See How They Love One Another!

The Ministry of Compassion in Scripture and Early Christianity to 300 AD.

by Dr. Keith C. Wessel

Symposium on Compassion Ministry at
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The topic of this symposium focuses our attention on the ministry of compassion. The topic allows us to peer (as little as we can) into the very heart of God and put our finger on the pulse of the Church in various ages. We can draw inspiration, encouragement, direction, and perhaps even warnings from this history. The topic also allows us to witness from a distance the lives of brothers and sisters who lived by faith while patiently awaiting the blessed appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ. In particular, this first essay sets the stage by considering what Scripture has to say on the topic of compassion and then seeing compassion in action in the church of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the first few centuries after the apostles.

I. The Foundation of Compassion: God's Rich Grace to Us in Christ

When the recent WELS hymnal project turned itself to matters of liturgy, one of the settings of the Divine Service that the Rites committee gave some consideration to using for regular worship was entitled *Jesus, the Compassion of God.*[1] Although the committee decided not to use this setting for various reasons, the title itself is a beautiful testament not only to what is the proper focus of Christian worship[2] but to what the entire history of this world is. From beginning to end, Scripture reveals the very heart of God that chose of his own free will to save the world from sin and death through his Son, Jesus Christ. St. Paul describes the marvel of it all in his letter to Titus: "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." (Titus 3:4 NIV)

Lutheran theology has long rightly centered itself on God's grace as the foundation for our justification and sanctification. We think, for instance, of how Luther himself expressed this truth in his famous hymn *Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice:* "He spoke to his beloved Son, 'Tis time to have compassion… Likewise, each Sunday in Lutheran worship, we are reminded of this great compassion of God in the amazing proclamation in the Absolution: "Our gracious Father in heaven has been merciful to us…." Everything in the worship service that follows and in our daily life of faith flows from this great truth that God has chosen to deal with us in grace, compassion, mercy, and love in his Son, Jesus Christ. Though this is the quiet voice of the gospel, it also is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Rom 1:16-17). It is the only solid foundation for faith and life.

[1] *Jesus, the Compassion of God* by David Haas. GIA Publications #4990FS

[2] Johnold J. Strey, *Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* (Northwestern Publishing House, 2021), 45. "The Word of God points us to Jesus Christ and calls us to faith in his work of salvation. This is the Bible's focus, purpose, and goal."

The great truth of the gospel was not, of course, a development of Lutheran theology nor even of Christian theology. The truth of God's grace was *his* revelation and first makes its appearance in Gen 1:1 with the very act of creation. Utterly transcendent, incomprehensibly happy, complete in his aseity, God was lacking nothing—no "something missing" in the bond of the Trinity, no itch he had to scratch[3]—that would cause him to *need* to create the world and everything in it. Simply put, God didn't need to give life to us or anything else. He could have continued to exist in his eternal glory and be perfectly happy. When we consider that God, in his perfect foreknowledge of mankind's eventual fall, would be the only one who could make things right again, isn't this act of grace even more stupefying—that he went ahead and created all things anyway?

That grace of God demonstrated in creation is only magnified for us in Genesis 3. Again, under no obligation to commit himself to our redemption, the LORD God did so anyway. It was grace and compassion that he did not extend to those angels who rebelled against him (2 Pet 2:4).

The Lord's Directives for Compassion in Old Testament Israel

The Old Testament subsequently records how God protected this ultimate promise of grace and compassion that he would fulfill through his own Son. In time, we know how he singled out the family of Abraham and, eventually, the people of Israel to be the ones through whom he would reveal the fulness of his compassion. Israel, too, was chosen by grace as each of us. God made that clear on many occasions, including at the second giving of the Law to a new generation:

> For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord, your God, has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. (Deut 7:6-9)

The same law code God gave to serve as a mirror for Israel was also to serve as a guide for ancient Israel's national life of sanctification. As each contemplated God's goodness and compassion, each would be motivated to express that gratitude in *societal* relationships in Old Testament Israel. This was God's good and gracious design and remains so.

Of course, other law codes existed in the ancient world, such as those of Ur-Nammu[4] or Hammurabi.[5] Egypt had plenty of regulations as well. Such ancient law codes were not only filled with detailed legislation and applications, but they also were replete with passages of self-aggrandizement. The king highlighted his generous, paternal nature as he watched out for the

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[3] The Harlem Renaissance poet James Weldon Johnson began his famous poem *The Creation* with the words: "And God said, 'I'm lonely; I think I'll make me a world." A romantic thought…but simply not true.

[4] ca 2100 BC Ur-Nammu was a Sumerian ruler of the Third Dynasty of Ur, and ruled from 2112-2094 BC His law code is the oldest written code.

[5] Believed to have been composed ca. 1755-1750 BC

less fortunate in society. Ur-Nammu's boasted: "I eliminated enmity, violence, and cries for justice. I established justice in the land."[6] Immediately preceding this all-encompassing claim, the king noted various people of special concern to him: "I did not deliver the orphan to the rich. I did not deliver the widow to the mighty."[7]

Although there are similarities to typical Near East law codes, we recognize that a different spirit runs as an undercurrent through the Mosaic code God had given. God's law code invited his people to soberly consider *both* threats of punishment and blessings for obedience. The motivation was entirely different, focusing as it did upon a thankful response to God's goodness.

Among the Mosaic laws were guidelines for Israel's dealing with the vulnerable of society. Such care was to be patterned after God's concern and care for the same. The Lord faithfully defended those less fortunate and at the mercy of society (Ps 145:9). Such defense extended not only to physical life but also to the economic and legal interests as well (Prov 15:25). Since the lowly were considered valuable to God, the nation of Israel was likewise to regard them as valuable members of the community. To abuse the poor was to forget Israel's bondage in the land of Egypt and the Lord's mercy to Israel in rescuing them. To foster such a spirit of humility and thankfulness among the people, God directed Israel to remind themselves frequently, "My father was a wandering Aramean" (Deut 26:4), i.e., "We were pagan nobodies, but our faithful God in his mercy made us into a great nation."

One of those channels for Israel to show concern for the less fortunate was the triennial tithe. There were other tithes collected at different times for non-landowners such as the Levites and foreigners, but the offering of the third year's produce was gathered so that "the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands (Deut 14:28-29)."[8] Later in Deuteronomy (ch 24), the Lord gave directives for not greedily harvesting every last ounce of produce.[9] In this way, the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow could have some means of support by gleaning

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[6] Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, ed. Piotr Michalowski, 1st ed., vol. 6 of *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (Atlanta, GA: Scholar's Press, 1995). 6:17.

[7] Roth, *Law collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 6:16. References for original text: A, iv 162-168 (Nippur Tablets); C, ii 30-39 (Sippur Tablets). Yet while there may be a temptation to view Ur-Nammu as the first champion of human rights on record, it appears that the concern of the king is primarily an economic one, and not so much concerned with the individual as a person *per se*.

[8] This eventually develops into what is known as the "poor man's tithe," the parameters of which were debated among the schools of Shammai and Hillel. Wilfand relates an humorous anecdote recorded in *Pe'ah* that details how one celebrated rabbi preferred to give his annual poor-man's tithe to a favorite student, whose net worth was known to be below (the required) 200 *zuz*. Some fellow students, jealous of the favoritism, took up a collection for the poor student with the result that the latter's holdings rose to just above 200 *zuz*, thus making him ineligible for the rabbi's charity. Upon hearing this, the rabbi "innocently" talked the students into taking out the poor student for drinks and making him buy in celebration of his new-found resources. Falling for the trap, the students did, causing the poor student's net worth to fall below 200 *zuz* again. Thereupon the rabbi once again gave his favored his annual poor-man's tithe. Cf. Yael Wilfand, "From the School of Shammai to Rabbi Yehuda the Patriarch's Student: The Evolution of the Poor Man's Tithe," Jew. Stud. Q. 22.1 (2015): 57–58.

[9] This is fully fleshed-out in the rabbinic tractate *Pe'ah* ("corners") from the Mishnah. The directives, of course, are the same that serve as a catalyst for the dramatic action in the narrative of Ruth.

from the remnants left behind by the harvesters. After all, the land belonged to the Lord, and the Israelites were merely tenants. As the owner, God had the right to use his property to provide for people in this way. In such details of the Law, we can see the Lord's way of compassionately and providentially caring for all his people.

Through Moses, God further directed Israel to adopt his own attitude toward the poor and regard them as *equal* members of society.[10] We find this, especially in the precepts given for national worship during the three "high" festivals of the religious calendar: Passover, Pentecost (Weeks), and *Sukkōth* (Booths, Tabernacles). At such times of national solidarity, when all Israelites gathered to recognize both the Lord's goodness as well as his sovereignty over them, *every* Israelite was to

> rejoice before the Lord your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name—you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, the Levites in your towns, and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows living among you (Deut 16:11).

Yet we know that such ideals for the sanctified lives of God's Old Testament people were never perfectly or consistently realized. Apart from the human heart that looks first to its own interests, other societal factors played a role as Old Testament history progressed. One of these factors was the radical change in the fabric of the Israelite social structure that the development of the monarchy brought about.[11] Before this, the family and clan had been the principal source of security and support.[12] The prophet Samuel had cautioned the people of Israel about changes that would inevitably come with a kingship (cf. 1 Sam 8:10-22). This realignment of society undoubtedly took a toll on the Israelite support system. True, this change occurred gradually. However, the change can, perhaps, account for the proliferation of references to abuses against the poor that is so prominent in the prophetic writings.

The prophets especially demonstrate how wandering from faith inevitably leads to disregarding those in need of compassion. Isaiah introduces early in his book the motif that will frequently recur: "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow (1:17)."[13] Along with Isaiah, Zechariah (7:10), Malachi (3:5), and Jeremiah (17:10) all called the nation to collectively examine their hearts and practice true religion that understands the spirit of the Torah. Yet a false sense of security helped perpetuate the ungodly practices towards the disadvantaged that enveloped the nation, as many believed Jerusalem could never be swept away because of the presence of the LORD's temple (Jer 7:1-4). Jeremiah, however, stuck with his original diagnosis and called upon Jerusalem to

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[10] Bruce V. Malchow, "Social Justice in the Israelite Law Codes," *Word & World* 4.3 (1984): 305. "They are equal to monied people in their right to enjoy the festivals."

[11] For a brief overview of divergent scholarly opinions on this issue, see Malchow, *ibid.,* 300.

[12] Preston Mayes, "The Resident Alien, the Fatherless, and the Widow in Deuteronomy: The Priority of Relationship with Israel's God for Social Benevolence" (Ph. D, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2012), 135.

[13] The Hebrew text here employs a very forceful verb (*rīvh* ריב) that usually has military connotations. Yet it does also have a legal nuance to it, with God himself usually as the plaintiff seeking judgment against the sinful nation.

repent, the proof of which would be that they would not oppress the alien, fatherless, and widow (Jer 7:6)."[14] Indeed, a failure to change their ways would result in self-destruction. Even Moses and Samuel would not be able to intercede for them (Jer 15:1). Yet, as we know, sadly, both Israel and Judah reaped the whirlwind of judgment for their actions and were scattered among the nations.

Almsgiving During the Intertestamental Period

Yet when the exiles returned from Babylon, they had, in some respects, learned their lesson. In the intertestamental period, we can note a conservative reaction in Judaism as testified by the rise of those religious sects marked by conservatism and devotion to the Torah: the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. In the intertestamental literature, we find recorded acts of compassion toward those in need. Job-like Tobit, for instance, faithfully gave the triennial tithe for the poor (Tob 1:8). [15] Likewise, Judas Maccabeus made it his regular practice to share some of the plunder of his battles with the widows, orphans, and others affected by persecution (2 Macc 8:28-30) as did Onias, the high priest. The latter provided for them from the temple treasury (2 Macc 3:1-12). All good and noteworthy examples.

One practice that arises in this context is that of almsgiving. While giving gifts to the poor was nothing new, a very noticeable shift occurs at this time as acts of compassion begin to focus more on the *giver* than the *recipient*. Two passages bear this out clearly.[16] The first is from Tobit 12. Throughout the book, the reader senses the close connection between charitable works and righteousness, exemplified in the life of Tobit. Tobit and his son Tobiah are frequently heralded as righteous, conscientious carers for the poor. At the climax of the book, the angel

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[14] The verbal idea of the Hebrew word for "oppress" (*'āshâq* עָשַׁק) "is concerned with acts of abuse of power or authority, in the burdening, trampling, and crushing of those lower in station." (TWOT Entry 1713.0)

[15] The pattern of the "three tithes" laid out here in the opening of Tobit coincides with the pattern laid out in the Mishnah. The volume entitled *Zeraim* ("Seeds") deals with all the directives for offerings, tithes, almsgiving, and charity. Frequently, throughout a number of the individual tractates comprising *Zeraim*, mention is made of "the first tithe", "the second tithe", and "the third tithe", given in different years on a rotating basis. Cf. Philip Blackman, *Mishnayoth Zeraim*, 2 edition, vol. 1, Mishnayoth: Pointed Hebrew Text, English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Supplement, Appendix, Addenda, Corrigenda (New York: Judaica Press, 1979).

[16] There is a canonical passage that often comes up for discussion in this context, Dan. 9:27. (9:27 is the reference in English versions of the Bible; the Hebrew text is 9:24.) The Hebrew text of Daniel here is replete with variant readings. However, established by all Hebrew versions is the critical verb of the verse, the imperative פְּרֻ֑ק . Here in the Pe'al form, the meaning connotes something decisive, even violent: "tear away, abolish, break off." The preceding word (בְּצִדְקָ֣ה - *be-tsid-chah)* can be instrumental: "with righteousness; by means of righteousness." But the *beth* prefix can also simply relate a state of being / circumstance: "in righteousness." The LXX employs the aorist middle imperative of the verb λυτρόω / λυτρόομαι. Both have overtones of "redemption," but the idea is more in line with "loosing" or "setting free," the middle form used particularly in the context of slavery. Thus, the crux of the interpretive problem is whether Daniel is advising Nebuchadnezzar to "release" (i.e. forsake) his sins and do what is right, or "atone" for his sins by doing what is right. The latter is merit-earning, the former a response to goodness. Jerome's Latin *et peccata tua elemosynis redime* (Dan. 4:24 VUL) seems to carry with it a stronger idea of redemption, and was attacked by Protestant reformers as a misuse of the passage by the Roman Church (cf. Melanchthon's *Apology to the Augsburg Confession,* IV.140 ff.) As I stated earlier, the text itself is problematic and, being so, is questionable for supporting the argument that almsgiving plays a role in making atonement for one's own sins.

Raphael, operating to this point incognito, reveals himself as the one who has been guiding them both, and it is this divine being who exhorts Tobit:

> Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving, and righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than much with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to treasure up gold. For almsgiving delivers from death, and it will purge away every sin. (Tob 12:8-9)[17]

Some scholars have noted that one remarkable linguistic development of the intertestamental period is that the Hebrew word for "righteousness"–ṣĕdāqâh (צדקה)—comes to mean "almsgiving."[18] This development occurs with a transition to using the metaphor of describing sin as a debt.[19] Once this happened, it was a very natural development in the popular mindset that works of charity have the power to erase sin (debt).[20] If the analysis is accurate, this development will have major implications for how Jews and Jewish Christians of the first century AD approached the entire venture of compassion toward the poor in practical terms.

The second passage that strikes a tone similar to Tobit is from the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus (The Wisdom of Ben Sira). Here we find another striking statement about charity erasing sin:

> Water will extinguish a blazing fire:
> and almsgiving will atone for sin.
> Whoever requites favors gives thought to the future;
> at the moment of his falling, he will find support. (Sir 3:30-31).

The mention of "giving "thought to the future" spurs the giver to consider that the fruit of charitable endeavors persists past the present life and into eternity. Ben Sira reinforced the idea later in the book (29:12).[21] Further on, the celebrated rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai (d. late 1st cent. AD) asserted that, following the temple's destruction, in 70 AD, devout Jews could gain ritual

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[17] Quotes from the Apocrypha from here forward are from the English Standard Version (ESV), and taken from Edward Engelbrecht, ed. *The Apocrypha: The Lutheran Edition with Notes*. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2012). In early Christianity, the sentiment of Tobit eventually surfaces as early as Polycarp who mentions that "alms deliver from death" (ch.10).

[18] Franz Rosenthal, ""Sedaqah, Charity," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 23, no. 1 (1950): 411–30. This is the seminal study. Satlow, "Fruit and the Fruit of Fruit," 2010.) also notes the shift (p. 261 ff.) Gardner emphasizes, though, that "Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible does the Hebrew *tsedaqah* mean charity or almsgiving." Gregg E. Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 139.27.

[19] Anderson, "Redeem Your Sins by the Giving of Alms: Sin, Debt, and the 'Treasury of Merit' in Early Jewish and Christian Tradition," 39. "The metaphor of sin as a debt is rarely attested in the bulk of the Hebrew Bible. But as soon as it became a commonplace to view a sin as a debt—and this took place early in the Second Temple period—it became natural to conceive of virtuous activity as a merit or credit."

[20] Not all are so ready to come to that conclusion. "In no way does the performance of such acts of mercy merit God's favor." Francis M. Macatangay, "Acts of Charity as Acts of Remembrance in the Book of Tobit," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 23, no. 1 (September 1, 2013): 84. Rather, Macantangay sees Jewish acts of charity as a testament to the command to "remember" the Lord in every aspect of life.

[21] Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 141."Whether as a means to absolve sin or as 'treasure in your strong-room' that 'will deliver you from every misfortune (29:12), charity in Ben Sira especially protects its giver from divine punishment in the afterlife."

atonement through acts of charity.[22] Beggars of the post-temple period (i.e., Late Antiquity) were even known to shout out to passersby, "*Zeki bi*!" ("Acquire heavenly treasure through me!")[23]

To be fair, the above points deal only with the *official* teachings of the rabbis recorded for us and do not speak to the countless expressions of genuine faith that undoubtedly occurred. However, this disappointing development of the intertestamental period began to reduce the poor and many acts of compassion as a means to personal spiritual gain.[24]

Jesus, the Compassion of God

But our Lord Jesus came and, as noted in the Formula,[25] did so both to fulfill the Law and to explain the law spiritually. He, the embodiment of pure mercy and compassion, also strove in his ministry to turn hearts back to God's original designs for showing mercy and compassion. His Sermon on the Mount spoke much about acts of righteousness and their proper motivation. His Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25 ff) in all those details describing genuine mercy that would have jarred the hearts of his listeners—the man from the race that many Jews considered spiritually dead moved to pity; the risk the benefactor took rescuing a man with known-robbers perhaps still lurking in the hills; the money he left (more than adequate for a few days recovery time) and the promise to pay even more on behalf of a stranger, etc. We think of how Jesus "had compassion"[26] on the crowds following him "because they were like sheep without a shepherd." We think of how our Savior's "bowels of compassion" churned at the site of a widow at Nain following the funeral procession of her only son and means of support (Luke 7:13). Throughout his entire ministry, Jesus embodied the very concept of compassion. And that ministry would culminate in the greatest act of compassion that the world has ever seen, as the Savior suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. But through that passion and subsequent resurrection, "God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ" (Eph 2:4-5).

Under the Spirit's guidance, the apostles would begin to understand the immensity of it all. God's compassion toward them would drive their entire lives and work, as it still does today for all Christians. Peter, who begged Jesus to go away from such a sinful man, basked in the joy of Easter and poured out in ink his amazement at God's rich mercy at the onset of his first epistle. Paul repeatedly marveled how Christ – *why* Christ—would save him, the "very worst of sinners" (1 Tim 1:5-6). Even John, who saw indescribable things, begins his final book with this word of wonder at Jesus' compassion for sinners: "To him who loved us and redeemed us from

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[22] Gary A. Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition*, Reprint edition. (Yale University Press, 2013), 20. Ben Zakkai cites Hos 6:6 in support.

[23] Anderson, *Charity*, 20.

[24] Frederick B. Bird, "A Comparative Study of The Work of Charity in Christianity and Judaism," *J. Relig. Ethics* 10.1 (1982): 161. "Subtly, but increasingly, Jewish communities redefined charity in ways that pictured it as an individual and meritorious activity rather than as a whole series of communal obligations and norms."

[25] Formula of Concord, *Solid Declaration*, Art. V.10

[26] ἐσπλαγχνίσθη - < σπλαγχνίζομαι -A verb of strong emotion used 5x's by Matthew, 4 x's by Mark, 3x's by Luke. Notably, it is the same verb used to describe the Good Samaritan's emotive state in Luke 10. Paul Wendland shared this insight with me: "In every other New Testament case, it is used with reference to our Savior's compassion on others."

our sins by his blood and has made us a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen!" (Rev 1:5-6)

So far, we have seen, in our brief survey of the Old Testament era, things that we aren't shocked to find—the Lord dealing with the world and with his people according to law and gospel. God, who promised in Eden to redeem the world from sin and death, chose Israel and gave his holy Law to the nation for them to thankfully follow. This law code, in many places, emphasized compassion for the oppressed and distressed, patterned after God's treatment of and care for the nation. Eventually, though, worshipping other gods and mistreating the poor would bring exile for both Israel and Judah.

Yet after Judah returned from Babylon, a conservative reaction began with the rise of the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and synagogues. By the time God sent his Son as promised, Christ often confronted an attitude of works-righteousness that had grown up in almsgiving practices of the intertestamental period, challenging self-satisfied leaders who were only concerned with outward actions. But after fulfilling his earthly mission, Jesus would send his Holy Spirit to lead his New Testament church on a truly God-pleasing path.

II. The Uniqueness of Christian Compassion in the Ancient World

When we consider the historical situation surrounding the birth of the Christian church, we have two contexts to deal with. One is Jewish; the other is gentile (Roman). Both have things to say about compassion and its practice. As we move into New Testament history, we will need to consider to what extent both Judaism and the Greco-Roman society influenced the development of a genuine Christian ministry of compassion.

Ministries of Compassion in Acts

What we find in the book of Acts in those days after Pentecost catches us somewhat by surprise—in the most wonderful way. We find Christians selling property and placing the money at the feet of the apostles to be used, presumably, for charitable purposes. We see isolated incidents of compassion, such as Tabitha providing for destitute widows. We also abruptly come upon what seems to be a full-blown, organized ministry of compassion in Acts 6, where the nascent church has taken the care of Jerusalem's widows upon itself. And we also hear about a radical idea for the time, that of Christians gathering an offering to help a fellow group of believers they have never met.

The first thing we should note about those expressions of compassion recorded in Acts is how *unique* such things were in the first century AD. Outsiders couldn't help but notice how the earliest Christians expressed their love for one another. Love (mercy, compassion, help, etc.) became their defining feature, and it would continue to be throughout the period covered in this essay. Their behavior was striking because it was a bit *odd* in the world of that day. Some have

even wondered if such a thing as an organized ministry of compassion existed before the Christians.[27]

Jewish Attitudes Toward the Poor in the 1st Century AD

It is natural to assume that the apostles got the idea for an organized ministry of compassion from their Jewish upbringing coupled with the teachings of Jesus. But there are also good reasons to assert that Christian charity and relief for the poor were markedly different than the practices of Judaism at the time of the early Church.[28] Apart from the sad incident involving Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, we find among the Jerusalem Christians a refreshing, self-sacrificing generosity that flowed from faith and joy in the Holy Spirit.

More than motivation, though, there are other differences we can highlight between Jewish and Christian charitable practices at the time of Acts. We know about the Jewish practices concerning tithing and behavior toward the poor at that time[29] largely from various tractates in the Mishnah, recorded by the first of the noted rabbinic scholars, the Tannaim,[30] around the year 200 AD. There we read that Jews largely organized their charitable efforts around two things: the *tamhui* ("community chest") and the *quppah* ("soup kitchen"). Mishnah *Pe'ah* describes the difference between these two:

> A poor man who wanders from place to place must not be given less than a loaf worth a *dupondium* when four *seahs* cost a *sela*; if he lodges overnight, he must be given the cost of lodging; if he stays over the Sabbath, he must be provided with food for three meals. Anyone who possesses the means for two meals must not accept anything from the poor soup kitchen; means for fourteen meals, he must not accept help from the public poor-box. And the poor box is taken round for collection by two persons and is shared by three.[31]

The Hebrew words here translated as "poor soup-kitchen" and "public poor-box," or *tamhui* (תַּמְחוּי) and *quppah* (קוּפָּה), respectively, indicate different ways to deal with the poor. The earliest commentary on the Mishnah, the Tosefta (ca. 300 AD), similarly distinguishes between these two forms of charity. The *quppah* targets someone who has come on hard times

[27] David Seccombe, "Was There Organized Charity in Jerusalem Before the Christians?" *J. Theol. Stud.* 29.1 (1978): 140–43.

[28] Dov Kahane, "Problematizing Charity: Rabbinic Charity Narrative Cycle in Bavli Ketubbot 67b–68a," *Stud. Rabbin. Narrat. Vol. 1*, *Brown Judaic Studies* 1 (2021): 48. "While many credit the Hebrew Scriptures for introducting the concept of charity, if not the very vocabulary of poverty itself, attention to the poor qua poor became a societal norm in the Mediterranean and later the European world only after the spread of Christianity throughout the empire."

[29] Bird, "A Comparative Study of The Work of Charity in Christianity and Judaism," 151. The author offers an insightful comment: "The charity ethic of early rabbinic Judaism represents an expansion, specification, and idealization of the charity ethic of postexilic Israel." In other words, Bird implies that even though the written codification and delineation of Jewish charitable practices was not made until the time of the Tannaim, the *ethic* was firmly in place for some time prior to this (even centuries), and the plausible assumption is that if the ethic was in place, the acts of charity were as well.

[30] "The Repeaters" i.e. "teachers." Their views date from 10 – 220 AD and are first recorded in the Mishnah (ca. 200 AD).

[31] Blackman, *Mishnayoth*, vol. 1. 1:130

but has lived in a given community for at least thirty days, so "the communal fund [gives support only] to the poor of that locale."[32] As to the *quppah*'s purpose, Gardner explains:

> While the *quppah* certainly supports the poor, it is more accurate to say that it supports the impoverished. The beneficiaries of the *quppah* are not those who were born poor but rather those who were born wealthy or well off and have fallen into poverty for one reason or another.[33]

The goal of the *quppah* was not, in essence, to provide immediate relief. Rather, it was to help a citizen who had suffered some reversal of fortune and bring that person back up to their usual standard of living.[34] The *quppah* was to be closely supervised; two chosen individuals were to collect funds from the community, and three were chosen to distribute them.[35] Finally, the fund provided more than just food; the Tosefta (4.9-10) also speaks of such items as clothing, money, and even dough.[36]

In contrast, the *tamhui* existed to provide relief to "a poor man who wanders from place to place" and had little to no means of support. The charter of the *tamhui* is also open-ended; this form of aid was available to anyone. Blackman's commentary on the passage clarifies that the target group for the *tamhui* was the "outside poor (not the town's own poor)."[37] The goal of the *tamhui* was also different from the *quppah*. Whereas the *quppah* was much more concerned about the social dignity of the one who had experienced an unexpected reversal of fortune, the goal of the *tamhui* was simply to provide enough food to a poor person to keep them alive for another day.

How much food did the Jews consider to be sufficient for a day? The Mishnah *Pe'ah* mentions that, according to the calculations of the rabbis (mentioned earlier), it was a *dupondius* worth of food. In his work on poverty and charity in Roman Palestine, Gildas Hamel concludes that "daily bread" consisted of one loaf of wheat bread (about 550 grams) or double that if the bread was made of barley.[38] The amount seems comparable to what the rabbis had in mind as the

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[32] Jacob Neusner;, *The Tosefta*, 1st Edition. (Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 1:71. Gardner also notes that the Mishnah and the Tosefta do, in fact, have different conceptions of who is poor. The Mishnah views poverty exclusively in material terms, whereas the Tosefta "accounts for the individual's residential status and civic identity as well." He sees the latter as influenced by Greek and Roman civic culture. (Gregg E. Gardner, "Concerning Poverty: Mishnah Pe'ah, Tosefta Pe'ah and the Re-Imagination of Society in Late Antiquity," in *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Ra'anan S. Boustan et al. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013, 213–14.)

[33] Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*, 139.

[34] Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*, 139. More pointedly, Tosefta Pe'ah 4:10: "[If] he used to wear find wool [before he became poor], then supply him with [clothes of] finewool. [If he used to receive] a coin [as a salary], then give him a coin."

[35] Gardner, "Concerning Poverty: Mishnah Pe'ah, Tosefta Pe'ah and the Re-Imagination of Society in Late Antiquity," 210.

[36] Neusner, *The Tosefta*, 1:70–71.

[37] Blackman, *Mishnayoth*, vol. 1. 1:130

[38] Gildas H. Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries C.E.* (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1990), 40–41.

amount to be distributed from the *tamhui* to needy people daily, with additional provisions for the Sabbath.[39]

It is also interesting to note that the original authors of the Mishnah (the Tannaim) are greatly concerned with preserving the *dignity* of the poor as much as possible.[40] To that end, the original directives for both the *quppah* and the *tamhui* were that giving was to be done anonymously. Likewise, the system of supervised distribution was designed so that the donor and the recipient never interact face to face.[41] The goal was not some economic equality but rather equality of dignity that hearkened back to the Exodus from Egypt.[42] This concern for the *dignity* of the poor who needed assistance was unique in the Mediterranean world, where "the poor were generally despised and derided."[43] Later on, though, what we observed in its incipient form during the intertestamental period–redemptive almsgiving to acquire *tzedakah* for oneself–became commonplace from the days of the Amoraim forward.[44] Thus, the initial vision of the Tannaim concerning charity toward the poor was distorted.[45]

The issues noted above–poverty, charity, and the plausible precedents for giving charity—set the background for a closer look at Acts 6 and 9, where we read specifically about Jewish widows benefitting from Christian compassion and charity.

Acts 6: The Beginnings of Organized Compassion?

The text of Acts 6:1-7 raises several interesting questions: What is the timing of this event? Who are the "Hellenists"? What is the "daily ministry"? What exactly does it mean to "serve at tables"? Where does this assembly meet "daily"? How big a group of widows is this, and is the number of chosen men (all with Greek names) merely a biblically symbolic number, or does the amount of daily work that this ministry entailed necessitate this?[46] What were these Christians

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[39] In particular, fish. Gregg E. Gardner, "Let Them Eat Fish: Food for the Poor in Early Rabbinic Judaism," *J. Study Jud.* 45.2 (2014): 250–70.

[40] Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*. "Whereas the institutionalization of charity would be used by others in subsequent years for instrumental purposes to gain and maintain social and religious authority, it was designed by the Tannaim as a systematic means for discharging one's obligation to give charity in a way that protects the poor from the indignity of begging." 83

[41] Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*. The organization of charitable giving that strove for anonymity did have benefits. Gardner explains that the "simplest form of charity, when one individual hands over food, money, or some other asset to a beggar, was the most prevalent form of support for the poor in the ancient world. This straightforward transfer, however, created moral, ethical, and social dilemmas (2)." Among these dilemmas he lists: a) such a face to face exchange wounds the receiver; b) it likewise reinforces social strata; c) it reminds the recipient of charity of his inferiority. 151-154.

[42] Rabbi Jill Jacobs, *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition*, 1st edition. (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 2010), 18–19. "The wilderness acts as the great economic equalizer. During their forty years of wandering, the Jewish people can own only what they can carry with them...God constantly reminds the reader that "the land is mine..."

[43] Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*, 154.

[44] The Amoraim ("the Speakers") were those Jewish scholars who flourished from 250–500 AD

[45] Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism*, 39: "Thus the Palestinian Amoraim developed instrumental uses for organized charity that were never intended by the Tannaim--who, by contrast, focused on protecting the dignity of the poor by bringing an end to the shame and humiliation of begging."

providing to widows on a daily basis? We can gain insight into what exactly comprised this charitable endeavor in Jerusalem by seeking answers to these questions.[47]

To begin, who are these widows, and how many widows might we be talking about that were the objects of concern for the fledgling Jerusalem congregation? The text states, "there was a grumbling of the Hellenists toward the Hebraic" (ἐγένετο γογγυσμὸς τῶν Ἑλληνιστῶν πρὸς τοὺς Ἑβραίους). Thus, it was not the widows who did the grumbling[48] but rather the men of the respective groups who did so on their behalf. Some understand the Greek term as referring to a "secret murmuring that was not done openly."[49] In this daily care, some were being overlooked either purposefully or unintentionally. Given the love Christians consistently displayed in Acts up to this point, the latter seems more likely.

The mention of the two separate groups comes upon the reader unexpectedly, and we wonder what these labels "Hellenists" and "Hebraic" meant at that time.[50] Bruce sees the distinction as "largely social. In origin, however, it was cultural and mainly linguistic."[51] Some believe that the two groups represent Jews and Gentiles, that is, the distinction between Christians and non-Christians.[52] In Keener's long discourse covering the most recent scholarship on the text,[53] he notes several things. For one, he agrees with most scholars who see that the distinction points primarily to a linguistic difference.[54] That said, the term "Hellenist" may imply much more; it could indicate something as strong as active support for Greek culture or at least some degree of influence from the Greek lifestyle.[55] In fact, it is precisely in this latter sense that 2 Maccabees employs the term.[56] Finally, another possibility is that the "Hellenistic" Jews are, in

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[46] Kim-Kwong Chan, "The Organization of the Caritative Ministry in the Early Church," *East Asia Journal of Theology* 2, no. 1 (1984): 107. "The 'Seven' have never been clearly identified; the 'Seven' seemed to be more a collective title than an official title."

[47] See my *Excursus: What Did it Take for a Congregation to Feed a Widow Every Day in Jerusalem (Acts 6)?* that supplements this essay. There I walk through a plausible scenario. The later patristic writings help us but little; they are much more concerned about the principles of ordination and the role of new offices in the ecclesiastical structure than in the social and charitable aspects of Acts 6.

[48] The word γογγυσμὸς ("grumbling") is a strong but infrequently used term; it occurs in the LXX when the Israelites complain about Moses' leadership (Exod 16:7 ff.), and when the Jews of Jerusalem murmur against certain teachings of Jesus (John 7:12).

[49] Barclay Moon Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles,* (New York: American Bible Society, 1972), 134.

[50] Frederick F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1999), 180–81.

[51] Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*. Newman and Nida relate that there is general agreement among scholars concerning the term "Hebraic," but much more disagreement concerning the other (*A Translator's Handbook,* 134).

[52] That is the opinion of Brehm, cited in Martin M. Culy and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 107.

[53] Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: 3:1-14:28*, Har/Com edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1249-1260.

[54] Keener, *Acts*, 1255. Keener then provides ample proof of the interplay of Greek and Aramaic in Judea, noting among that, "even rabbinic literature includes some fifteen hundred Greek loanwords." (1256)

[55] Keener, *Acts*, 1258. Keener mentions "Medizing" here, but also offers some definitions of "Hellenist." The author also notes (ibid.) that "the term cannot be a question of cultural *loyalties* here, for the fiercest defenders of traditional Judean institutions in the narrative are also Hellenists (Acts 6:9-11; 9:29)."

fact, Diaspora Jews, who "were certainly Hellenized."[57] This group may have included Jews who had come to Jerusalem for Passover but elected to remain in the city until Pentecost—or even until Tabernacles—and thus were *temporary* residents of the city. Nor can we exclude the possibility that some of the widows in Acts 6 were women who were stranded in Jerusalem, having accompanied their (now dead) husbands to the festivals only to have them die during their temporary residency.

Dunn notes that whatever the exact meaning and implications of the terms, there is one inescapable conclusion:

> The terms "Hellenists" and "Hebrews" indicate a degree of suspicion and possibly even hostility between the two groups thus denoted. The Hellenists more than likely looked down on the Hebrews as parochial and traditionalist. Equally, the Hebrews probably regarded the Hellenists as those who were diluting and compromising key traditions of their shared faith and praxis as Jews.[58]

The complaint from the Hellenists was not directed at the leadership of the Jerusalem church[59] but at the Hebraic men who had been assisting with the distribution of charity. The verb describing the problem is in the imperfect tense–*paratheorounto* (παρεθεωροῦντο), indicating that this was not a singular oversight but an ongoing problem.

The call from the Hellenists was for equity in the "daily distribution" (ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ τῇ καθημερινῇ). This phrase also harbors some ambiguity. The noun rendered "distribution" could also mean "service." In either case, it is vague. What is meant by "distribution"? Or what is meant by "daily service?" Some have opined that the term *diakonia* indicates a worship setting involving the distribution of the Lord's Supper.[60] Others see a similar worship context, but one in which the widows were overlooked in the distribution of the sacred meal.[61] However, these

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[56] Keener, *Acts*, 1258. Keener lists: 2 Macc 4:10,13,15; 6:9; 11:24. Also cf. 4 Macc 8:8. In this regard, it was somewhat of a surprising discovery at Sepphoris in 1993 when archaeologists uncovered the well-preserved mosaics embedded in the synagogue floor, depicted traditional scene from the Old Testament, but also having a large depiction of the zodiac in the center of the floor, with the Greek god Helios in his golden chariot arising from center of the circle.

[57] Keener, *Acts*, 1259.

[58] James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 1 edition. (Cambridge, U.K.: Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 251.

[59] Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 251.

[60] Reid, in her feminist reading of the text, sees the situation as one where the Hellenistic widows are being overlooked "in the assignment of ministries," perhaps even the "distribution" of the Lord's Supper itself. Barbara E. Reid OP, "The Power of Widows and How to Suppress It (Acts 6:1-7)," in *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (London & New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 83. Further, Reid's comment, following Schüssler Fiorenza, that "nothing in the text indicates that these widows were poor, and thus in need of goods distributed by the community" is surprising (83).

[61] David W. Pao, "Waiters or Preachers: Acts 6:1-7 and the Lukan Table Fellowship Motif," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 1 (2011): 137. "Therefore, rather than the imagery of the 'soup kitchen,' τῇ διακονίᾳ τῇ καθημερινῇ is best understood to refer to 'the common sacred meal,' as already noted in 2:46. The complaint of the Hellenists is therefore that their widows 'were not allowed to participate in the daily meal.' As to the nature of the meal from which the widows are excluded, some have suggested that this is a reference to the eucharistic meal. This reading is built on the reference to the Eucharist as "the Lord's table" (τραπέζης κυρίου) in 1 Cor 10:21, but in Luke-Acts the "table," especially in the plural, does not acquire this specific sense."

interpretations seem out of place in the immediate context.[62] The reference in Acts 6:4 to "tables" (τραπέζαις*)* presses us to take the passage in the most natural sense, that "serving at tables" describes a type of service involving a meal.[63] Some have argued that the "distribution" was money instead of food, but the burden of proof lies on them.

Possible Origins of the Acts 6 "Distribution"

But whose brainchild was this "daily distribution" to begin with? We have already seen that there *may* have been some conceptual influence from the Jewish "soup kitchen" (*tamhui*). Still, the differences between the two administrations are significant enough for us to question a direct influence. There could, however, be an influence from another source—the Essenes. [64] Josephus describes the charitable aspect of Essene life:

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[62] For one, such an interpretation does not account for the nuances of the word "ministry." While it is true that later New Testament usage of the noun διακονία frequently carries with it the meaning of "ministry" in the sense of representative, public ministry, at this point in Acts the term has only appeared twice, both uses occurring in Chapter 1 and both in reference to the remaining apostles choosing a replacement for Judas. Thus, is seems most natural to understand the noun διακονία as referring to some kind of official work done by the leadership of the congregation. Even though earlier chapters of Acts make it clear that the early Christians did share many things in common, striving towards some level of equality among the membership, I believe it to be an unwarranted conclusion to assume that such an egalitarian approach to material possessions automatically transferred to an egalitarian approach to spiritual duties in the congregation. The fact that the apostles, in Acts 6, speak of their own work as "the ministry of the word" indicates that even by the time of these early chapter of Acts, there exists in basic form a clear, if rudimentary, division of spiritual work and authority. Granted, we do not know precisely how the Jerusalem Christians conducted their worship service or by what method they distributed the Lord's Supper. The argument put forward that the widows were being excluded from some established rotation for "service" assumes a level of ecclesial organization that is hard to envision at this point in the life of the Christian movement. The other suggestion, that the Hellenistic widows of Acts 6 were being skipped for their turn to distribute communion might be more plausible, but it hinges entirely on the argument that "daily distribution" must be the equivalent to the type of daily gathering described in Acts 2, and that the phrase "to break bread" is a standard phrase consistently employed in reference to the celebration of the Lord's sacred meal. This is a debatable assumption. While there may be places that it does refer to the Lord's Supper, it certainly cannot mean that in a situation such as is described in Acts 27, where Paul is sailing to Rome in a ship beleaguered by a fourteen-day storm. There Paul encourages all on board to eat—a largely unbelieving group with a few Christians mixed in. In this context, "After [Paul] said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. (Acts 27:35)." Moreover, given the fact that *diakonia* also is used in the New Testament to indicate services voluntarily rendered to fellow believers (especially in respect to *offerings* given for the relief of fellow Christians), it is just as warranted to argue that the situation being described in Acts 6 is one where the Hellenistic widows' *offerings* are being "overlooked" (i.e. rejected).

[63] Ac 6:2 διακονεῖν τραπέζαις (*diakonein trapedzais*) "to serve at tables." Again, some have tried to set this phrase in the context of a worship service, largely on the basis of the word "table." For example, Pao: "Returning to the connection between Acts 6:1-7 and the Lukan account of the Last Supper (Luke 22:14–38), one significant parallel also needs to be noted. In the Last Supper narrative, not only does Jesus, who is sharing a meal with his disciples "on the table" (ἐπὶ τῆς τραπέζης, 22:21), identify himself as "the one who serves" (ὁ διακονῶν, 22:27); he also calls the disciples to be "like the one who serves" (ὡς ὁ διακονῶν, 22:26) as he himself is." (Pao, "Waiters or Preachers." 141.) While it is also true that Paul in 1 Co 10:20 speaks of the Eucharistic meal as "the Lord's table" (τραπέζης κυρίου), we should note the presence of the plural form ("tables") in Acts 6:2, which leads us away from seeing a commonality of meaning. The meaning of Acts 6 is literal, whereas the reference in 1 Co 10 is metaphorical.

[64] Philo, *Quod Omnis Probus Liber*. XII.75 Although there may be a tendency today to link the Essenes to the Dead Sea Scrolls and thus confine them to an isolated, almost monastic existence on the shores of the Dead Sea, the simple fact that not all Essenes lived at the desert commune. Philo sets their number at a little more than 4000 living

> And truly, as for other things, they do nothing but according to the injunctions of their curators; only these two things are done among them at everyone's own free will, which is to assist those that want it and to show mercy; for they are permitted of their own accord to afford assistance to such as deserve it, when they stand in need of it, and to bestow food on those that are in distress; but they cannot give anything to their kindred without the curators.[65]

Philo also speaks of the Essenes–their common life, common purse, and common purpose. He also highlights the attitude with which the Essenes ministered to the elderly:

> With the common purse, there is plenty from which to treat all illnesses. They lavish great respect on the elderly. With them, they are very generous and surround them with a thousand attentions.[66]

We can, perhaps, cautiously assert that the Essene charitable practices were an inspiration and model for the early Christians in Jerusalem, helping the elderly and those in need. There are striking parallels between Josephus and Philo's descriptions of the Essene practices and the situation in Acts. Because so, Capper comes to this conclusion:

> There are, in fact, a sufficient number of close terminological and administrative parallels between the Acts account and our sources on the Essene community of goods to suggest that the property sharing which took place in the earliest Christian community was substantially similar to the Essene community of goods, and was probably modeled upon Essene practice. [67]

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in Palestine and Syria. Josephus mentions that a number of them lived in various cities. In fact, by the time of the first half of the first century AD, many Essenes had migrated to the newly established "Essene Quarter" of Jerusalem. The Essenes, moreover, seemed to have had a particularly favorable rapport with Herod the Great, and he showed his deference to them (over the Sadducees and Pharisees) by setting aside a portion of the city for their habitation, even creating a special gate in the city wall known thereafter as the Essene Gate. True, Pliny the Elder was familiar with the Essenes and located them on the shores of the Dead Sea, but it we must keep in mind that Pliny never actually visited Judea, possibly obtaining his information about it from M. Agrippa. Archaeological studies, however, indicate that the Essene Gate not only existed but was in all probability burned in the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 AD The number of Essenes living within Jerusalem itself during this period is difficult to ascertain. Bargil Pixner suggest that perhaps 50 Essene *cohenim* ("priests") inhabited this dedicated section of the city, located in the southwest corner, from approximately 30 B.AD to 70 AD ("The History of the 'Essene Gate' Area," *Z. Dtsch. Paläst.-Ver. 1953-* 105 (1989): 96–104). Thus, during the formative period of Christianity in Jerusalem, a sizeable group of Essenes living and following their precepts in a well-marked, distinguished part of the city. Although sectarian and discreet to the point of nearly isolationist, nevertheless the beliefs and practices of the Essenes must have become well known. If this holds true for Philo living as their contemporary in Alexandria, then certainly it also holds true for those living in Jerusalem, in whose midst lived a sizeable contingent of Essenes.

[65] *BJ* 2:134 (Whiston translation).

[66] Philo, *Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit,* XII.87

[67] Brian Capper, "The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods," in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham, vol. 4 of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 323–56. Capper is ready to say that the Essenes mostly abandoned the Essene Quarter of Jerusalem and returned to Qumran in the days of Herod's son Archelaus. (But he does concede that "some kind of Essene presence continued" afterward–p.349.) Pixner, however, indicates that a *substantial* number of Essenes remained in Jerusalem up until the time of the destruction of the city by Titus, 70 AD ("The History of the 'Essene Gate' Area," 96–104.) Capper's argument is centered more on the similarity of the Essene term *yachad* ("together") with the Greek of Acts, ἐπι το αὐτο (Ac 2:44) and κοινός at the same place; he links the concepts noting that even as early as John Chysostom, it was noted that the Greek at this verse "was not natural" (cf. footnote 42), thus supporting the idea that what was being referred to here with "they had everything in common" was a Greek rendering of the Hebrew concept *yachad.*

Finally, as we think about the Acts 6 account, we can't help but ask: what level of commitment was required of the Jerusalem congregation to maintain this daily ministry of compassion? What did the leaders distribute, what did it cost *per diem,* and how did they gather funding? Most of our questions are impossible to answer.[68] One plausible scenario I worked through envisions the commitment of the Jerusalem congregation to maintain this ministry at ca $3-$5 per day, per widow, in current US dollars.[69]

On a side note, in the context of Acts 6, we also should remind ourselves that serving at tables was not something beneath the rank of the apostles, most of whom sat in the Upper Room with their master on Maundy Thursday and watched him wash their feet.[70] Following the pattern Jesus set, it was the very nature of the office of an apostle to be a servant.[71] In Acts 6, the apostles' primary concern was to rectify a problem that affected their society's most vulnerable people–the widows, and not to maintain some hierarchy or jealously safeguard the dignity of their office. The exercise of true Christian leadership and compassion also requires true humility.

Tabitha: The Compassionate Provider (Acts 9)

Acts 9 presents us with another account of compassion: Tabitha (Dorcas) providing clothing for widows. There the Spirit drops us in on the scene where Tabitha has recently died unexpectedly, eliciting displays of grief from those who her kindness had touched. When Peter arrives,

> All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. (Acts 9:39)

Joppa, the setting of the text, was essentially the port of Jerusalem, situated roughly forty miles slightly northwest. It is challenging even to venture a plausible guess at the number of widows for whom Tabitha cared (following standard demographic formulas for the classical

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[68] But in this context, I am reminded of a report I recently heard concerning voluntary gifts for relief in Ukraine given to WELS Christian Aid and Relief. Of some $50,000 collected in a short time, the vast majority were gifts of $20 or less. Uhlhorn observed the same phenomenon over a century ago: "The history of charity proves in innumerable instances that the greatest results are accomplished when many small gifts are combined." Gerhard Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church*, trans. Sophia Taylor (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark International, 1883), 86.

[69] Again, I point you to the *Excursus* attached for how I arrived at this figure.

[70] John 13:1-17

[71] Luke 22:27, "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." (NIV)

world)[72] or whether they were Jewish or Jewish Christian.[73] Part of the challenge is that, with respect to Jerusalem, it is flat-out difficult to accurately assess the population at this time.[74]

What the Spirit does record through Luke, though, is Tabitha's regular,[75] well-known acts of compassion towards the widows of Joppa. Whereas in Acts 6, the material of charity was food, here it is one of life's other essentials: clothing. Upon the death of Tabitha and Peter's arrival, the widows of Joppa, who directly benefitted from Tabitha's charity, came to the site of mourning and displayed the clothing Tabitha had provided to Peter. The Greek text describes two types of clothing, the "tunics and cloaks" (χιτῶνας καὶ ἱμάτια, Acts 9:39). The two pieces were distinct, and both were necessary for daily life.

It is difficult for us moderns to understand the importance of clothing in ancient Jewish society and what a minimal amount or lack thereof implied. "Nakedness" (not to be understood as "nudity")[76] was completely unacceptable, and either complete or relative nakedness "indicated a very low status."[77] The tunic (χιτῶνα) was the standard clothing unit. The cloak (ἱμάτια) was much more expensive and served as the primary protection against the weather and, especially, the cold at night; it was an overcoat and blanket in one. For that reason, the Old Testament law pointedly spoke about borrowing or taking a neighbor's cloak. If one did so, it was incumbent upon the borrower to return it to the owner by sunset.[78] Jesus had asserted in the Sermon on the Mount: "And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well (Matt 5:40)." Such a statement must have been truly shocking to the listeners, for it implies both nakedness and exposure to the elements.[79] So vital was the cloak for Jewish life that Jewish men, as part of the *ketubah* (marriage contract), even took an oath to mortgage all their property, "even the mantle on my shoulders," to fulfill the terms of the *ketubah.*[80]

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[72] 30% male, 30% female, 40% children. See the *Excursus* attached and notes on calculating populations.

[73] Chan sees <u>all</u> the charity recipients in Acts as only members of the Christian community (Chan, "The Organization of the Caritative Ministry in the Early Church," 107). But is Tabitha herself a follower of Jesus? The text states that *the disciples* sent for Peter (9:38), presumably Jewish Christians. Tabitha herself is described in 9:36 by a *hapax legommenon* of the Greek New Testament, literally "a female disciple" (τις ἦν <u>μαθήτρια</u> ὀνόματι Ταβιθά), so it is safe to assume that she is Jewish Christian. Why, then, is her Greek name Dorcas also mentioned? Was it only for the sake of the (presumably) Gentile readership of Acts, or does this indicate that she may have been one of the "Hellenists" herself? The possibility exists.

[74] Josephus mentions that during the First Jewish Revolt (66 -73 AD), the city was captured by the Roman general Cestius Gallus, and 8400 inhabitants of the city were killed. Thus, Joppa was a city of noteworthy size. It also then follows that the city must have had a good share of women living out their days in widowhood. *BJ* 2.507–509, 3:414–426 Dunn notes that Joppa had "been forcibly Judaized during the Maccabean period (1 Macc 13:11)." Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem,* 380.

[75] The NIV rendering at Acts 9:36, "always doing good" captures the spirit of the Greek here, which literally reads: "She was full of good works and alms (acts of mercy)" (αὕτη ἦν πλήρης ἔργων ἀγαθῶν καὶ ἐλεημοσυνῶν ὧν ἐποίει.) Cf. Newman and Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles,* 200.

[76] "Nakedness" was even considered to be wearing only a tunic without a mantle. Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries AD*, 74.

[77] Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries AD*, 73

[78] Ex 22:26-27

[79] The Greek contains the very two same words (*xiton, himatia*) for "shirt" and "coat" as the Acts 9 account does here: καὶ τῷ θέλοντί σοι κριθῆναι καὶ τὸν χιτῶνά σου λαβεῖν, ἄφες αὐτῷ καὶ τὸ ἱμάτιον· (Matt. 5:40 BGT)

[80] This promise remains part of the traditional marriage contract to this day, especially among the Orthodox Ashkenazic community.

For this reason, the Jewish marriage contracts (*ketuboth*) specifically sought to protect the vulnerable regarding clothing. Some of the details in these contracts shed light on the situation in Acts 9. We read, for instance, legal requirements concerning the amount of money a husband was to leave behind for the support of his wife after his death.[81] Often, the amount provided was minimal. [82]

Moreover, even though the mandate was in place, what guarantees were there that the husband would faithfully meet this obligation, especially if the couple were in the lower strata of society? In the Mishnah tractate *Ketubah,* we find that a standard amount of support from a widow from her husband's estate was 200 *zuz* (if she was a virgin at marriage) or 100 *zuz* (if she had been previously married).[83] Updating that figure to the present day, adjusted for inflation: 200 *zuz* = $1899.13 per annum in 2022 dollars, from which they were to provide for themselves food and clothing. What strikes us about the situation in Acts 9 is that there is a group of widows apparently without resources even to provide basic tunics and cloaks. [84] Any number of factors–economic, social, legal–could have played a role in creating the challenging situation that each of these widows found themselves in.

Considering the larger economic picture of that day further helps us understand Tabitha's generosity in meeting the needs of these widows. On the very low end, a *tallit* (tunic) of very cheap material costs one *denarius* (135-170 AD), and a normal *tallit* costs twelve *denarii* in the same time frame.[85] Likewise, the "cloak of a poor man" cost 100–200 *denarii*.[86] There is a reference, though, to "clothing of sacking to last 4-5 years" costing a mere four *denarii.*[87] Then

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[81] *Ketubah* law can become rather complicated, and rabbinic discussions about the applications of the principles to various situations populate the Mishnah and Talmud. For a good basic overview of marriage contract law (*ketubah*) see Singer, Isidore; et al., eds. (1901–1906). "Ketubah (Ketubbah)". Jewish Encyclopedia. New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company. (Online at: http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9290-ketubah)

[82] Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries AD*, 64-67. He based his calculations upon the price lists calculated by Sperber. See Daniel Sperber, "Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I," *J. Econ. Soc. Hist. Orient* 8.3 (1965): 252. The author compiles a useful list of goods and their cost to first century Palestinian consumers. One situation, described in detail by Hamel, shows how such protections played out in the life of a Jewish wife whose husband had not died but was frequently gone for extended periods due to the nature of his work. The rabbinic law mandated that such a wife be provided 50 *zuz* worth of clothing each year.[82] What did that amount provide? Hamel concludes that in the I-II cent. AD, this amount provided "one or two tunics and a cloak of modest quality, or tunics and undergarments. This was not much."

[83] *t Keth.* 12.4 Cf. Roman A. Ohrenstein and Barry Gordon, *Economic Analysis in Talmudic Literature*, 3 Revised edition (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2009) where the author calculates 200 *zuz* to be the equivalent of $666 US, in 1984 dollars (166). Also noted is that the Mishnah sought to establish a definition of "poverty" by establishing the poverty threshold at 200 *zuz* (ibid.). Later rabbinic exegesis stated that the surviving wife had two options upon her husband's death: 1) she could return to her father's house as a widow, in which case she could receive 200 *zuz* annually for the rest of her life, or 2) she could remain in her dead husband's house, in which case she could only receive 200 *zuz* annually for twenty-five years.

[84] Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries AD*, 67: "The spirit of this Mishnah, however, may have been very far from the reality."

[85] Again, Sperber's assertion that prices were very stable during the I-II centuries AD must be emphasized ("The Cost of Living in Roman Palestine I," 249).

[86] Sperber, "Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I." 252.

[87] Sperber, "Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I." 252.

as today, price ranges reflected the quality of garments.[88] As I said earlier, we cannot know how many widows benefitted from Tabitha's handiwork. Nor can we know the quality of the clothing she provided. Perhaps she spun her own thread and wove her own fabric. Perhaps she was a woman of means and could simply buy the cloth. However, if she provided each widow with one tunic and one cloak each, it speaks to her generosity toward these women at risk in that society.[89]

The Uniqueness of Christian Relief: The Offering Gathered by Paul

The final item for us to consider as we survey ministries of compassion in the New Testament era is the offering Paul and others organized for the relief of fellow Christians in Jerusalem. This initiative, in particular, was the beginning of something unheard of in the Greco-Roman world. The focus of Christians on helping the abject poor just because they were poor was a foreign concept in that day, even though a good estimate is that nearly 80% of the Empire's population "lived near or at subsistence level or below.[90] Christian actions were so unique that they sparked the creation of new words in both Latin and Greek to describe their practices.[91] One scholar even asserts, "To put it bluntly: In a sense, it was the Christian bishops who invented the poor."[92]

The offering for Jerusalem was markedly different from the societal "charitable acts" of the day. It differed from Roman works of *euergetism*—public, civic-orientated deeds done primarily by the wealthy at their own expense to enhance both the giver's reputation and that of the community.[93] Occasionally, Roman emperors did "help" citizens by providing public relief via such channels as the grain dole. However, it is also true that such public acts of "charity" often benefitted the middle-class and wealthy more than the needy.[94] It also radically differs

[88] Sperber, "Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I." 252. In comparison, Sperber's list notes that the suit of high priests in the pre-70 AD world had a range of 10,000–20,000 *denarii.* (i.e. the yearly wages of a day laborer for 27-54 yrs.-KCW)

[89] Sperber notes in respect to his discussion about bakers that the rabbis capped the profit margin for them at 33% (Daniel Sperber, "Costs of Living in Roman Palestine II," *J. Econ. Soc. Hist. Orient* 9.3 (1966): 185.) If Tabitha made the clothing at cost, she perhaps could have done so for under 75 d. (probably even much less than that.) On the other hand, if Tabitha simply *purchased* a cloak for 100 d. and a tunic for 12 d., according to Sperber's lists the total would have been 112 *denarii,* or roughly 1/3 a yearly day laborer's salary.

[90] Rupen Das, "A Compassionate Community: What Did the Early Church Teach That Made Christians 'Lovers of the Poor'?," *J. Eur. Baptist Stud.* 17.2 (2017): 32. Das cites the work of (originally) Steven Friesen's economic scale, which Bruce Longenecker subsequently tweaked in his book, *Remembering the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (53).

[91] Anderson, *Charity*, 5. Anderson cites the important work of Paul Veyne's, *Bread and Circuses* (Eng. version, 1990), the scholar very much responsible for bringing the study of benefactors and euergetism to the forefront. But see also Glen L. Thompson, "Christian Charity in a Non-Christian World: Benefactors and Paul's Vocabulary of Giving," 1995, presented at the 1995 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (Philadelphia, PA) and readily available at the author's site on www.academia.edu.

[92] Das, "A Compassionate Community," 33. Das is quoting Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, 8.

[93] Kahane, "Problematizing Charity," 47–48. "Greco-Roman euergetism was characterized by the expectation of some reciprocity that would accrue—often in the form of public honor, statue, or title—for the patron on behalf of his or her benevolence to the city. But this was typically benevolence directed toward the general good of the city and not focused on specifically on its poor."

[94] Anneliese Parkin, "'You Do Him No Service': An Exploration of Pagan Almsgiving," in *Poverty in the Roman World*, ed. Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne, 1 edition. (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 60. "The destitute were never *en masse* targets of aid. As Hendrik Bolkenstein made clear long ago, Christian charity did not

from patterns of Roman societal relationships, such as the patron-client. Acts of genuine compassion done for the sake of nothing but (for lack of a better term) "humanity's sake" are incredibly rare in the ancient annals. Tacitus records one striking exception as the nobles of Rome offered a generous and compassionate response to some 50,000 injured in the collapse of a poorly-built amphitheater.[95] But, as previously said, this is the exception.[96]

In the Greco-Roman world, the unfortunates of society were generally despised. Humfress observes that in surviving Roman legal texts, Roman jurists have no working definition for "the poor."[97] Other Romans, believers in fate, viewed the poor as poor for no reason other than their lot in life assigned by the gods. Philosophy didn't help much, either.[98] Plato had no room for the poor in his ideal city described in *The Republic,* and Aristotle only emphasized friendship as a basis of benevolence, not a general love for humanity.[99] Seneca the Stoic, though sounding "Christian" in some respects, nevertheless deplored pity as a weakness of character.[100] Generally speaking, in the early first-century Roman world, "no one claimed to love the destitute until the rise of Christianity as a power in the late empire when patronage of the poor became an ideological and political force."[101] And furthest from the minds of most was associating "moral excellence or virtue (*dignitas*) with poverty or the poor." It even took the church time to adjust to this radical new way of thinking concerning the distressed, as shown in the various words early Christian authors used for the term "the poor."[102]

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develop out of pagan munificence. The two were concerned with fundamentally different sectors of ancient society." Also Thompson, "Christian Charity in a Non-Christian World," 6. And Das (*ibid.*) mentions that "any relief provided to the poor during times of crises was based on political status."

[95] Tacitus, *Annales* iv.62-63. Cited by Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church*, 4.

[96] "Widows, orphans, migrants and the sick, whom the Church tended, were those whom Roman *euergetism* almost ignored. They were not the 'deserving poor'." Whittaker 1993:24, quoted in Bruce W. Longenecker, "Exposing the Economic Middle: A Revised Economy Scale for the Study of Early Urban Christianity," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament.* 31.3 (2009): 271, fn#54.

[97] Caroline Humfress, "Poverty and Roman Law," in *Poverty in the Roman World*, ed. Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne, 1st edition. (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 183.

[98] Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church*, 3. ""Compassion and humanity are virtues peculiar to the righteous and to the worshippers of God. Philosophy teaches us nothing of them."

[99] Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church*, 33–34.

[100] Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church*, 37. "Just as superstition (*superstitio*) is a morbid perversion of Roman religion, so is pity a morbid caricature of mercy and kindness. Pity is the fault of a weak spirit, which succumbs at the sight of a stranger in distress."

[101] Parkin, "'You Do Him No Service': An Exploration of Pagan Almsgiving," 68.

[102] Hamel (*Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries AD*) provides an example: understanding the social implications of the term πένης also involves understanding the opinion that classical and later Greek thought had of work, since the term implies meager existence achieved through day labor. Thus, the mere mention of the terms for "the poor" produced various value judgments, depending upon the culture. Jewish society, following select passages from the Old Testament (especially the Psalms) viewed the poor more positively, since they believed the poor to be dear to God's heart and objects of his special concern and protection. But, in contrast, Greek literature "usually saw little problem, not only in drawing attention to modesty of means and beggary but also in attaching blame or shame to the poor themselves." To illustrate even further, when Greek became the representative language of the early Christian movement, Christian authors frequently nuanced πτωχός "in a favorable light [that was] shocking to the Greeks who…sought to explain away the πτωχός of the Gospels and to harmonize the Beatitudes and their own view of society." So, the Greek terms especially were impregnated with cultural significance, and early Greek Christians struggled to overcome the biases that these terms carried in their culture when they were confronted with the positive–even blessed–status that the poor had not only in the Jewish

Yet St. Paul, prompted by the Holy Spirit, develops the idea of helping those in Jerusalem affected by a recent famine. It was an opportunity to instruct especially Gentile converts about the radical nature of God's compassionate grace in Christ and how that grace moves us to be imitators of God as dearly loved children (Eph 5:1). As Thompson notes,

> Paul's Gentile converts, however, would have found this a new and strange idea. Their familiarity with Graeco-Roman benefactions would not have helped but would rather have hindered their understanding of who was to give what to whom and for what reason. Paul, therefore, instructed them on the Christian concept of giving. In doing so, he used familiar benefactor terminology to express some concepts and as a contrast to other new ideas. When all was said and done, he had formulated a distinctively Christian vocabulary of giving.[103]

In summary, then, it is safe to say that while the first and second-generation Christians may have drawn some limited inspiration for a formal, organized approach to something of a ministry of compassion in Jerusalem from the Essenes and Pharisees, the entire approach and spirit of the Christians towards the poor and needy was something unique in the Greco-Roman world. That culture generally hated and despised the poor. It was even different in form and spirit from the practices of the Jewish culture of that day. Most importantly, their lives of love did not go unnoticed.

III. Compassionate Love in Action: The Early Church

Love for the Saints in Action

They continued to be noticed. Genuine Christian love would become the hallmark of the early Church in the first few centuries after Christ's ascension. But an honest appraisal of the textual evidence leads us to concede that the vast majority of incidents of compassion involve Christians caring for other Christian. We think, for instance, of that earliest of letters we still possess, Clement of Rome's first letter to the church of Corinth, filled as it is with exhortations to unity and love. But there is also this, the fostering of compassion:

> Let the strong care for the weak and let the weak respect the strong. Let the rich provide for the poor and let the poor give thanks to God, that he gave to him *one* through whom he might supply his need." (38:2)[104]

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scriptures but also in the eyes of Jesus himself. "In the Greco-Roman world, it was a new and revolutionary message. Its acceptance was not natural, and various ways of understanding the message developed." Consequently, there was a shift in thinking that needed to occur, as Greek-speaking Gentiles became part of the early Christian movement. (168-222)

[103] Thompson, "Christian Charity in a Non-Christian World," 8.

[104] Rick Brannan, *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation*, Translation edition., Lexham Classics (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 37–38. All following quotes from the Apostolic Fathers are from this edition. Later, the *Didache*: "Do not reject the needy ones, but share everything with your brother and do not say it is your own, for if you are a sharer in the immortal, how much more in the mortal?" (4:8)

Similarly, Ignatius of Antioch also commends Christian love in action in his famous seven letters to various churches in Asia Minor.[105] Although in the context of rebuking those who hold divisive opinions, Ignatius—by their negative example—infers how the Smyrnaeans have been living out their faith:

> For love does not concern [the divisive], no concern for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the afflicted, none for the ones imprisoned or the ones set free, none for the hungry or the thirsty. (Ign. *Smyrn.*6:2)

This concern for fellow Christians does not imply, of course, that early Christians ignored such encouragement as that of Paul, "…do good to all…" (Gal 6:10). Polycarp, in his letter to the Philippians, acknowledges this when he says that "presbyters also must be compassionate, merciful to all..".[106] But we also need to remember that the early Church was a) a very, very small component of the Mediterranean landscape,[107] b) illegal, and c) a persecuted church. Most Christians were primarily concerned with surviving and holding on to the faith.[108] What's more, the Christians, initially, really had no large buildings or institutions for the relief of the poor. Part of this may be because they were detached from this world and longed to be with Christ.[109] Indeed, many zealously sought a way out of this world through a martyr's death to obtain a better resurrection, especially in North Africa. And, as I inferred earlier, so many acts of compassion toward fellow believers and, presumably, unbelievers are not recorded for us, as Christians lived out their faith in quiet humility. [110]

These factors make it difficult for us to find (much less reconstruct) any formal, intentional ministry of compassion. For the early Christians, the power of their love for one

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[105] Ign. *Magn.*6:1-2; *Smyrn.*1:1-2; 6:1-2. A bit later, the *Didache* (1:5; 4:8; 15:4) and the *Shepherd* of Hermas (Second Mandate) speak similarly as to how Christians are to care for one another and, in general, all people.

[106] Pol. *Phil* 6:1. Objectively, though, it is uncertain whether Polycarp has in mind behavior towards all people or just those of the household of faith.

[107] See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, unknown edition. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997). Stark's model is that the trajectory of Christian growth was, roughly: 7,500 Christians by the end of the first century (0.02% of sixty million people); 40,000 Christians by 150 AD (0.07%) 200,000 by 200 AD (0.35%) 2 million by 250 AD (2%). Many scholars believe that the number of Christians by 300 AD had risen to 6 million (10%). This represents a 40% rate of growth *per decade*. Further, see Bart Ehrman's discussion on his blog: "The Rate of Christian Growth," *The Bart Ehrman Blog*, n.d., https://ehrmanblog.org/the-rate-of-christian-growth/. Keith Hopkins has a fascinating article about the implications of the growth numbers: "Christian Number and Its Implications," *J. Early Christ. Stud.* 6.2 (1998): 185–226. He sees the rate of Christian growth as 0.01% for the first century and 0.35% for the second. But he also adds a number of caveats, beginning with the important question, "Who is actually considered to be 'Christian'?" Hopkins numbers are slightly lower than Stark's.

[108] For this reason, both Ignatius and Polycarp heavily emphasize that the bishop must be followed and obeyed in all things.

[109] Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church*, 124–25. "The task of fleeing from the world was in the front rank of the Christian's duties, that of penetrating the world with the new life only gradually dawned on him." (124)

[110] Francine Cardman, "Early Christian Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David Hunter, Illustrated edition. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 942. She writes, "Prior to Constantine, almsgiving and other forms of charity were mainly personal acts within the life of Christian communities."

another was their primary witness to the world. So, Chadwick asserts: “The practical application of charity was probably the most potent single cause of Christian success.”[111] And although a common assumption among scholars has long been that the early Church’s growth was due primarily to zeal for evangelism and church planting, Harnack noted a century ago that it was the gospel of love and compassion that accounted for the flourishing of Christianity.[112]

Tertullian can serve as a profitable guide in a brief survey of how Christians cared for those suffering in some manner, especially their own. In his *Apologeticus,* he writes:

> Though we have our treasure chest, it is not made up of purchase money, as of a religion that has its price. On a monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are, as it were, piety’s deposit fund. For they are not taken thence and spent on feasts, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; such, too, as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be any in the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God’s Church, they become the nurslings of their confession. But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See, they say, how they love one another, for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred; how they are ready even to die for one another, for they themselves will sooner put to death.[113]

We can’t help but notice the list of activities that the early Christians busied themselves with and how many fit under the broad umbrella of compassion. Tertullian’s statements align with earlier writers, notably the apologists Aristides and Justin Martyr. In their efforts to persuade the authorities of the unjustness of persecution of Christians, they list many of the believers’ compassionate and charitable practices.[114]

The truth of Tertullian’s statement can even be substantiated by negative evidence, that of Lucian, the Roman satirist (130-200 AD). He berated the Christian view of wealth and scoffed at their charity. In his treatise *The Passing of Peregrinus*, Lucian creates a fictitious scenario describing the arrest of a pseudo-Christian preacher named Proteus (who uses the pseudonym

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[111] Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, Revised., vol. 1 of *The Penguin History of the Church* (London: Penguin Random House, 1993), 56. Per Monty L. Lynn, *Christian Compassion: A Charitable History* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2021), 45.

[112] Das, “A Compassionate Community,” 31.

[113] Tertullian, *The Apology*, 5th ed., vol. 03 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF)*, ed. Philip Schaff (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1990). Ch. xxix. Such mistreatment wasn't exclusively the purview of the pagans; in the *History of the Arians* (Pt. VII.58 ff *NPNF,* Ser. 2 Vol. 4) the author details persecution of Christians by the Arians in Alexandria (ca. 358 AD) Although much later, there are similarities to Tertullian's list.

[114] Aristides, *Apology*, XV; Justin, *First Apology*, LXVII. Eusebius of Caesarea also preserves a quote of Dionysius of Corinth (ca. 170 AD), who bears witness to the congregation in Rome's generosity: “For from the beginning it has been your practice to do good to all the brethren in various ways, and to send contributions to many churches in every city. Thus, relieving the want of the needy, and making provision for the brethren in the mines by the gifts which you have sent from the beginning, you Romans keep up the hereditary customs of the Romans, which your blessed bishop Soter has not only maintained, but also added to, furnishing an abundance of supplies to the saints, and encouraging the brethren from abroad with blessed words, as a loving father his children." (*NPNF* V.2-01.XXIII.10, online at ccel.org).

Peregrinus). He mocks the Christians for their behavior: bringing meals to the jail, bribing the guards to let them visit,[115] reading Scripture to him through the bars, visitors traveling great distances to give him money—and all of this with great zeal. Yet there must have been some underlying realities that sparked Lucian to write so.[116]

In the non-fiction world, the *Constitution of the Holy Apostles* affirms that such activities indeed were commonplace among Christians:

> And such sums of money as are collected from them in the manner aforesaid, appoint to be laid out in the redemption of the saints, the deliverance of slaves, and of captives, and of prisoners, and of those that have been abused, and of those that have been condemned by tyrants to single combat and death on account of the name of Christ. For the Scripture says: "Deliver those that are led to death and redeem those that are ready to be slain, do not spare." (Bk. IV.I.ix)[117]

Further, the *Constitutions* even suggests somewhat extreme measures in showing compassion to fellow Christians who suffer for the sake of Christ:

> If any Christian, on account of the name of Christ, and love and faith towards God, be condemned by the ungodly to the games, to the beasts, or to the mines, do not overlook him; but send to him from your labor and your very sweat for his sustenance, and for a reward to the soldiers, that he may be eased and be taken care of; that, as far as lies in your power, your blessed brother may not be afflicted: (Bk. VI.I.i)[118]

A half-century later—also in Carthage—Cyprian demonstrated a particular zeal for the care of prisoners. From his somewhat moderately-sized congregation, he gathered HS 100,000[119] for the ransom of some Numidian prisoners. As for those relegated to the mines, Cyprian received several letters expressing gratitude from the captives for the supplies, encouragement, and prayers their fellow Christians had sent.[120]

Witness to the World: Compassion for Humanity

The examples above have sufficiently illustrated that anything resembling an organized ministry of compassion in the first few centuries of Christianity was, understandably, directed primarily at fellow Christians. Were there no attempts to broaden the definition of "neighbor" and marshal

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[115] This also occurs in *The Passion of Perpetua*, I.2 The text relates how two deacons in Carthage, Tertius, and Pomponius, bribed the prison guards to allow Perpetua to spend some more pleasant hours in a better part of the prison.

[116] Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus,* 12-13. Translated and notes by A.M. Harmon, 1936, Published in Loeb Classical Library, 9 volumes, Greek texts and facing English translation: Harvard University Press. We know from other texts that widows of early Christianity—as mentioned above—were particularly active in this "prison ministry".

[117] James Donaldson D.D (tr.), *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles: Or, The Apostolic Constitutions* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 69.

[118] Donaldson, *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, 73.

[119] At the time Uhlhorn notes this (1883), he equated the value at £850. This, in turn, equates to £114,874 ($139,388) in modern currency. Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church*, 158.

[120] Cyprian, *Epistles of Cyprian*, 5th ed., vol. 05 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF)*, ed. Philip Schaff (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1990). See esp. Ep 76-79.

efforts to assist the pagans in need, merely for humanity's sake? I think we can safely say that there were. Again, it is God's will and the renewed Christian's nature to do good to all. More than that, perhaps Christians even saw their assistance to the needy and unfortunate as a way in which others could return to a useful life of vocation, fulfilling their role as part of God's providential care of his world.[121] Some have also noted that one of the driving factors in expressions of Christian compassion was the belief that all humans were created in the *imago Dei.*[122]

Although the textual evidence is slim, there does exist at least some testimony to Christians demonstrating their compassion to the Roman world outside of the Church. Coincidentally, given our world's current situation, these Christians' efforts occurred in times of pandemics. There were at least two of note. The first occurred in the late 2nd century AD and is known as the Antonine Plague since it stretched from the reign of Marcus Aurelius (b. 165 AD) to the reign of his son Commodus. Historians and medical professionals have argued about the extent of the plague. But it certainly was a devastating crisis. In the end, it may have even begun the gradual disintegration of the empire. The plague depleted the military, forcing conscription; it ravaged agricultural production; it may have even contributed to a greater interest in monotheistic religions such as Christianity.[123]

The second pandemic broke out in the mid-200s, the early 250s. Historians already refer to this period in Roman history as "the crisis of the third century,"[124] when twenty-six different emperors reigned in fifty years. The economy tanked, and the government tried to rectify the tenuous situation by debasing the currency.[125] In the midst of all this, the plague hit the empire, beginning in Egypt. It lasted for some 15 years. "The death toll was staggering: Two-thirds of the population of Alexandria died and as many as 5,000 a day in Rome alone."[126]

Nor was the church left unaffected by this "Plague of Cyprian" (as it has become known), beginning about 250 AD and lasting for twenty years. In his treatise *De Mortalitate*, Cyprian gently chides his members for not having the proper perspective on the plague, especially calling

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[121] Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church*, 64: "Then it is the task of charity to give him such assistance as shall put him again in a position to do his work. She strives to make the poor independent again, not only that they may be raised above the need for further assistance--for that would be a very low view of the case, and would not answer to true love--but in order that they may again fulfill their calling."

[122] Rob Moll, "The Health Care Debate, Early Church Style," *Christianity Today*, 26 August 2009, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/augustweb-only/health-care-debate-early-church.html.

[123] Christer Bruun, "The Antonine Plague and the Third-Century Crisis," in *Crises and the Roman Empire*, ed. Olivier Hekster, Gerda de Kleijn, and Daniëlle Slootjes, Proceedings of the Seventh Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire (Nijmegen, June 20-24, 2006) (Brill, 2007), 201–17. Gibbon, of course, famously argues that it was Christianity that "softened" the fabric of Roman society (through such things as compassionate charity) to such an extent that it eventually became too weak—and kind—to hold together.

[124] A standard Roman history simply calls it "The Third-Century Anarchy, AD 235 to 285." Allen M. Ward, Fritz M. Heichelheim, and Cedric A. Yeo, *A History of the Roman People*, 3rd edition. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Taylor & Francis, 1998).

[125] Today it is called "quantitative easing."

[126] Ward, Heichelheim, and Yeo, *A History of the Roman People*, 387.

out those who wrongly thought that becoming a Christian was a guarantee for escaping all earthly ills.[127] The bishop also cataloged some of the symptoms of the disease:

> This trial that now the bowels, relaxed into a constant flux discharge the bodily strength; that fire originated in the marrow ferments into wounds of the fauces (back of the throat); that the intestines are shaken with continual vomiting; that the eyes are on fire with the injected blood; that in some cases the feet or some parts of the limbs are taken off by the contagion of diseased putrefaction; that from the weakness arising by the enfeebled, or the hearing is obstructed, or the sight darkened; -- is profitable as proof of faith. What a grandeur of spirit it is to struggle with all the powers of an unshaken mind against so many onsets of devastation and death![128]

Pontius the Deacon, in his *The Life and Passion of Cyprian,* also detailed the morbid and tragic effect that the disease had upon the city:

> All were shuddering, fleeing, shunning the contagion, impiously exposing their own friends as if with the exclusion of the person who was sure to die of the plague, one could exclude death itself also. There lay about, meanwhile, over the whole city, no longer bodies but the carcasses of many, and, by the contemplation of a lot which in their turn would be theirs, demanded the pity of the passersby for themselves. No one regarded anything besides his cruel gains.[129]

Yet Pontius immediately records what we could consider an organized, concerted effort of compassion by a congregation. Motivated by the love of Christ, the members took care of both fallen Christians as well as the dead pagans. The surviving pagan neighbors and relatives were simply too mortified and paralyzed by the situation to perform that most important Roman rite, the burial of the dead. Cyprian stirred up the church in Carthage to rise to the challenge and accept this task:

> Then afterward, he subjoined that there was nothing wonderful in our cherishing our own people only with the needed attentions of love, but that he might become perfect who would do something more than the publican or the heathen, who, overcoming evil with good, and practicing clemency, loved even his enemies, who would pray for the salvation of those that persecute him, as the Lord admonishes and exhorts…Thus what is good was done in the liberality of overflowing works to all men, not to those only who are of the household of faith.[130]

Ironically, at Carthage, “banishment followed these actions so good and so benevolent.”[131] Be that as it may, church historians have also noted that at these two critical

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[127] Cyprian, *Epistles of Cyprian*, 470. (*De Mort.,* treatise VII.8)

[128] Cyprian, *Epistles of Cyprian*, 472. (*De Mort.,* treatise VII.14)

[129] Cyprian, *The Life and Passion of Cyprian*, 270. *(Vit. Cypr.* 10) A similar situation occurred in Alexandria, recorded by Dionysius the bishop (later pope). "At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treating unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape." Quoted in Society of Saint Piux X, “The Church and the Plague - The Early Centuries (Part Two of Four),” *District of the USA*, 30 March 2020, https://sspx.org/en/news-events/news/church-and-plague-early-centuries-part-two-four-56751.

[130] Cyprian, *Life of Cyprian*, 270–71. (*Vit. Cypr.* 9-10)

[131] Cyprian, *Life of Cyprian*, 271. (*Vit. Cypr.* 10)

points—the times of the plagues described above—there was an increase in the number of those professing to be Christian.[132] Another blessing for the Church that came out of the plague is that, in Cyprian's *De Mortalitate*, we also have the beginning of a unique genre of Christian literature that would flourish in subsequent centuries, the *consolatio* – a stylized correspondence of compassion.[133]

Some Concluding Thoughts

The title of this essay, drawn from Tertullian, is appropriate for the period covered. Jesus had promised that all people would know who his disciples were by their love. Love, of course, was to encompass the whole of a believer's life of either testament. Obedience to the Sinaitic law code was designed by God to be given as a grateful response for the Lord's unmerited goodness to this little nation that he had chosen as his own. The festivals of the old covenant emphasized the value and equality of each member of society in God's eyes, and the Lord faithfully provided for all through the exercise of compassion. This was the design.

Yet we know, as theologians, that no child of Adam has ever lived a life perfectly motivated by the gospel. For this reason, God sent his Son, the Second Adam, into the world. Much of his ministry was a ministry of compassion—binding up the brokenhearted, comforting those in Zion who mourned, announcing the day of the Lord's favor, as Isaiah had foretold. It was also part of our Savior's ministry to explain the law spiritually and teach the people that actions pleasing to God are only those that flow from gratitude and faith.

The early Christian Church blossomed in the power of the Spirit, which poured out at Pentecost. Their trademark, so visibly to everyone, was their deep concern and love for one another. Their sincere love didn't need to be asked, didn't need to analyze and develop a plan; it just *did.* [134] Far into the second century AD, we still hear testimony noting this trademark love and compassion—not only from Christians defending their faith to the Roman powers but also from the lips of the pagans.

Yet if we look for something such as an organized ministry of compassion in those first centuries, we are somewhat hard-pressed to find it. This wasn't due to a lack of vision, strategic planning, or zeal to reach the lost. Rather, we need to remember that, especially in the early

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[132] Society of Saint Piux X, "The Church and the Plague - The Early Centuries (Part Two of Four)." To label it as "an explosion" may be a bit of rhetorical flourish. But what can account for the actions of the Christians, apart from genuine Christian love and concern? Was caring for the contagious sick a death-wish for martyrdom? The atmosphere, especially in North Africa, was filled with thoughts of prizing, even of seeking, martrydom. Was it the decree of Caracalla (i.e. the Decree of Antoninus) that made *everyone* a citizen of the Roman empire? Was there a new spirit of solidarity on that basis that hadn't before been experienced?

[133] J. H. D. Scourfield, "The *De Mortalitate* of Cyprian: Consolation and Context," *Vigiliae Christ.* 50.1 (1996): 12–41.

[134] Bird, "A Comparative Study of The Work of Charity in Christianity and Judaism," 166. "For primitive Christians charity first and foremost referred to heroic norms of self-sacrifice supplemented by other standards of mutual assistance. Ascetic values influenced Christian's ideas of charity which in time became associated with monasticism, vows of poverty, and philanthropic giving to support religious institutions."

decades, there was a vibrant eschatological hope that Jesus was returning soon. And the sooner, the better, in the minds of most members of this small, persecuted sect called Christians.

Gradually, though, it became clear to many leaders that Jesus has his own timetable and may not be returning anytime soon. So, the church carved out a place in the Mediterranean world and gradually began to organize more. There was also, at that time, a notable shift in thinking about *wealth*; instead of being despised and avoided, wealth might be harnessed for the benefit of the church, especially concerning charitable endeavors. So argued Clement of Alexandria.[135]

Then, by the time of the late 200s, organizational documents such as the *Constitutions of the Apostles*[136] appeared, and there we find at last official channels for compassion ministry.[137] Even though the congregation's ministry centered, by and large, on the person of the bishop, who was responsible for collecting and administering charitable funds as part of his office, deacons played an increasingly prominent role as the bishop's trusted assistants in the distribution of funds to those in need.[138]

Looking back across the centuries, can we crystallize some takeaways from this early period concerning compassion ministry? Certainly. For one, the silence of the historical record perhaps speaks most loudly. So many deeds of compassion and heartfelt expressions of love simply went unrecorded as Christians lived out their lives of faith. The same still occurs in our

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[135] Clement of Alexandria, *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?*, 5th ed., vol. 02 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF)*, ed. Philip Schaff (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1990). "And how much more beneficial the opposite case, for a man, through possessing a competency, both not himself to be in straits about money, and also to give assistance to those to whom it is requisite so to do! For if no one had anything, what room would be left among men for giving? And how can this dogma fail to be found plainly opposed to and conflicting with many other excellent teachings of the Lord? "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, that when ye fail, they may receive you into the everlasting habitations." (*Quod dives salvetur,* XIII.) Shirley Jackson Case notes "in the course of three centuries, the original indifference of Christians toward worldly goods had been completely supplanted by a determination on the part of the church to bring the material resources of the world into the service of religion. In *The Social Triumph of the Ancient Church,* quoted by Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church*, 1. paperback ed., The Rauschenbusch Lectures N.S., 1 (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper & Row, 1990), 19.

[136] The *Consitutions* books 1-6 were based on an older document, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*—an Eastern document and probably Jewish Christian in origin (200-250 AD).

[137] Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* VI.43. Eusebius, in a passing comment, notes that the congregation in Rome took care of 1500 widows daily. Uhlhorn (159) attempts to assess the financial commitment to Rome's ministry.

[138] Sadly, though, the same problems that derailed Jewish almsgiving in the intertestamental period surfaced in the early Church. We read, for instance, how the official ministry of compassion towards widows—which began so well in places such as Rome—also devolved into a "tit-for-tat" spiritual arrangement. Widows were frequently appointed as intercessors for a congregation since there was a prevailing belief that God held the widows particularly close to his heart and thus was more open to hearing their prayers. Bishops would receive funds for the widows from certain congregational members and, summoning a particular widow privately from his prayer-army, the bishop would administer the funds and direct the widow to specifically pray for this individual who had contributed the funds. Yet we read in the *Apostolic Constitutions* that eventually strict guidelines needed to be established concerning secrecy, for some widows were pestering others into revealing the name of their benefactor. Sometimes jealousy arose among the widows over perceived inequalities in fund distributions. At other times, widows who obtained the names of donors by pressuring other widows would, in turn, circumvent the bishop's administration and go out to such donors and solicit funds from them directly. Thus, a beautiful ministry of compassion, centered in the bishop, sometimes became a source of conflict. And it is equally disturbing to thing of donors bringing gifts almost superstitiously in the hope that a well-respected widow would take their particular concerns to the Father's throne and be heard.

fellowship, where a modern Barnabus, Tabitha, or Cornelius generously help others—congregational members or not—in compassionate love and the secrecy of humble faith.[139] Sometimes we, as pastors, hear about these deeds of love; many times, we do not. A good reminder for us to preach the gospel clearly and let the Spirit do his job as he leads God's people to live in love in their daily walk. Not everything needs to be officially organized.

Another thing this period teaches us is that crises provide opportunities for showing compassion. The plagues of the second and third centuries and the response they produced in both Christians and non-believers are instructive for us. God used them to produce more interest in what Christ has to offer through his gospel and the visible gatherings of believers. As the birth pains have already begun and their intensity is ratcheting up as we quickly move toward the End, such opportunities for the church of God will only increase. In Spirit-strengthened faith, may we be prepared to seize them.

But perhaps our biggest takeaway is this: believers rejoice in helping our fellow believers most of all. These are the brothers and sisters our Lord has given to us as companions for the journey home. As in the early Church, may our modern churches be a place of refuge where brothers and sisters in Christ can find help in times of need—prayers, support, a kind word, a thoughtful card, a meal, and money. If charity begins at home, so does compassion. What a wonderful thing it would be if the people of our world (which is increasingly as pagan as the Roman Empire) would look at what is happening between believers in the churches of God and come to this very same conclusion, "See how they love one another!" That continues to be the most powerful witness to the world of the truth of the gospel.

In Jesus' name,
KCW

[139] As I was preparing to go overseas this summer and visit the Scandinavian churches on behalf of the CICR and One Europe Team, a fellow member of our congregation stopped by my home and gave me €500 to distribute to those small synods. Her name is known to God and me.

Excursus: What Did it Take for a Congregation to Feed a Widow Each Day in Jerusalem?

Is it possible to envision the scope of this early Christian charitable undertaking in Acts 6? How many widows might we be talking about? Further, given the parameters discussed below regarding the provisions and possible cost, what sort of expense did the early Christian community in Jerusalem incur daily as they conducted this charity program? Again, a word of caution is in place that demographic studies of the period come to widely varying conclusions concerning such things as numbers in the general population, the ratio of adults to children, the ratio of men to women, and the ratio of Christians to non-Christians in the city of Jerusalem at the time of Acts 6. To arrive at a precise number is an impossibility. For instance, we cannot even know if the Jerusalem congregation only cared for its widows or whether the "Hellenistic" and "Hebraic" widows mentioned in the text also included women who viewed themselves entirely. This scenario is quite realistic since the early Christians in Jerusalem did not initially view themselves as members of a separate religion.[140] Nor can we even assume that everyone living in Jerusalem at the time of Acts is either a Jew or a Gentile convert to Judaism. Thus, many variables prevent the derivation of a highly accurate number.[141]

Yet it is possible, I argue, to derive a realistic range for the number of widows for which the Jerusalem congregation may have cared daily. Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity* is the classic study involving the demographics of Jerusalem,[142] although Jeremias before him also suggested some numbers.[143] Keith Hopkins also has studied various aspects and implications of demography involving early Christianity (largely triggered by Stark's work and in response to it). However, he does so with an oft-repeated assertion that his study is purely "speculative and exploratory."[144]

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[140] It is interesting, for instance, how Paul as he faces trial in the Sanhedrin following his third missionary trip, states, "I *am* a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee" (Ac 23:6). It would seem on that basis that Paul did not consider himself as a member of a separate rival religion, but merely as part of a movement within Judaism that saw Christianity as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. Likewise, Paul states in just the previous verse that he lived "according to the strictest *sect* (αἵρεσις) of our religion" i.e. the Pharisees. Elsewhere the Christian movement is referred to by the same term--αἵρεσις (*haeresis)*--indicating that even the authorities were inclined to view Christianity as the equivalent of another religious party, such as the Pharisees, Saduccees, Herodians, Essenes, etc. (cf. Ac 24:5; 26:5; 28:22).

[141] Bruce W. Frier, "More Is Worse: Some Observations on the Population of the Roman Empire," in *Debating Roman Demography*, ed. Walter Scheidel (Leiden Netherlands ; Boston: Brill Academic Pub, 2000), 139. What he says about the Roman world in general also applies to Palestine: "The reason is that surviving evidence on population seems to me exceedingly fragile both in its quantity and quality, and accordingly I have little confidence in our ability to arrive at more than vague (if arguably "educated") guesses as to gross population levels and change."

[142] Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*. Stark's subsequent study, *Cities of God* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2006), excludes Jerusalem in that it begins its study following the destruction of the city by Titus in 70 AD

[143] Discussed below.

[144] Keith Hopkins, "Christian Number and Its Implications," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6, no. 2 (1998): 185–226. Comment stated on p. 184. But Hopkins goes on: "I am more interested in competing probabilities, and in their logical implications, than in established or establish able facts." (185)

It lies beyond the scope of this excursus to go into all the aspects of the demography of early Christianity. Our goal is simply to try to determine a reasonable number of inhabitants of Jerusalem between 30–40 AD and see if we can derive a plausible number of widows that may have lived in the city and what percentage of them might have been under the sort of care of the Jerusalem congregation described in Acts 6.

To begin, what is a realistic number for the population of Jerusalem during the period of the early chapters of Acts? There are considerable challenges to even attempting to arrive at a general number. However, several attempts have been made over the past few decades, all having somewhat different approaches to the problem.[145]

Jeremias states that in the days of Jesus, Jerusalem's population was roughly 25,000-30,000.[146] In 1974, Wilkinson, based on a detailed analysis of the city's water supply, thought the figure was more than 76,000.[147] In 1978, Broshi took issue with Wilkinson's methodology and argued that the number was considerably higher and derived a figure of roughly 100,000 by 66 AD[148] Broshi's methodology was based upon calculating a "density coefficient," an approach that has proven popular with other demographers.[149] Shanks sets the number in 44 AD at 80,000–90,000, following a considerable rise in population during the time of Herod the Great.[150] Most recently, Geva has taken a "minimalist" view which is, surprisingly, quite close to Jeremias' original estimate; he places the population number at 20,000, based largely on placing a premium on archaeological evidence over textual.[151] As is readily seen, there is no scholarly consensus on this issue.

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[145] For an overview of early attempts, see I. Finkelstein, "A Few Notes of Demographic Data from Recent Generations and Ethnoarchaeology," Palestine Exploration Quarterly 122 (1990) 47-52. Also, the list provided by Fouts (3) includes: tax lists; refugee lists; available roof space; analogy with present populations; and the maximum agricultural production for a given reason. (David M. Fouts, "The Demographics of Ancient Israel," *Biblical Research Bulletin: The Academic Journal of Trinity Southwest University* VII, no. 2 (2007): 1–11.

[146] Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 84. There are other numbers that both Josephus and Tacitus relate about the population of Jerusalem, but these are related to the number of pilgrims who journeyed to the city for Passover and (in Tacitus) the number of people suddenly trapped inside the city as the siege of Titus began (at Passover time). Jeremias relates the numbers on p. 78. The one number – 2,700,000 is extrapolated from the number of lambs slain at Passover (1 lamb for every 10 Jews). The other number–1,200,000–is a compilation of the numbers recorded by Josephus in *BJ* 6-7. Again, though, this included the large number of visitors to Jerusalem. Cf. also Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services*, 168.

[147] John Wilkinson, "Ancient Jerusalem: Its Water Supply and Population," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 106, no. 1 (January 1, 1974): 33–51.

[148] Magen Broshi, "Estimating the Population of Ancient Jerusalem," *The Biblical Archaeology Review* 4, no. 2 (June 1, 1978), 10. This article is the English distillation of "La population de l'ancienne Jérusalem" *Revue Biblique 82.1* (Jan 1, 1975), 5. Also, see useful overview of various methods at Fouts, "The Demographics of Ancient Israel."

[149] Fouts, "The Demographics of Ancient Israel," 3.

[150] Hershel Shanks, *Jerusalem: An Archaeological Biography*, 1st edition (New York: Random House, 1995), 123.

[151] Hillel Geva, "Jerusalem's Population in Antiquity: A Minimalist View," *Tel Aviv* 41, no. 2 (October 1, 2014): 131–60. In actuality, Jeremias and Geva agree; Jeremias had broken down the profile of Jerusalem to 20,000 within the city proper, with another 5000–10,000 living in close proximity with 30,000 for greater Jerusalem being the upper limit (Jeremias, *Jerusalem,* 84).

For the purposes of illustration (and simplicity), I will set the population of Jerusalem at 50,000 in the period of the early chapters of Acts. Naturally, we cannot assume that every one of the 50,000 is Jewish, but it is reasonable to assume that the vast majority is. Next, we need to ask what percentage of the 50,000 is associated with the apostolic congregation in Jerusalem. Here, again, scholars differ in their opinions. Stark's study sets the number at no more than 1000 Christians *empire-wide* in 40 AD[152] He (along with Conzelmann, Grant, and others) does not take the numbers seriously in Acts,[153] regarding them as a rhetorical flourish to suit the author's theme of recording the growth of the kingdom of God.[154] Keith Hopkins took issue with Stark's conclusions and ran through several scenarios showing the impact of suggesting such low numbers; in particular, concerning the implausibly low number of literate Christians, there must have been, according to Stark's calculations.[155] McKechnie, however, makes a persuasive argument for accepting the numbers recorded in Acts at face value. He refers to Suetonius's description of the "Chrestus" riots (*Claudius* 25.4). His conclusion: "The impact of the Chrestus riots implies that when Christianity first started in Judea, it probably attracted support more on the 10,000-adherent scale than the 1000-adherent scale."[156]

Again, suppose we take a middling position for the number of Christians in Jerusalem around 40 AD, say 5,000.[157] This would account for the reality of the number of converts at Pentecost (Ac 2:41) and the references in Acts 2:47 and 5:14 (those references before Acts 6), as well as allow for some initial growth. If we follow Hopkins' lead, we can assume that of these 5000, roughly 30% are women.[158] In our speculative scenario, 1500 of these Christians in Jerusalem are women. What percentage of these, in turn, might be widows?[159] One third? One-

[152] Though by this point, the majority of those must be located in Jerusalem as well.

[153] Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 5.

[154] Ac 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 16:5; 19:20.

[155] Hopkins, "Christian Number and Its Implications," 208-209.

[156] Paul McKechnie, *First Christian Centuries Perspectives on the Early Church* (Generic, 2001). See his analysis of both Stark and Hopkins, p. 55-58. Also, "Christianity was more popular in its earliest decades than academic studies in recent times have wanted to allow. The balance of evidence for its first-century rate of growth tends to point in the same direction as Acts, the biblical text most often suspected of exaggerating the size and importance of the apostles' following." (64)

[157] Hopkins, who sees the numbers in Acts as inflated, calculates that only 1 in 30 Jews (3.3%) converted to Christianity before 175 AD In our theoretical scenario, that would mean that only 1650 people were Jewish Christians at this time. (Hopkins, "Christian Number and Its Implications," 216)

[158] Hopkins, "Christian Number and Its Implications," 204. He writes, "According to modern historical demographers, ancient populations were usually made up, roughly speaking, of 30% males, 30% females, and 40% children of both sexes under age seventeen. Mortality was particularly high among infants and children under five, but by modern standards continued to be very high in adult populations. For example, roughly speaking, half of those surviving to the age of fifteen, died by the age of fifty. Sickness and death, and presumably the fear of death, were pervasive. Hence, crudely speaking, the significance and appeal of immortality.

"These basic figures are fundamental for understanding the structure and growth of early Christian communities and house cult-groups. So, for example, if by 100 [AD], there were one hundred Christian communities, then the average community consisted of seventy people (7000/100 = 70) with perhaps twenty adult males, twenty adult females (or twenty families), and thirty children."

[159] For the illustration, I assume that the charitable efforts of Acts 6 primarily targeted widows only associated with the Jerusalem congregation, and not the general populace of Jerusalem.

half? Satlow, in his study on Jewish marriage practices in Late Antiquity, offers this observation, which may be helpful:

Assuming a male life expectancy at birth of thirty years, nearly 20 percent of men who reached the age of thirty would not live to see their fortieth birthday. Similarly, of women who lived to the age of fifteen, we expect that about 15 percent will die before their twenty-fifth birthday. Put more starkly, more than 40 percent of women alive at age twenty would die by their forty-fifth birthday, with men doing slightly better. Assuming some, but not complete, overlap, anyone who married around the age of twenty would have expected to have been widowed within the next twenty-five years.[160]

If we utilize these numbers, we can parse out our theoretical scenario as follows:

- 1500 women in Jerusalem are Christian around 40 AD
- Of these, 15% die before their 25th birthday, leaving 1275 women who, in all likelihood, were not widows yet.
- 40% of these remaining women would die by their 45th birthday, leaving 510 women who are 45 yrs. and older.
- Those living past 45 could expect to be a widow.
- Life expectancy for women in first century Judea was????

As stated above, I tried to follow Hopkins' model to produce a picture of how many widows could have been involved in the Acts 6 scenario in Jerusalem. However, as one can readily see, the information available for determining such a figure is sorely lacking. Ze'ev simply says:

It is impossible to determine how many people live in the Land of Israel during the Mishnah and Talmud periods. We do not know how many people lived there before then, and we also do not know the 'population threshold' of the Land of Israel or how it can be determined. There have been a number of estimates regarding population numbers in the Land of Israel, but none is based on a date that has been sufficiently examined.[161]

Several important pieces of information are missing and need to be in place to draw any remotely accurate picture. For instance, the above numbers do not–cannot–account for any remarriage rate, which probably was higher for Jewish women than their Gentile counterparts in the Greco-Roman world since remarriage was encouraged both by the Old Testament as well as by the rabbis. Or was the life expectancy rate lower for those urban dwellers than for the country or small village dwellers? The research of Bagnall and Frier on census records from Roman Egypt from the mid-first century onward seems to indicate so. They concluded that in a typical Egyptian town (as opposed to a village), one could only expect to see 14 women over the age of forty-five walking down the street and that "perhaps as little as a fifth" of the Egyptian women during this period survived from their teens into their sixties.[162] Suppose the situation in Egypt is

[160] Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*, 185.
[161] Ze'ev Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* (London: Routledge, 1994), 249.

analogous to Judea. In that case, this might imply that, in our hypothetical scenario above, of the women of marriageable age (1270), only 255 would have made it into their sixties. Of course, there is no indication of the age of the Hellenistic or Hebraic widows in Acts 6. Yet it might be possible to infer from the text that the urgency to rectify the situation (i.e., they "grumbled") may indicate that the widows of the text were toward the upper end of the age spectrum for widows, that is, elderly women more in need of attentive care than were younger widows.

It was also my desire in creating this hypothetical scenario to see not only if I could get a handle on how many widows the Jerusalem congregation was caring for daily but then, by using the information from the previous section, to see if I could attach a monetary amount to the endeavor. More pointedly, I was interested in attempting to calculate what the financial impact might have been on the congregation(s) in their daily operation of such a program. Using the parameters derived above, then, if the apostles were in charge of caring for between 250 (on the low end) and 500 (on the high end) widows in "the daily distribution," it would have cost the congregation between 41 *denarii* and 83 *denarii* per day (wheat loaf meal), or one-half that amount if the daily distribution involved barley loaves. These figures are based on my earlier calculation that it would have cost roughly 1/6 *denarius* to provide daily (wheat) bread to one man (1/12 *denarius* if it were barley bread), and that (in keeping with Sperber's numbers) at this time a day's wage was one *denarius*. The bottom line is that this must have been a challenging financial endeavor for the Jerusalem Christians.[163] Yet, if the scenario above is plausible, it also would then speak to the generosity of the early Christian community and reflect the measure of their desire to provide for one another.

Another question: what did the leaders envision giving these widows daily? In reality, we cannot answer this question either with great precision. However, it is possible to make some educated speculations in this regard, drawing guidance and inference from studies on the common diet of Judea in the first century, as well as from the descriptions provided in the precepts as mentioned earlier of the Jewish *tamhui*, the daily "soup kitchen" approach to charity discussed in the Mishnah. The assumption here is that if there is a "daily distribution" in Acts 6, this amount is equivalent to "daily bread," which was commonly considered a basic daily meal. Of what might that have consisted? Hamel's seminal work on poverty in Roman Palestine provides some insights into the general diets of the various strata of society. He notes that "only a few elements were of decisive importance in everyone's real diet: cereals, legumes, olives, water, and salt."[164] Eating meat was much rarer, and people generally avoided eating

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[162] Roger S. Bagnall, Bruce W. Frier, and Ansley J. Coale, *The Demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge England; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For chart on female life expectancy, see p.71. Also, note Satlow, "Working from the contemporaneous census records in Roman Egypt, Roger Bagnall and Bruce Frier have suggested that after the age of thirty-five, the sex ratio tilts heavily and quickly toward males. Should a similar pattern apply in Palestine, then there would have been a growing population of widowers who would look for second brides among young women." (Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*, 184.)

[163] Then again, we have no idea what resources the apostles had at their disposal. Joseph Barnabus, at the end of Acts 4, sold a piece of land and donated the proceeds to the congregation…but how much was land worth? Was the land in Judea or Cyprus, his native land? In other words, for how long could the congregation in Jerusalem utilize the funds provided by Barnabus? All these are variables, and lead to questions unanswerable.

vegetables.[165] Olives, grapes, figs, and dates were the most common and important fruits.[166] The possibility does exist that the system in place in Acts very literally was a "soup kitchen"; porridges and gruels were quite common, according to later sources from the Talmud.[167] Yet bread was the most important type of food and thus considered the most basic staple in the Palestinian diet. As noted earlier, Mishnah *Pe'ah*, in its directives for daily gifts to the poor, expresses such charity in terms of bread, the most basic sustenance for those in need:

> A poor man who wanders from place to place must not be given less than a loaf worth a *dupondium* when four *seahs* cost a *sela*; (*Pe'ah* 8.7)

The ideal bread in the Palestinian world was wheat bread, the tastiest and superior to all other grains for bread production. However, Sperber, in his lengthy study on the cost of living in Roman Palestine, concludes that the wheat harvested in Palestine was inferior to that of Egypt and further reckons that the price of wheat in Egypt was roughly half of what it was in Palestine.[168] Cost factors, then, prohibited the common resident of Jerusalem from enjoying a regular diet of bread made from wheat flour. It is much more likely that the common–and certainly the poor–residents of Jerusalem ate more bread made from barley than from wheat, inferior though it was.[169] In all likelihood, the scene in Acts 6 depicts poor people (widows) receiving a simple, basic meal from the hands of Jewish Christians who were, for the most part, also people of limited means.[170] The directions for the *tamhui* (cited above) indicate that the amount of bread (assumedly for a man; widows may have eaten less) that comprised "daily bread" was "a loaf worth a *dupondium*." Determining monetary equivalents across cultures and centuries is a formidable challenge. Still, if Sperber's calculations are accurate, in the I-II

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[164] Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries AD*, 9. The entire first chapter, entitled "Daily Bread" encompasses the gamut of the Palestinian diet.

[165] Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries AD*, 9.

[166] Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries AD*, 9.

[167] Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries AD*,12.

[168] Daniel Sperber, "Costs of Living in Roman Palestine II," 190. Sperber also note (ibid.) that in Rome the price of Egyptian wheat was twice as high as in Palestine, i.e. four times as high as in Egypt. Moreover, the close proximity of Egypt to Palestine allowed Palestinian importers to bring wheat into Palestine quite reasonably, and then undercut the native Jewish wheat market by quite a bit. Thus, as early as the 2nd century B.AD, one of the Jewish rabbis, Joshua ben Perachia, apparently tried to have all Alexandrian wheat declared impure in an effort to force Jews to buy locally grown wheat. "Alexandrian traders could still undercut the Palestinian prices by 30% and be left with a clear profit of almost 30%" (191-92). All these factors, though, tended to put access to wheat on a regular (daily) basis out of reach for the common Jewish family.

[169] Hamel explains that barley had a much lower gluten content than wheat, and thus did not bond into a loaf as well. Further, eating this "black bread" denoted low social status. (Hamel, "Poverty and Charity," 317.) Barley also cost half as much as wheat, according to Sperber (Daniel Sperber, "Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I," 257.)

[170] "Concerning the reality of food consumption in general in Roman Palestine, one may adopt what R. J. Forbes says of classical antiquity: 'roughly speaking, classical diet consisted mainly of bread and porridge made from wheat or barley supplemented by vegetables, fish and spices and not much else. One should add legumes and olive oil as major elements, whereas the 'not much else' should include the main fruits when in season. Curiously enough, although bread clearly was the essential food, especially barley bread, it is not always mentioned in texts speaking of a desirable meal. The same was true of legumes. The reason for these omissions ust simply be that bread was taken for granted. People's desires normally did not concern bread itself but its whiteness, sweetness, puffiness, and so on." (Hamel, *Poverty and Charity in Roman Palestine First Three Centuries AD*, 22-23.)

centuries AD, one loaf of bread cost one *pondion* (1/12 *denarius*).[171] The average loaf was about 1/18 *seah* (6 *kabs*), with one *seah* equivalent to 1 denarius and one sela (= four seahs) equivalent to one *denarius*.[172] *Pe'ah* 8.7, then, indicates the amount of bread that is to be provided under the stated *market* conditions. Blackmon simplifies by stating, "in practice, the quantity of the loaf works out to about a third of a *kab*.[173] This is consistent with Sperber's calculations. Mishnah *Pe'ah*, in its directives for Jewish charity, considers this to be the *minimum* amount for providing "daily bread": one loaf = 1 *dupondium* = 2 *pondion* = 2 x 1/12 d. = 1/6 d. for two loaves of 1/18 *seah* each, each loaf being between 10–14 oz.[174]

In other words, Mishnah *Pe'ah* considers "daily bread" for charity to be (presumably for a man) a minimum of two loaves of wheat bread of approximately 10-14 oz and costing roughly 1/6 of a *denarius* at a time when the common rate for a vineyard worker was one *denarius*/day.[175] Then, if we extrapolate this out and consider (as noted above) that the cost of barley was roughly half of wheat in the 1st cent. Roman Palestine, the cost for providing a comparable meal with two loaves of barley bread at the center drops to 1/12 *denarius*.

It is interesting to speculate how this might compare with a *per diem* for someone earning minimum wage. Given an eight hr. work day at a minimum wage of $9.25/hr., a minimum wage worker in the US earns $74 per day.[176] So one *denarius* would be equivalent to $74. If 1/6 goes for "daily bread," that would mean $12/day for food. If we use the barley figure (1/12 d.), a minimum wage worker in the US would spend $6 on daily food. Perhaps a 1st-century widow ate only half (?) of the nourishment required for a man (as envisioned by the rabbis), leaving us with a figure of $3-$5??

Again, it must be emphasized that these calculations are approximate and based entirely on relative price calculations across several monetary systems operating in Palestine in the first-century world. That said, though, my purpose is to discover what plausibly could have been considered to be "daily bread," adhering to the guidelines for Jewish charitable practices that may have been in place during the same time frame (though not formally codified until later). This calculation allows us to speculate what the "daily distribution" of food in Jerusalem may have consisted of.[177]

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[171] Daniel Sperber, "Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I," 260.

[172] Sperber, "Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I," 259. For a short survey of the entire currency system as it gradually gave way in Palestine to Roman standards, see Daniel Sperber, "Palestinian Currency Systems during the Second Commonwealth," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 56, no. 4 (1966): 273–301.

[173] Blackman, *Mishnayoth*, 130.

[174] Sperber, "Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I," 261, footnote 3.

[175] Sperber, "Costs of Living in Roman Palestine I," 261. Sperber's table of wages is on 251-52.

[176] Currently, the national minimum wage for federal employees is $7.25/hr. (www.dol.gov). Since the pandemic and subsequent labor shortage, minimum wage prices vary from place to place, of course.

[177] One Bible scholar has used Walter Scheidel and Elijah Meek's interactive geospatial network of the Roman world (orbis.stanford.edu) to calculate the cost of Paul's missionary trips recorded in Acts ("Calculating the Time and Cost of Paul's Missionary Journeys, at: https://www.openbible.info/blog/2012/07/calculating-the-time-and-cost-of-pauls-missionary-journeys/). This is a very interesting exercise that essentially takes Sperber's work into the digital age, via Scheidel and Meeks. The drawback is that it only calculates the basic cost of travel, without taking into consideration anything such as a *per diem* for food.

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