

track a historical, institutional development, is able to give to it, and it suggests an avenue for further research.

The last full chapter of the book turns its attention to the office of the “charity supervisor,” arguing that he is imagined as a civic leader in the model of both a tax collector and a judge. The chapter masterfully weaves together ideas from rabbinic literature and the Greco-Roman world to create a vivid image of the ideal public official who would administer the charity fund.

Finally, an important conclusion/epilogue closes the historical gap that the tannaitic charity institutions are shown to have filled by bringing us to the era of late antiquity, in which organized charity institutions are well documented. Gardner makes a point of distinguishing these later institutions from the tannaitic ones both in form and in motive. The idea of charity is expanded to include support for the rabbinic movement itself, and the intent also subtly shifts from simply benefiting the poor and the community to exercising social control by the rabbis. *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism* gives a convincing account not only of how charity institutions were born in a certain time and place but of the emergence (and disappearance) of a different model of charity in the ancient world: one that was attuned to the dignity of the poor and the social cohesion of the civic community.

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Reuven Hammer. *Akiva: Life, Legend, Legacy*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society and University of Nebraska Press, 2015. 243 pp.
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The desire to know the historical Akiva—to know how this cornerstone of rabbinic Judaism actually lived and died, what he really said and did—is natural. But our ability to satisfy this desire is very limited. We appreciate, thanks to Jacob Neusner among others, the challenges of writing rabbinic biographies. All rabbinic texts are anthologies, collected and edited, in many cases by strong hands, in light of interests and assumptions very different from the modern biographer’s. The more famous the rabbi—and there is none more famous than R. Akiva—the more obscure he becomes, as he attracts to himself, like a black hole, the words and deeds of dimmer stars, and the desires and ideologies of later tradents. The best path for recovering what we can of the historical Akiva lies in a two-stage process. The first and conceptually prior stage involves piecing together a portrait of R. Akiva’s milieu. What was it like to live as a Jew in Roman Palestine in the late first and early second centuries of the Common Era? What did the rabbinic movement look like at the time? What issues preoccupied its leaders? The second stage: collecting all of the sources on R. Akiva specifically, and distilling from them, by means of critical analysis, reliable data points. The background

portrait serves both as a control (one of many) for judging the historical plausibility of the Akiva material, and as a sort of glue, to merge the inevitably fragmentary results of the second stage into a relatively coherent *bios*.

Hammer's book—a biography of R. Akiva from his early life (chapter 1) to his death (chapter 8), with an epilogue on “the man and his legacy”—does not, unfortunately, greatly advance the recovery of the historical Akiva, and this for two main reasons. First, it makes almost no attempt to paint the background portrait, or to incorporate the results of modern research on the rabbinic movement in second-century Roman Palestine into its analysis. In the absence of background, we are left, at best, with an unnecessarily disjointed understanding of R. Akiva, and at worst, with a contextually implausible R. Akiva. Second, and more importantly, the book engages with modern critical tools too superficially and sporadically. Thus, for example, while Hammer recognizes that, all things being equal, earlier (tannaitic) and geographically proximate (Palestinian) sources are to be preferred over later (amoraic) and geographically distant (Babylonian) sources, he counts Avot de-Rabbi Natan among the early sources, offering that it is “considered by many to be an early tannaitic work” (2). Modern scholars do recognize that this work contains a tannaitic substratum that is earlier in certain respects than Mishnah Avot, but there is no doubt that much of it—including almost everything that it has to say about R. Akiva—is late, and sometimes very late.

I offer two specific illustrations, in themselves trivial, of the book's limited engagement with critical analysis, the first centered on text criticism, and the second on source criticism. First, Hammer offers that “at times he [i.e., R. Akiva] could ... be brusque with a student. An early tannaitic midrash, *Sifra*, relates that one of his disciples once made a rather foolish deduction by misunderstanding two verses. Akiva's remark to him was, ‘You have dived (צללה) into deep water and brought up a shard in your hand,’ after which he showed him his error. Such a tale has the ring of truth” (45). The “ring of truth” criterion is worrisomely vague, but more to the point, Hammer's text is highly suspect. The quotation, from Weiss's edition of the *Sifra*, and paralleled in the Bavli (B. Bava Kamma 91a), is not to be found in the best manuscript of the *Sifra*, Vatican 66, or in any of the other manuscript witnesses accessible via Bar-Ilan University's Torat Ha-Tannaim website (<http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/tannaim/>). In all of these witnesses, R. Akiva says only צללה. This may mean “you have dived/sunk”—so the Bavli evidently interprets it—or it may mean something else entirely. The notion of gaining insight into R. Akiva by collecting unique formulations attributed to him has some promise, but it is very important, in this framework, to get the text right.

A second illustrative discussion concerns R. Akiva's imprisonment (160–63). Hammer offers some general critical observations—on the grounds for arrest: “[t]here is no indication that Akiva's imprisonment was in any way related to actual participation in or involvement in the Bar Kokhva Rebellion”; and on his time in prison: “Many stories are told of that time, although we cannot be certain that all the details are true”—but does not actually do the work of sifting the more reliable from the less. He cites only Bavli sources in this section, even

though a tannaitic source, T. Sanhedrin 2:8, attests to R. Akiva's imprisonment, and even though one of the stories that he attributes to the Bavli (B. Yevamot 105b) in fact occurs only in the Yerushalmi (Y. Yevamot 12:5 [12d]). This story—a tragicomic one in which R. Yoḥanan the Sandal-Maker disguises himself as a peddler to pose a halakhic question to the imprisoned R. Akiva, with the legal exchange interwoven into commercial discourse shouted between the prison and the street—is almost a textbook example of secondary embellishment. The Mishnah tells of a case in which R. Akiva ruled on the validity of a rite performed by an imprisoned husband. The Talmud, knowing of R. Akiva's own imprisonment, infers, with iron-clad narrative (but not, of course, historical) logic: "In prison was the deed, and to prison the question came." Hence the notion that R. Yoḥanan the Sandal-Maker—cited earlier in the same Mishnah pericope—must have conveyed the question to the imprisoned R. Akiva.

Hammer's book largely eschews close analysis of this sort. Insofar as it is as much about the "legend" and "legacy" of R. Akiva as about his life, the inclusion of likely secondary material is not per se objectionable, but insofar as Hammer wishes to distinguish between the life, on the one hand, and the legend and the legacy, on the other, the book falls short. It will be of interest to a popular audience that wishes to have a readable, relatively sober summary of what rabbinic literature can tell us about R. Akiva's life, and the book indeed appears to have been written for such a readership. Because it engages insufficiently with modern scholarship and with the methodological challenges of writing a rabbinic biography, it can offer little to a scholarly audience.

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Christine Hayes. *What's Divine about Divine Law?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. 412 pp.
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In this volume Christine Hayes explores the origins of a dilemma that has disturbed Western thought for two thousand years: both the Hebrew Scriptures and the classics of ancient Greek thought make use of the idea of divine law, but these two bodies of thought use the idea differently, in fact incompatibly, and Western civilization, initially in its Christian form but eventually in Jewish thought as well, inherited both versions. The two notions have since uncomfortably coexisted, throughout the Middle Ages and into our own time, and the cognitive dissonance thus produced continues to bedevil both religious communities today.

The book is divided into three parts, embracing a total of eight chapters. Part 1 lays out the discourses on divine law to be found in the Bible (chapter 1) and in Greco-Roman thought (chapter 2). In the Bible one can identify three strands of