled among the stone and ivy-covered archaeological institutions built in the nineteenth century, lie the ruins of a monumental tomb. Pilgrims, under the impression that the “Tomb of the Kings” housed the remains of monarchs mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, used to visit the site and offer prayers in times of distress. The complex, however, more likely houses the remains of a later and less famous royal dynasty, the House of Adiabene. This family, which ruled a small kingdom in Mesopotamia, converted to Judaism in the first century C.E. and built a burial complex on the outskirts of the Jews’ holiest city that was so impressive that ancient writers compared it to the massive Tomb of Mausolus in Halicarnassus (Turkey)—the original Mausoleum. Adiabene’s matriarch, Queen Helena, as well as her two sons were likely interred in the tomb in Jerusalem. Monobazus II was the eldest son, but he was so nondescript that he was initially passed over in favor of his more ambitious and savvier younger brother, Izates. However, due to his shockingly fortuitous name, combined with his family’s reputation for generosity, Monobazus—or more accurately, a memory of him—would play a seminal role in the development of Jewish ethics.

“Munbaz,” as his name would be rendered into Hebrew, makes an appearance at a crucial juncture in the earliest discussion of charity in classical rabbinic literature—a corpus of works on law and biblical interpretation from late antiquity that would form the foundations of rabbinic Judaism, the preeminent form of Judaism from the Middle Ages to today. The earliest version of the story appears in the Tosefta, a legal text from third-century-C.E. Roman
Palestine, where Munbaz “spends”—Munbaz bizbez, a play on words in Hebrew—his wealth by giving it away to relieve a famine. Against his family’s protests, Munbaz argues that his beneficence will be offset with treasures in the afterlife or world-to-come. The dialogue, in which Munbaz cites passages from the Hebrew Bible to support his ideas, explores different perceptions of wealth and its possible uses. For the intended audience of rabbis and rabbinic disciples, Munbaz serves as a model for how to view wealth and give it to the poor. Over the course of the narrative, the rabbinic authors also embed a subtle yet crucial claim, that Munbaz’s giving to the needy constitutes a form of tzedaqah. The Hebrew tzedaqah had predominantly meant “righteousness” in the Hebrew Bible and only later, in Second Temple-era texts (first centuries b.c.e. up to 70 C.E.), did it begin to take on a secondary meaning as “charity.” Beginning with the Munbaz narrative in the Tosefta, “charity” would eventually become the predominant meaning of tzedaqah in rabbinic literature if not the Hebrew language. Along with it, almsgiving would become the primary way to be righteous before God. Likewise, the concept of charity would become a pillar of Jewish ethics and a cardinal commandment of Judaism.

The Munbaz passage is mentioned briefly by Peter Brown, whose extensive scholarship otherwise focuses on late antique Christian sources, as the narrative illustrates how ancient writers saw wealth as a natural and acceptable way to connect earth to heaven. Brown’s scholarship demonstrates the importance of wealth in all areas of social and religious life in late antiquity. His approach aligns with broader research in the humanities and social sciences, where questions about poverty and charity are inseparable from issues about wealth—how wealth is perceived, used, and transferred from one individual to another helps define poverty and charity.

Within the field of religious studies, however, scholars had been reluctant to study the role of wealth head on, apologetic and uncomfortable with shining a bright light on possible connections between God and gold. This is even more so in Jewish Studies, due to the history of anti-Semitic stereotypes that associate Jews with money. However, inroads have recently been made into critical research on wealth in the history of religions, including by Brown on late antique Christianity (fourth to sixth centuries). For other periods (especially medieval and modern), there have also been advances in Jewish Studies. This book aims to help fill the gap in critical research on wealth, poverty, and charity in late antique Judaism, including classical rabbinic literature. In particular, I focus on discussions of care for the poor in the earliest rabbinic
texts, legal and exegetical texts that took shape in early third-century-c.e. Roman Palestine. These “Tannaitic” writings are named for the early rabbis or Tannaim (singular: Tanna) who “repeated” the teachings of their masters to internalize them and transmit them to their own disciples. These rabbis lived in Roman Palestine between 70 and 250 c.e., and their works of law (Mishnah and Tosefta) and exegesis (Mekilta of Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus, Sifra on Leviticus, Sifre on Numbers, and Sifre on Deuteronomy) were brought together and profoundly shaped by the last generations of the Tannaim in the early third century. These compilations, mostly in Hebrew, would form the basis of the Talmuds and, in turn, the foundations of subsequent Jewish thought on law and ethics to this day.

Previous scholarship on charity in classical rabbinic literature has focused on the traditional themes of pity, altruism, generosity, and atonement. While these are surely important components and features of charity, this book demonstrates that having an eye on wealth can provide us with a fuller understanding of care for the poor. Through a critical approach to the sources, reading them within their historical contexts, and drawing upon ideas from the humanities and social sciences, this book shows how the rabbis saw the problem of poverty as a problem of wealth—how wealth is created and destroyed, gained and lost; how wealth creates social difference by defining “rich” and “poor”; how wealth is conceptualized, measured, and allocated; and how to motivate others to part with their wealth and give it to the needy. I will also demonstrate how the rabbis’ own socioeconomic position influenced their thinking. As well-off individuals, the Tannaim could not but see the topic of care for the poor from the perspective of potential givers, more so than recipients. Ultimately, charity is a commandment for one to give some of one’s personal wealth to the poor—there is no commandment to receive, nor are the poor entitled to any particular object as charity. The rabbis would find the concept of wealth useful for interpreting biblical laws as it supplied a treasury of terms, concepts, and metaphors that enabled them to concretize and add specificity to their legal points, as well as formulate ways to motivate their audience to give.

This study contributes to our understanding of late antiquity by unlocking the important role that wealth played in shaping early rabbinic law. While it focuses on care for the poor, it also shows how the issue of wealth impacted the rabbis’ views and approaches to other topics of social and religious interest. Because rabbinic literature and the concept of charity would later become
central to Jewish law and ethics, this book also contributes broadly to Jewish Studies of all periods.

WEALTH AND RELIGION

The narrative on Munbaz is one of several early rabbinic texts that suggest a deep connection between wealth and religion. We also see this in numerous other religious texts from the ancient world, perhaps most notably Mark 10:17–31 (and parallels in Matthew 19:16–24 and Luke 18:18–30), where Jesus promises a heavenly treasure to a rich young man if he gives away his earthly fortune. Yet, aside from a handful of recent studies, scholars have generally been reticent to discuss the topic and highly apologetic when they do.4

Finding that the ancients were not inherently uncomfortable with connecting God and money, Brown has suggested that perhaps it is we moderns who are out of step.5 Brown builds on the research of anthropologists Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch, whose assessments on the morality of money also apply to wealth in general. Wealth, and the accumulation of wealth, are not necessarily evil.6 Modern, Western ideas about the amoral nature of wealth are not universal, but rather culturally specific. Negative attitudes towards money, like those famously promulgated by Aristotle and followed by many thereafter, are closely related to negative attitudes towards trade, which was viewed as inferior to agriculture.7 It follows that profit-oriented exchange is understood as artificial and unnatural, and able to destroy the material and economic ties that bind households together.8 As Parry and Bloch note, however, this characterizes Western thought, and we cannot assume that all ancient groups had views that aligned with those of Aristotle.9 Other negative views towards wealth and especially money originate in the Middle Ages, when there was unease about the merchant’s profit and the usurer’s interest. Money is seen as promoting individualism and destroying communal solidarity.10

Parry and Bloch further exhort us to recognize that attitudes towards wealth not only are culturally specific, but can take on different meanings within the same culture, as they are constantly shifting and situationally defined. One ought to avoid attributing to money in general what is in fact a specific set of meanings that derive from one’s own culture.11 Wealth, moreover, is powerful and has broad influence—its impact can be felt in all spheres of life, even beyond those that are traditionally identified as “economic.”12 Thus, it is reasonable to see how it would have a profound impact on religious ideas and language. To
adopt a disapproving attitude towards wealth, Brown writes, is to overlook a crucial fact that wealth and preoccupations with wealth lay heavily on people’s minds and influenced secular and religious life in late antiquity.¹³

Recently, a handful of scholars have begun to lay bare, unapologetically, the connections between wealth and religion. This scholarship has generally focused on early and late antique Christianity, and Second Temple Judaism (especially the Hellenistic and early Roman eras, 332 B.C.E. to 70 C.E.).¹⁴ These studies show that aversion to wealth tends to be more indicative of modern Western sensibilities than those of Jews and Christians living in the Near East some two millennia ago. Notably, charity is a central focus of these studies, and this book contributes to this body of scholarship by examining the topic in early rabbinic literature.

To be sure, there have been a few recent studies on poverty and charity in late antique Judaism and rabbinic literature. Some stress empathy, pity, and other themes that follow traditional approaches to the topic.¹⁵ Other studies have provided critical analysis of religious giving, generosity, and atonement, which have contributed greatly to our understanding of the topic and will be brought into my analyses in this book.¹⁶ My book aims to add to our growing understanding of poverty relief by foregrounding the concept of wealth and seeing how doing so can help us uncover new insights about Jewish approaches to care for the poor. Indeed, other areas of research have demonstrated the usefulness of studying wealth and poverty in tandem. In addition to Brown on late antique Christianity, I note, for example, the work in philosophy and ethics by J. B. Schneewind, who observes, “For obvious reasons, a serious history of thought about charity would be inseparable from a history of thought about property.”¹⁷

**Charity**

While this book will address multiple forms of poverty relief to some extent, it focuses primarily on charity, which would later grow to become the preeminent form of poverty relief and a central concept in Jewish ethics.¹⁸ As I will discuss in greater detail in chapter 3, I define “charity” as the provision of material support for the poor without the expectation of a material return for the giver from the recipient. Early rabbinic literature discusses two types of charity. The first, which was the topic of my previous book, is organized charity, whereby two communal institutions (the tamhui or soup kitchen, and the quppa or charity fund) serve as intermediaries between benefactors and
beneficiaries. The institutions’ supervisors collect donations from benefactors, which they then allocate to the needy based on an array of criteria. Institutional charity amounts to anonymous giving as the benefactors and beneficiaries do not meet. The second form of charity in early rabbinic literature, which is the focus of this book, is direct giving from one individual to another. Here, benefactors give directly from their own possessions and they alone decide how, how much, when, and to whom they give. This is done without an intermediary, often face-to-face from benefactor to recipient—a giver hands over a coin or piece of bread to someone in need. This was surely the most common form of support for the poor in the ancient world, which was largely devoid of the kind of organized welfare that the rabbis had envisioned.

The rabbis’ elevation and promotion of charity, or tzedaqah in Hebrew, would prove to be highly significant. The concept of charity has become so deeply ingrained in Jewish thought that it is easy to think that it has always been there and has always been so important. Recognizing the revolutionary role played by the Tannaim, we should be alert to the fact that the concept was not born fully formed—it would be anachronistic to presume that the earliest rabbis envisioned it precisely in the way that we have come to know it today. Rather, the concept grew and developed over time. Examining charity within its historical contexts, moreover, provides insight into multiple areas of social and religious life during the formative age of rabbinic Judaism. As Julia Lieberman and Michal Jan Rozbicki rightly observe, conceptualizations of charity are prisms through which we can learn about the conceivee’s ideas on a variety of social, cultural, and religious issues. These include attitudes towards “others,” perceptions of social order, norms of exclusion and inclusion, meaning of public and private virtue, and justice and responsibility—many of which are undergirded by religious justifications, telling us something about the conceivee’s perceptions of the divine. An interaction that is often considered to be straightforward—when a giver drops a coin into the hand of a recipient—provides us with a window into ideas about power, materiality, social interactions, economics, culture, and religion.

**POVERTY RELIEF FROM THE HEBREW BIBLE THROUGH HELLENISTIC JUDAISM**

Support for the poor has a long history in the Jewish tradition. In the Hebrew Bible, poverty relief is provided in a variety of ways. These include allocations at the time of the harvest such as pe’ah, gleanings, and forgotten produce (Lev
19:9–10, 23:22; Deut 24:19–21; Ruth 2). Deuteronomy (15:7–11) advocates giving loans to the poor, especially in the years leading up to the septennial cancellation of debts. In every third and sixth years of the Sabbatical cycle, one gives a portion of one’s yield to the needy, as the second tithe becomes the “poor tithe” in these years (Deut 14:28–9, 26:12–15). Landowners are instructed to leave their land fallow every seventh year for the poor to collect what grows during that year (Exod 23:11). Prophetic texts express special empathy for the disadvantaged, warning the reader against taking advantage of the needy (Isa 3:14–15, 10:1–2, 58:5–8, 61:8; Jer 5:28–29, 7:6; Amos 8:4–6; Mal 3:5).

Agricultural allotments do not come from the householder’s property. As I will discuss in more detail in chapter 2, harvest-time allocations do not represent a redistribution from the rich to the poor, but rather are conceived as a direct distribution from the divine to the poor. The biblical laws prescribe how the householder should refrain from interfering with the process. As with many commandments, performing those that support the poor often earns the householder recompense from the divine. We see this especially in Deuteronomy, where fulfilling certain poor laws earns blessings (Deut 14:29, 24:19, 26:15; cf. Ruth 2:19). Similarly, prophetic texts instruct that the failure to follow the laws to support the needy can result in divine punishment (Isa 10:1–4; Jer 5:28; Amos 8:4–8).

In addition to the agricultural allotments, we see a few isolated passages on care for the poor (e.g., Isa 3:14–15, 10:1–2, 58:7; Ezek 16:49; Amos 5:12; Prov 19:17), as well the provision of “gifts to the poor” on the festival of Purim (Esth 9:22). The scholarly consensus, however, is that the Hebrew Bible lacks a clear sense of “charity” or almsgiving in a form that would resemble how it would come to be understood in postbiblical texts, whereby one gives material provisions to the poor out of one’s own possessions, with a mutual understanding between both parties that the asset will neither be returned nor repaid by the recipient in material terms. Thus, charity is distinct from other transactions, such as loans, sales, barter exchanges, or service agreements. While the concept would not be restricted to any one term, it is nevertheless emblematic that tsedaqah denotes “righteousness” in the Hebrew Bible, where it appears some 150 times. Tsedaqah only takes on the additional meaning of “charity” in Hellenistic-era writings. While one may argue that the “spirit” or “ethos” of charity is found in the Hebrew Bible, the study at hand demands significantly more precision, and we should not conflate empathy or general care for the poor with the specific concept of charity per se.
The biblical agricultural entitlements for the poor continued to be discussed in Second Temple-era texts. In his treatment of these laws, Josephus writes that those who fulfill them will receive not only divine recompense (as in the Hebrew Bible) but also gratitude from the poor (Ant. 4.232). Alongside harvest-time allocations, in Hellenistic Jewish texts we begin to see the emergence of the concept of charity taking shape as an expression of righteous behavior and as a distinct commandment (Sir 29:9; Tob 4:5–7; Ag. Ap. 2.283). No set amount is dictated, as one should give from one’s belongings according to one’s ability (Sir 29:20; Tob 4:8). Charity also earns divine recompense, which takes several forms. Atonement for sins is granted to the giver, providing a replacement for offering a sacrifice to God (Dan 4:24; Sir 3:30; Tob 12:9). The giver can bank on rewards in heavenly or otherworldly realms (Tob 4:10; 2 En. 9:1, 50:5–6, 51:1–3), while one who oppresses the poor will be punished (2 En. [MS J] 10:5; Sir 4:1–6). Some texts promise earthly rewards, such as treasures, renown, or deliverance from death (Tob 4:9–10, 12:9; Sir 29:11–13; T. Job 44, 53).

Many of the themes and motivations that we see in Second Temple or Hellenistic Jewish texts also appear in the New Testament. In the Gospels, almsgiving is a form of piety and those who give alms are considered “righteous” (Matt 6:1–4, 25:31–46). Likewise, a heavenly reward is given to one who provides material relief for the poor (Matt 19:21; 25:31–46; Luke 12:33, 14:13–14) and atones for sin (Luke 11:41). Matthew 6:1–4 advocates anonymous giving, instructing the giver to eschew earthly, social recognition in favor of earning otherworldly rewards. In Paul’s letters (1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8–9; Gal 2:10; Rom 15:25–29), discussions of almsgiving center on his collection of contributions from the Gentile communities for “the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Rom 15:26). The Pauline and post-Pauline epistles also envision almsgiving as a means of accumulating divine blessings and heavenly rewards (2 Cor 9:6–11; Phil 4:17; 1 Tim 6:17–19; cf. 2 Cor 8:13–14). Of all the laws related to the poor in biblical and Jewish traditions, it would be two in particular—harvest allocations from the Hebrew Bible and charity from Second Temple Judaism—that the Tannaim would draw upon and develop further.

The Socioeconomic Context of Roman Galilee

Poverty is a persistent problem. The Deuteronomist astutely observes, “there will never cease to be some in need on the earth” (Deut 15:11), while the author
of the Gospel of Mark (14:7) writes, “For you always have the poor with you.” Indeed, that poverty will always exist is recognized throughout ancient sources. It is helpful, therefore, to understand the causes and manifestations of poverty that were specific to the time and place in which Tannaitic literature took shape. By understanding the realities of poverty that surrounded and contextualized the rabbis who authored and redacted these texts, we will shed further light on their discourses on poverty relief.

To be sure, we have insufficient sources (both in their quality and quantity) on social history, limiting our ability to reconstruct a comprehensive view of the socioeconomic landscape of second- to third-century-c.e. Roman Palestine. Traditions associated with prerabbinic figures and the early generations of Tannaim have likely been worked over and stylized, raising significant questions about these traditions’ reliability for earlier eras. Moreover, even when reading the material as a product of its final authors and redactors, it is important to keep in mind that these texts were not intended as historical sources or to provide transparent windows into social and economic life during the era, but rather represent views of the world through the prescriptive and idiosyncratic lenses of individuals who were both an intellectual and economic elite. Archaeological finds from the era are also complex, as material remains from late-second- and early-third-century Palestinian Jewish society are meager compared to earlier and later periods. Some attribute the scarcity to the ancient Jews themselves, arguing that they failed to produce a material culture that was distinctively Jewish. Others point to the challenges in interpreting remains, such as precisely dating finds, obstruction of earlier periods by later occupation and use, and interpretive methods whereby archaeological assemblages are dated according to their newest artifacts. As a result, we have far fewer reliable sources on the political, economic, social, and religious history of Jews and Judaism in the late second and early third centuries than we have for other periods of Jewish antiquity.

While our sources are meager, the available archaeological and epigraphic remains allow us to sketch the general contours of the rabbis’ social and economic environment. The economy of Roman Palestine was primarily based on agriculture, as most individuals earned their living from the land—as landowners, tenants, sharecroppers, or hired laborers, who cultivated the land for their own consumption or (increasingly) for trade. Particularly important crops were the “Mediterranean triad” of cereals (especially wheat and barley), olives, and grapes; legumes were also a staple of the region. Large swaths of
society worked to either cultivate these crops or process them into bread, olive oil, wine, and so on. To be sure, there was also a significant sector of the economy that was not engaged firsthand with agriculture—including services, marketing, transportation, and manufacturing (e.g., the production and dissemination of ceramic vessels). Nevertheless, because most professions were connected to agriculture in some way, the country’s fortunes were often dependent upon the amount of rainfall. Indeed, historical sources are surfeit with descriptions of droughts that caused famines. This was especially dangerous for those who lived near subsistence levels, as a lack of rain would plunge them into poverty.

Poverty in Roman Palestine took different forms. The first measure is the degree of permanence. One who is “structurally” poor lacks the capabilities or prospects (due to disability, old age, etc.) to escape poverty. By contrast, one is “conjuncturally” poor if he or she was not initially poor but fell into poverty following a “conjuncture” or event, such as a drought, war, or personal misfortune. Such individuals are episodically or temporarily poor, and their prospects for enrichment are higher than those of the structural poor, as the conjunctural poor often have the skills, abilities, or social connections to climb out of poverty.

The second measure is how one defines the threshold of poverty. If one lacks the means to acquire enough food, clothing, or shelter to maintain physical efficiency, then one is physiologically poor. These individuals live below subsistence levels and, especially when combined with structural poverty, will not survive without support from others. The second type of threshold is by “value-judgment,” whereby poverty is defined as a failure to meet standards established by social conventions. One who has sufficient clothing to provide protection from the weather (wind, rain, cold, or severe heat), but whose garments are ragged or made of undesirable materials (e.g., coarse wool), is considered to be poor by the value-judgment criteria. Likewise, one could have a home, but would be considered poor if it was small or unadorned. One might have enough food to meet the minimal caloric intake but would be considered poor if their food was stigmatized—barley bread, for example, was considered to be food for commoners.

The Tannaim were keenly aware of these different manifestations of poverty, and they prescribed forms of support for all combinations of structural/conjunctural and physiological/value-judgment approaches. For example, the soup kitchen or tambui was to provide immediate provisions to all those in