



[Genesis Rabbah 33:1](#)

Divine justice: attempts to explain how God allows evil social and legal systems to flourish, even as they favor material assets over human life

Date: 5th CE

Place: Syria Palaestina

Language: Hebrew and Aramaic

Category: Jewish

Literary genre: Midrash

Title of work: Genesis Rabbah

Reference: 33:1

Commentary:

These passages from Genesis Rabbah (a fifth-century midrashic collection) are placed in the context of expositions on the story of Noah, where a verse from Psalms is cited: “Your justice (or, “charity”; *tzedakah*) is like the mountains of God, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord” (36:7, this translation is partially based on NRSV). This source includes two narratives that reveal unjust social and legal systems: one refers to Rome, and the other to Alexander Macedon. I would suggest that this story of Alexander (D) alludes to Rome. I do not intend to cast doubt on previous studies that view this tale of Alexander's visit to the kingdom of Qatzyya (the edge of the world) as an expression of rabbinic opposition to Hellenism but, rather, I am offering an additional dimension, where Alexander represents Rome. My reading is based in part on the thematic placement of this narrative in this amoraic midrash. This section of Genesis Rabbah (A to D) focuses on the subject of theodicy, seeking to explain how unjust legal and social systems continue to exist, and even flourish, without divine redress. Sections A and B present two famous sages' explanations for Psalms 36:7, which contrast God's capacities to bestow charity and to exact retribution. These sages are both third-generation tannaim who were active in the second century CE: Rabbi Ishmael was especially active in the decades before and immediately after the Bar Kokhba revolt, and Rabbi Akiva was active until the Bar Kokhba revolt. Rabbi Ishmael claims that God's charity is reserved for those who accept the Torah because Psalm 36:7 mentions “the mountains of God,” which refers to Sinai, whereas the wicked, who did not accept the Torah, are strictly judged. But Rabbi Akiva posits that God deals strictly with the pious and the wicked alike. The righteous are disciplined severely in this world for their few minor transgressions, so that they will be generously rewarded in the world to come. By contrast, the wicked are rewarded for their few insignificant *mitzvot* (“religious commands” or “good deeds”), to assure that they will be firmly punished in the world to come. Rabbi Akiva's teaching better addresses a reality wherein the wicked flourish and the righteous suffer, while affirming that God operates a just system of reward and punishment. This midrash includes additional teachings on this topic but, moving directly to the two traditions that are most relevant to our project, I do not present them here.

The narrative in Section C (which also appears in Leviticus Rabbah 27:1) describes a prominent sage's visit to Rome. In our text, that sojourner is Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, a first-generation amora who was active in the first half of the third century. In Leviticus Rabbah, the traveler is Rabbi Yehoshua, a second-generation tanna who was active in the late first century; several traditions portray this earlier Rabbi Yehoshua visiting Rome (for example, [Tosefta Horayot 2:5-6](#) and [Sifre Deuteronomy 43](#)). In our narrative, while in Rome, this sage (whether Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi or Rabbi Yehoshua) observes the special treatment given to columns – they were covered with carpets to protect them from extreme weather – whereas a poor man is wrapped in a mat. These images illustrate how the Romans devalued human well-being while cherishing architectural structures. A related critique appears in the Jerusalem Talmud with regard to certain families of rabbis who donated edifices in Palestine, following Roman energetic practices, rather than support indigent students of Torah (see Wilfand, *Poverty*, p. 264-266). However, our story (C) is set in Rome, emphasizing that city's misguided priorities: columns are considered more precious than indigent persons. When he sees how these structures are treated, the sage proclaims: “Your charity is like the mountains of God” (Psalms 36:7) and, upon observing the poor, he recites: “Your judgments are like the great deep” (Psalms 36:7, cont.). It has been suggested that, according to this midrash, the poor man is being justly punished for his sins (Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates*, p. 130-131). However, in the context of Rabbi Akiva's explanation of the verse (B), that reading is but one possibility. Taken as a whole, this narrative seems to criticize Roman values more than it highlights the transgressions of this poor man.



It is in this context that Genesis Rabbah situates the story of Alexander Macedon's visit to the realm of Qatzyya, the kingdom at the edge of the world (D). This placement supports my suggestion that, like the previous tradition, this one also criticizes Rome, shifting our attention from social norms to legal systems. While tales about Alexander Macedon's adventures as an explorer of remote cultures – based on accounts by scholars and generals who accompanied his armies – were recounted in the courts of later Hellenistic kings and during the Roman period (on Alexander as an explorer, see Spencer, *The Roman Alexander*, p. 67, 160-161). This midrash uses such a narrative to criticize Rome by placing it immediately after a teaching that denounces Roman principles (C). In both traditions, material assets are valued above human life. This reading may be further supported by passages elsewhere in Genesis Rabbah which depict Rome and its legal system as robbing and killing the innocent. For example, Rome is described as a thief in 44:15 (Theodor-Albeck, edition, p. 437); we read: "...This evil kingdom robs and extorts yet (lit. and) she looks as if she were holding court (*bimah*; lit. she arranges a platform that was erected for the judge's tribunal) in 65:1 (Theodor-Albeck, edition, p. 713); see also, 63:8 (Theodor-Albeck, edition, p. 688). Given these perspectives on Roman rule and, especially, its legal system, it is not surprising that this midrashic collection focuses on Rome in its treatment of theodicy.

This story of Alexander, albeit with a few noteworthy differences, also appears in [Jerusalem Talmud Baba Metzi'a 2:4, 8c](#), in the context of restoring lost property to gentiles. That *sugya* (talmudic unit) contrasts Jewish sages who are detached from a desire for material wealth, and the legal system in which Alexander operates, one that is founded on avarice and bloodshed (for a synoptic presentation of these two versions of this story, plus its variant in Leviticus Rabbah 27:1, see Catherine Hezser, *Form*, p. 66-69; and p. 70-72 for a discussion of their differences). Although Genesis Rabbah was edited later than the Jerusalem Talmud, it has been suggested that this midrash's version of this narrative (D) is the original – thus earlier – rendering, especially since the Talmud's "version is longer and more complete" (Catherine Hezser, *Form*, p. 72; see also, Wallach, "Alexander the Great," p. 65). I would posit that the Talmud does not transmit a later version. Rather, the differences between this pair of accounts may be explained in light of the central motif of each text: theodicy in the midrash and attitudes toward mammon in the Jerusalem Talmud. Therefore, in the interests of his thematic priorities, the editor of the midrash may have inserted and discarded select elements that appear in the longer talmudic version. Those omissions include: the banquet of golden food that was served to Alexander, and the king's questions – "Do you love gold that much?" and "[If] you do not eat gold, why do you love gold so much?" – which emphasize the opposing views of material wealth held by the sages and Alexander. In contrast, this passage from Genesis Rabbah focuses on the role of divine justice in a world where evil appears to govern without facing retribution. As in the Talmud, it seems that, although this story's protagonists are ostensibly Alexander and the king of Qatzyya, its underlying message is a reproach of Rome and its social and legal norms. This midrash, therefore, seeks to reveal the presence of divine justice despite a legal system that is dedicated to enriching the king or the kingdom at the expense of human life.

In comparison to the Talmud, this midrash focuses more on the kingdom of Qatzyya than its ruler, highlighting its location behind "the Dark Mountains of darkness" (for another depiction of Alexander as an explorer of distant lands, see the commentary on [Jerusalem Talmud Baba Metzi'a 2:4, 8c](#)). When its inhabitants welcome Alexander with gifts of gold, he responds by asking: "Do I need your riches (mammon)?" This answer implies that Alexander's possessions are so abundant that he has no need for additional treasure. Instead, he states that an interest in their legal system has prompted his journey. Alexander, therefore, presents himself as a philosopher-king and explorer who is driven by intellectual curiosity alone. However, the story exposes his true character (Fraenkel, *Studies*, 147; Ben Shalom, *Hassidut*, p. 145; cf. Kosman, "A Fresh Look," p. 86).

While Alexander converses with the people (or, according to another manuscript, with the king), two individuals approach with a legal dispute: one of them had purchased a dilapidated building from his fellow and, upon digging into it, found a previously concealed treasure. Both the buyer and the seller claim that the treasure does not belong to him. Their mutual refusal is at the heart of this conflict. The king resolves the problem by proposing a marriage between the children of the buyer and the seller, who would then share the treasure. This solution enables them to become one family, hence creating new life. At this point, the king notices Alexander sitting nearby and seeks his view of this judgment. Alexander states that the king did not rule well. The king then asks how he would address such a case in his country. Alexander then replies that the seller and buyer would both be killed and their mammon would go to the government (for Roman law on the fate of such a cache, see the commentary on [Jerusalem Talmud Baba Metzi'a 2:4, 8c](#)). In contrast to the talmudic version, where the treasure would be confiscated by the kingdom, in the midrash, it seems that their property would be appropriated in its entirety, thus ruining their families' standing as well. In response, the king asks Alexander whether there are sun, rain, and small livestock in his country. When he affirms that all three are, the king uses Psalms 36:7 to explain that sun and rain exist in such a kingdom only for the sake of its flocks. For the king, Alexander's legal system is vicious because it prioritizes material wealth over its populace; where such human behavior exists, according to divine justice, neither sun nor



rain should be bestowed. As in the talmudic parallel, this midrash seems to use the figure of Alexander to criticize the Rome's legal system or, at least, a Greco-Roman legal framework (for further support of this claim, see the commentary on [Jerusalem Talmud Baba Metzi'a 2:4, 8c](#)).

The theme of this midrash is the mechanism of divine justice. In that context, Rome's ascendancy required justification. Whereas divine punishment for human sins was severely imposed on Noah's generation, even the animals, this fifth-century midrash seeks to clarify how evil societies could be allowed to flourish and, specifically, how Rome could persistently dominate the Jews. Although, in the teaching attributed to Rabbi Akiva (B), the wicked are rewarded in this world but will be strictly punished in the world to come, in this narrative (D), the fact that a society that operates such an ethically repugnant legal system could still receive rain and sun is explained by the presence of animals, whose innocent lives also depend on them. While this pair of theological explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they represent two efforts to maintain the notion that God rules the world with justice.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Alexander the Great](#)
- [animals](#)
- [column](#)
- [divine justice](#)
- [gold](#)
- [King Qatzyya](#)
- [legal system](#)
- [mammon](#)
- [mitzvot](#)
- [Mountains of darkness](#)
- [philosopher-king](#)
- [poor](#)
- [Rabbi Akiva](#)
- [Rabbi Ishmael](#)
- [Rabbi Yehoshua](#)
- [Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi](#)
- [rain](#)
- [righteous](#)
- [Roman legal system](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [Sinai](#)
- [sun](#)
- [theodicy](#)
- [Torah](#)
- [wicked](#)
- [world to come](#)

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[Jerusalem Talmud Baba Metzi'a 2:4, 8c](#)

Alexander Macedon and his evil, greed-driven legal system



- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Baba Metzi'a 2:4, 8c](#)

Text

[Genesis Rabbah 23:1](#)

Cities named in honor of wicked rulers

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