# Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 10b

Antoninus and Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch
**Date:** 6th CE
**Place:** Babylonia
**Language:** Hebrew and Aramaic

**Category:** Jewish

**Literary genre:** Talmud

**Title of work:** Babylonian Talmud
**Reference:** Avodah Zarah 10b
**Commentary:**
This passage from the Babylonian Talmud is part of a long *sugya* (Talmudic unit) which focuses on the special relationship between Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch and Antoninus. Scholars have extensively discussed the identity of the emperor in these narratives as well as the status of Rabbi and the Patriarchate; for further details on these issues, see the commentary of Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Shirah (Be-Shala?), parashah 6. The relationship between these two leaders, as presented in these conversions, are a popular theme in rabbinic literature from Palestine, the Babylonian Talmud, and later rabbinic texts (for a list of references to such traditions, see Wallach, "The Colloquy," p. 263-264). However, by portraying this Roman emperor serving a Jewish leader, this narrative in the Babylonian Talmud takes this exchange further than any of the texts that were composed in the Land of Israel.

Section A depicts Antoninus regularly serving Rabbi, as exemplified by this emperor bending down so Rabbi could more easily climb onto his bed (in some manuscripts, Antoninus is also described feeding him). This practice is also mentioned in Bavli Qiddushin 31b to demonstrate the extent to which one rabbi went to honor his mother. Yet, in our passage, even Rabbi comments that this practice is a disgrace to the emperor and his kingdom. In response, Antoninus proclaims: "May I be your mattress in the world to come!" Or literally: "Who will place me as a mattress beneath you in the world to come?" According to Ofra Meir, Antoninus accepted Rabbi's objection (*Rabbi*, p. 286-287); however, this is not articulated explicitly. By contrast, no such tradition appears in Palestinian rabbinic texts where, at least in one teaching (Genesis Rabbah 75:5), Rabbi opens a letter to the emperor as follows: "From Yehudah your servant (or slave) to our master (*maran*), the king Antoninus" Thus, the normative hierarchy between the Roman emperor and this Jewish leader is upheld in Palestinian sources.

Following the words of Antoninus in Section A, the Talmud considers in whether Antoninus will enter the world to come, namely participating in the hereafter (in Section B). This concern recalls the exchange in Jerusalem Talmud Megillah 1:10, 72b where this emperor inquires whether Rabbi will permit him to partake of the Leviathan in the world to come. In our passage, Antoninus cites biblical verses from which he learns that the offspring of Esau and the kings of Edom will not participate in the hereafter. In rabbinic texts, the names Esau and Edom often refer to the Roman Empire (including its later Christian phase) and sometimes to Christianity itself (see Bakhos, "Figuring [out] Esau"). Rabbi provides a reading of the same verse to prove that Antoninus – in contrast to most Romans, citizens and emperors alike – will not be excluded. It is hardly surprising to find a Roman emperor and a Jewish sage puzzling to discern the meaning of biblical verses, for this is a prevalent feature of rabbinic literature. In Section C, the Talmud continues by citing a tannaitic teaching which seems to reflect Rabbi's understanding of this verse and explicitly states that this verse has come to exclude "Antoninus the son of Severus." However, although the Talmud presents this passage (in Section C) as a *barayta* (tannaitic tradition), it has no known parallel in rabbinic texts from the land of Israel. Moreover, while this Roman emperor is referred to as "Antoninus" in Palestinian rabbinic texts, only in the Babylonian Talmud do we find "Antoninus the son of Severus," which further suggests the Babylonian origin of this purported *barayta*.

It is not surprising that the description of a Roman emperor attending to a Jewish sage in this way was composed outside the borders of the Roman Empire. Rabbinic texts which originated in Palestine regularly portray Antoninus posing political, theological, and philosophical questions to Rabbi and showing esteem for Judaism, but without compromising his position of leadership and authority. The Babylonian Talmud, however, was not committed to that standard in this depiction the Roman emperor.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- Antoninus
- Edom
- emperor
- Esau
- Jewish wisdom
- king
- Rabbi Yehuda the patriarch
- service
- Severus
- slave
- world to come

**Bibliographical references:** Bakhos, Carol, "Figuring (out) Esau: The Rabbis and their Others", JJS 58 (2007)
 Meir, Ofra, *Rabbi Judah the Patriarch: Palestinian and Babylonian Portrait of a Leader* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999)
 Wallach, Luitpold, "The Colloquy of Marcus Aurelius with the Patriarch Judah I", The Jewish Quarterly Review, New Series 31 (1941)
**Other sources connected with this document:** Text

# Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Shirah (Be-Shala?), parashah 6

Antoninus and Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch

- Read more about Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Shirah (Be-Shala?), parashah 6

 Text

# Jerusalem Talmud Megillah 1:10, 72b

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- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Megillah 1:10, 72b](#)

Text

# Jerusalem Talmud Megillah 3:2, 74a

Antoninus and Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch

- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Megillah 3:2, 74a](#)

Text

# Genesis Rabbah 75:5

Antoninus and Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch

- [Read more about Genesis Rabbah 75:5](#)

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