



## Genesis Rabbah 6:3

The creation of the sun and the moon, and how these luminaries reflect the balance of power between Rome and Israel

**Date:** 5th CE

**Place:** Syria Palaestina

**Language:** Hebrew

**Category:** Jewish

**Literary genre:** Midrash

**Title of work:** Genesis Rabbah

**Reference:**

6:3

### **Commentary:**

Parashah Six in the fifth-century midrash Genesis Rabbah (and its parallel in Pesiqta de Rav Kahana 5:14) expounds on Genesis 1:14-19, which describes the creation of the luminaries: sun, moon and stars. Our passage addresses part of verse 16: "God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night" (NRSV). This midrash identifies (or associates) the great light, i.e. the sun, with Esau, who symbolizes Rome, and the smaller light, i.e. the moon, with Jacob, who symbolizes Israel. A link between Rome and Esau is already evident in tannaitic texts (see, for example, [Sifre Deuteronomy 343](#); 336; Cohen, "Esau," p. 21-27; Herr, *Roman Rule*, p. 117-118). In amoraic texts, we find many more instances where "Esau" refers to the Roman Empire (which had adopted Christianity by this time) and, sometimes, to Christianity itself. However, see Bakhos, "Figuring (out) Esau," for the need to exercise caution when interpreting the symbolism implied by the name Esau, which may refer to Rome, and, later, Christian Rome (see also Cohen, "Esau as Symbol," p. 19-27; Berthelot, "The Paradoxical Similarities"; for a general survey of the mentions of Esau and his image in Genesis Rabbah, see Morgenstern, "The Image of Edom"). Nevertheless, the identification of Esau with Rome in this midrash seems sound, for it cites the unique qualities of the sun and the moon as well as the relationship between them, to make a point about Israel and Rome and their balance of power, including encouragement and positive predictions for Israel, despite its inferior position during that period.

Sections A and B focus on the sun, the moon, and their role in the calendrical system: A lunar calendar is associated with Jacob (Israel) and a solar calendar is linked to Esau (Rome). Section A quotes a saying from Rabbi Yosi son of Rabbi Ilai (perhaps referring to Rabbi Yosi son of Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai, a fifth-generation tanna who was active toward the late second century), as transmitted by Rabbi Levi, a third-generation amora who was active in the late third- and early fourth centuries. According to this teaching, it is natural that the greater, namely older, one would determine its calendar according to the sun, and the smaller, or younger, one would rely on the smaller luminary, the moon, for this purpose. Whereas Tosefta Sukkah 2:6 states that gentiles (*goyim*) calculate their calendar by the sun and Israel according to the moon without mentioning the differences between these celestial bodies, Genesis Rabbah emphasizes a hierarchy, contrasting Jacob and Esau and, by extension, Israel and Rome: Esau, the older and physically larger brother, bases his calendar on the sun, while the smaller and younger Jacob follows the moon. This description reflects the status of Israel under Rome, both before and after its Christianization.

In Section B, Rav Na?man—a second- and third-generation amora, who was active in Babylonia during the second half of the third century and the early fourth century—elaborates on the teaching in Section A. He states that the associations of Rome-Esau with the sun and Jacob-Israel with the moon are a good omen for Israel. Following the description in Genesis 1:17-18, where God placed the sun, moon and stars in the heavens, not only to "give light upon the earth" but also to "rule over the day and over the night" (NRSV), Rav Na?man argues that, while the sun only rules only during the day, the moon rules during both day and night, even though his teaching seemingly contradicts Genesis 1:16: "God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night" (NRSV). Moreover, he assumes that day symbolizes this world, and night represents the world to come. By contrast, in several other rabbinic passages, day signifies the world to come and night symbolizes this world (see, for example, Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Beshala?, parasha 6 [Horovitz-Rabin edition, p. 115]; Jerusalem Talmud ?agigah 2:1, 77c; Babylonian Talmud ?agigah 12b; see also Genesis Rabbah 2:3 [Theodor-



Albeck edition, p. 16], where Esau and Jacob are associated with night and day, respectively). For Rav Na?man, following the moon to determine the calendar proves Israel's superiority: Esau-Rome will not have a place in the world to come since the sun does not rule at night; however, Israel will have a share in both this world and the world to come since the moon appears during the day and at night.

Section C presents another teaching that is attributed to Rav Na?man. This tradition is based on two observations from the natural world: first, the light of the moon cannot usually be discerned during the day, when the sun is shining; and, at the end each day, when night inevitably arrives, the sun cannot be seen. These realities are enlisted to explain the future of Israel. As long as the great light, which symbolizes the rule of Esau-Rome, endures, Israel's light is not visible. Thus, although Israel's strength exists, it cannot be recognized. However, as Isaiah 60:1-3 indicates, the light, namely the power of Israel, will eventually rise, just as night follows the day, enabling the moonlight to be seen. The ascent of Israel is therefore inextricably tied to Rome's decline.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [calendar](#)
- [day](#)
- [Esau](#)
- [Israel](#)
- [Jacob](#)
- [moon](#)
- [night](#)
- [Rabbi Levi](#)
- [Rav Nahman](#)
- [Roman domination](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [Roman rule](#)
- [solar calender](#)
- [sun](#)
- [world to come](#)



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