



[Jerusalem Talmud Megillah 1:10, 72b](#)

Antoninus and Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch

Date: 360 CE to 400 CE

Place: Syria Palaestina

Language: Hebrew and Aramaic

Category: Jewish

Literary genre: Talmud

Title of work: Jerusalem Talmud

Reference:

Megillah 1:10, 72b

Commentary:

This section from the Jerusalem Talmud presents the close relationship between Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch (often called Rabbi, as in this material) and Antoninus, a Roman emperor. Dialogues between these two leaders comprise a popular theme in rabbinic literature. Such narratives frequently open with a question that Antoninus poses to Rabbi (for a list of such traditions, see Wallach, “The Colloquy,” p. 263-264). Scholars have extensively debated the identity of Antoninus as well as the status of Rabbi and the patriarchate (for details about scholarship on these topics, see the commentary on Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, [Shirah \(Be-Shala?\), parashah 6](#)). Our text depicts Antoninus as being deeply fascinated by Judaism. First, as a non-Jew, he wants to offer a sacrifice to the God of Israel; however, this *sugya* (Talmudic unit) later considers whether Antoninus had actually converted to Judaism and, according to at least one rabbinic opinion, he indeed converted. Along with the other rabbinic traditions about Antoninus and Rabbi, this source has attracted significant scholarly attention.

Section A provides the context for these traditions about Rabbi and Antoninus. This passage opens with a teaching about the sacrificial offerings which could be offered on a *bamah* (one of the altars or cultic sites for worshipping the God of Israel that had been legitimate before the Jerusalem Temple was established (but were not recognized from that time onward)). This teaching then details which animals were permitted as sacrifices in that setting, and concludes by stating that non-Jews are permitted to offer sacrifices on such altars to this day. At that point, the Talmud discusses these teachings in further detail (which we skip here), eventually deliberating on the approval given to gentiles to offer sacrifices to God, even after the destruction of the Temple. In that passage (where our text continues), the Talmud cites Rabbi Abba – probably a third-generation amora who was active toward the late third- and early fourth centuries – in the name of Rav Yehudah, a second-generation amora who was active in Babylonia in the second half of the third century. Rav Yehudah emphasizes that a Jew may neither assist nor serve as a deputy for a gentile who wishes to make a sacrifice to the God of Israel. In this halakhic context (i.e. a debate on rabbinic law), the Talmud introduces a dialogue between Rabbi and Antoninus.

Section B opens with Antoninus asking Rabbi if it is permissible to build an altar; given its textual context, this would presumably be a site for offering a sacrifice for the God of Israel. Rabbi responds that Antoninus may build an altar and later, seemingly after performing a sacrifice, he should hide its stones so they would not be used for another purpose. The verb *g-n-z* typically appears in reference to sacred objects, such as Torah scrolls or the stones that constituted part of the Temple in Jerusalem, which should be concealed when they were no longer intact or needed for ritual purposes (see Mishnah Shabbat 16:1 and Tosefta Megillah 2:16). Antoninus then asks whether one may make incense (*qtoresh*) for this altar. Rabbi approves, provided that one of its essential ingredients is omitted. These questions imply that Antoninus is a gentile who wishes to offer a sacrifice to the God of Israel. Moreover, Antoninus asks Rabbi whether these actions are permissible under Jewish law; thus, he approaches this sage with a halakhic question and an understanding that he will accept his authority on these matters. The Talmud, however, challenges Rabbi’s answer with a citation from Exodus 30:37. This biblical chapter provides instructions for preparing incense (*qtoresh*) for the sanctuary, and concludes with a prohibition against making this exact mix for oneself (namely for private purposes) since it is exclusively for use before God. The Talmud quotes “You shall not make it for yourselves” (Exodus 30:37, NRSV) and derives that, whereas a Jew may not prepare such incense for use beyond its cultic context, others (here meaning non-Jews) may make it for Jews. The Talmud, therefore, questions Rabbi’s instruction that Antoninus may make it provided that the formula lacks at least one ingredient since, as a gentile, he would be acting within the parameters of this biblical imperative. Rabbi ?ananya, a fifth-



generation amora who was active in the fourth century, then resolves the problem by suggesting that Rabbi dispatched Rabbi Romenus (possibly Rominus or Rominos) to make this incense for Antoninus; therefore, Rabbi gave instructions to this Jewish sage rather than the Roman emperor. Rabbi also recruited Rabbi Romenus for a special assignment in [Jerusalem Talmud, Bikkurim 1:5, 64a](#), where he was sent to investigate a family from the South (of Judea, namely the Hebron Hills) whose lineage was in question. Whereas this passage makes clear that Antoninus is a gentile, the next section offers a different position.

Section C, which has parallels in Jerusalem Talmud Sanhedrin 10:3, 29c and [Megillah 3:2, 74a](#), opens by stating that certain evidence indicates that Antoninus converted while other evidence suggests that he did not. The Talmud then examines these matters. First, the Talmud states that Antoninus was seen with a torn or damaged shoe on the Day of Atonement. According to rabbinic law, one's regular shoes or sandals should not be worn on that day. However, our passage rejects this as an indicator of his conversion since, according to the Talmud, "God-fearers" also follow this practice. God-fearers were non-Jews who were drawn to Judaism and even observed some *mitzvot* (commandments), but who did not complete the process of conversion (on God-fearers, see Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, p. 77-81; Cohen, "The Conversion," p. 148-150; Sim, "Gentiles, God-Fearers and Proselytes," p. 14-18). The Talmud then presents another conversation between Antoninus and Rabbi. Here Antoninus asks whether Rabbi would allow him to eat from the Leviathan in the world to come. This mythical sea animal is mentioned in a several biblical verses, such as: "On that day the Lord with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea" (Isaiah 27:1, NRSV), and: "You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness" (Psalms 74:14, NRSV). In the fifth-century midrash Leviticus Rabbah, the Leviathan is eaten by the pious (13:3). Shaye J. D. Cohen explains that Antoninus's question reflects the assumption that "Rabbi has the power to determine his status, and consequently his cuisine, in the world to come" ("The Conversion," p. 150). After Rabbi agrees that Antoninus may eat from the Leviathan in the world to come, Antoninus asks why this is permitted but partaking in the paschal lamb is not. Rabbi cites a biblical passage that explicitly prohibits uncircumcised men from eating that sacrifice (see Exodus 12:43-44). In response, Antoninus circumcises himself which, for the editor of the Talmud, completes his conversion. As Section E explicitly concludes: "This [episode] indicates (lit. says) that Antoninus converted." The Talmud, however, continues by describing Antoninus, who returns to show his circumcision to Rabbi. This sage refuses to look, claiming that he never looked at his own circumcision. Although the parallel text in Sanhedrin 10:3, 29c then immediately concludes that Antoninus had indeed converted, our *sugya* inserts another tradition, which emphasizes the holiness of Rabbi (for an explanation of this tradition, see the commentary on its parallel in Jerusalem Talmud, Avodah Zarah 3:1, 42b-c).

On the basis of this narrative, Section E initially concludes that Antoninus converted. However, there are two ways to read the next lines: If the word "*lo*" (no in Hebrew) is original here, the Talmud now presents a rabbinic opinion which states that Antoninus did not convert ("The words of our sages are: 'Antoninus did not convert'"), then the subsequent teaching should also be read as a reinforcing view that Antoninus did not convert. This teaching is attributed to Rabbi ?izqiya – probably referring to a fourth-generation amora who was active in the first half of the fourth century – and Rabbi Abbahu – a third-generation amora who was active near the end of the third century – in the name of Rabbi Eleazar, a second-generation amora who was active in the second half of the third century. Saul Lieberman has argued that this teaching is intended to prove that Antoninus did not convert because "No Rabbi ever questioned the right to a future life of the full proselyte" (*Greek in Jewish Palestine*, p. 78-81; followed by Cohen, "The Conversion" p. 143, 155). Thus, according to Lieberman's reading, if it is possible to convert in the world to come, "Antoninus will come at the head of them" (*Greek in Jewish Palestine*, p. 80). Thus, the emperor did not convert in this world.

However, prior to Lieberman, most commentators argued that this teaching demonstrates that Antoninus had converted. Here the word "*lo*" (no) is omitted: "The words of our sages (*rabanan*) are: 'Antoninus did (not) convert.'" They claim that the Talmud further supports this conclusion by quoting the statement attributed to Rabbi ?izqiya and Rabbi Abbahu in the name of Rabbi Eleazar. According to this reading, if converts participate in the world to come, Antoninus will be "at their head," for he is considered the exemplary proselyte. From this perspective, Antoninus was not only a gentile who wished to offer a sacrifice to the God of Israel (as suggested in Section B), nor a God-fearer (as suggested in Section C), but a convert (see Cohen, "The Conversion," p. 168-171, on the development of the rabbinic traditions on the conversion of Antoninus). Richard Alan Freund suggests that "this myth of Antoninus' conversion or semi-conversion was created as a counter-balance to the Christian emperor's fourth century conversion to Christianity" ("Alexander Macedon and Antoninus," p. 62). While it remains unclear whether the conclusion of this *sugya* signals that Antoninus converted to Judaism, this text unambiguously portrays his interest in Judaism and his request for instructions from Rabbi Yehudah the Patriarch, his master on matters of religion. This Roman emperor is thus depicted seeking counsel from this Jewish leader,



whom he esteems. This description inverts the authority and power dynamics between these two figures, reflecting a desire for Roman recognition of Jewish superiority.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [altar](#)
- [Antoninus](#)
- [Atonement Day](#)
- [circumcision](#)
- [conversion](#)
- [convert](#)
- [emperor](#)
- [Gentiles](#)
- [god-fearer](#)
- [incense](#)
- [Leviathan](#)



- [Paschal lamb](#)
- [Rabbi Abba](#)
- [Rabbi Abbahu](#)
- [Rabbi Eleazar](#)
- [Rabbi Hananya](#)
- [Rabbi Hizqia](#)
- [Rabbi Romenus](#)
- [Rabbi Yehuda the patriarch](#)
- [Rav Yehudah](#)
- [sacrifice](#)
- [shoe](#)
- [stone](#)
- [superiority of Judaism](#)
- [world to come](#)

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[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 Bikkurim 1:4, 64a](#)

Can a convert recite the declaration for first fruits and the liturgical phrase “O God of our fathers” – are converts full members of the Israelite community?

- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Bikkurim 1:4, 64a](#)

Text

[Jerusalem Talmud Megillah 3:2, 74a](#)

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

Text

[Genesis Rabbah 75:5](#)

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Text

[Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 10b](#)

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