



## [Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 1:3, 39c](#)

Roman festivals

**Date:** 360 CE to 400 CE

**Place:** Syria Palaestina

**Language:** Hebrew and Aramaic

**Category:** Jewish

**Literary genre:** Talmud

**Title of work:** Jerusalem Talmud

**Reference:** Avodah Zarah 1:3, 39c

**Commentary:**

These passages from the Jerusalem Talmud discuss a group of non-Jewish festivals listed in Mishnah, Avodah Zarah 1:3, a mishnah that focuses on Roman festivals: "These are the festivals of the gentiles: Calends (from the Latin *Kalendae*), Saturnalia, Qrtisim (from the Greek *krat?sis*), the *gnesiya* (from the Greek *genesia*) of kings..." Before commenting on this material from Jerusalem Talmud, a brief explanation of these festivals may be useful:

A) Calends (from the Latin *Kalendae*; "the first day of the month") – However, Fritz Graf has shown that, in the context of the Eastern Empire, this term denotes a specific festival: "Pagan and Christian Greek texts from the imperial epoch sometimes refer to this important festival simply as *kalandai*, treating the word as an ordinary festival name, not the least because it lasted several days, against the original meaning of the Latin term as the name of the first day of the month" ("Roman Festivals in Syria Palaestina," p. 437). Thus, this festival opens the Roman year. According to Graf, fourth-century sources describe Kalende Ianuarie as the "the main festival all over the Roman Empire ... celebrated and founded the unity of the empire under one emperor" ("Roman Festivals in Syria Palaestina," p. 440).

B) Saturnalia – This religious festival honored Saturn and was celebrated from December 17-23, thus signifying the close of the Roman year. As William A. L. Elmslie writes: "It was the occasion for the most unrestrained merry-making by all classes of society" (*The Mishna on Idolatry*, p. 21). The festival included sacrifices, feasts, exchanging gifts with friends, and carnivals. The Saturnalia also included a break with social norms and role reversals within the Roman hierarchy; for example, masters would serve their slaves at meals (Versnel, *Transition and Reversal*, p. 146-150).

C) Qrtisim (from the Greek *krat?sis*, defined as "might," "power" or "dominion") – Daniel Sperber writes that this term refers to a "Roman festival, commemorating conquest of eastern countries" (*Dictionary of Greek and Latin Legal Terms*, p. 195). However, Fritz Graf contends: "There are no parallels for such a festival name in our material on Eastern Greek lexicology; thus, it is not a festival name, but a descriptive term" ("Roman Festivals in Syria Palaestina," p. 437). Graf offers two explanations: 1) the conquest of Egypt by Augustus, or 2) the current emperor's ascent to the throne. Based on evidence regarding festivals in the Roman East, he claims that the second definition is correct (*Roman Festivals in the Greek East*, p. 68-69; "Roman Festivals in Syria Palaestina," p. 437-438).

D) The *gnesiya* (from the Greek *genesia*) of kings – This may refer to the day of their ascent to power or to their birthday. According to the Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 10a, there are two options: First, the day when a king ascended to the throne; second, a birthday, whether of the king or other members of the royal family. William A. L. Elmslie explains that, in Philo, Josephus, and the New Testament, this term "acquired the meaning 'birthday-feast.'" (*The Mishna on Idolatry*, p. 22). Fritz Graf understands it as the birthday of the emperor ("Roman Festivals in Syria Palaestina," p. 439).

In its discussion on [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 1:3](#), the Jerusalem Talmud further emphasizes the Roman context of these festivals and reveals knowledge about them. Moreover, the Talmud explains the origin of these holidays and establishes their connections to Jewish history. The Talmud also reports on the sages' differing opinions on the prohibition from doing business with non-Jews on these festivals (based on Mishnah Avodah Zarah 1:1).

The Talmud opens this selection with a quotation from [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 1:3](#) (Section A), and then discusses



the Calends (Section B). Two rabbis and their stances anchor this section: Rav was a third-century sage from Babylonia who journeyed to study in the Land of Israel. Upon returning to Babylonia, according to rabbinic tradition, he introduced the Mishnah to his original community; Rav is therefore known as a first-generation Babylonian amora. The other is Rabbi Yo?anan, a second-generation Palestinian amora who was active in the third century (died ca. 280 CE). Section B begins with their respective explanations of the origin of the Calends and ends with their halakhic views regarding the permissibility of conducting business with non-Jews before and during this festival.

Rav identifies the origin of the Calends with the natural human fear of the elongation of darkness that leads up to the winter solstice. Therefore he links this festival to the first man, Adam, who was frightened to notice the nights growing longer. To support this notion, Rav cites two verses that include verbs that sound similar (although with different roots in biblical Hebrew: *sh-w-f* and *n-sh-f*). According to rabbinic hermeneutics, the appearance of a similar word in two verses offers an exegetical opportunity to use them together; in this case, Rav quotes them to link the Calends to the first man. In Genesis 3:15, God speaks to the serpent after the first humans sin by eating the forbidden fruit: “You will strike (*teshufenu*) his heel” (NRSV). Psalm 139:11 articulates the human fear of darkness: “Surely the darkness shall cover me (*yeshufeni*) [and the light around me will become night]” (based on NRSV). Rav then states that, when the days began to grow longer, the first man declared: “Calends – *qalon di’o*.” It has been suggested that this phrase may draw from both Greek and Latin (*qalos*: “beautiful” in Greek; *dies*: “day” in Latin; when combined, meaning “O beautiful day”), in response to the increasing light. Notably, this tale seems to indicate that the first man spoke Greek and Latin. Moreover, despite the Calends being a Roman festival, Rav traces its origin to humanity in general.

Alternatively, Rabbi Yo?anan attributes the emergence of the Calends to the history of Rome and its rise to power. He speaks of an ongoing war between the kingdoms of Rome and Egypt. At a certain point, they decided to end the cycle of bloodshed, establishing that the kingdom whose military commander who agreed to “fall on his sword” would prevail. Rome’s victory is therefore explained by the willingness of its highest ranking officer – an elder named Yyanoveris (from the Latin *ianuarius*, referring to the month of January) – to commit suicide, a decision that was eased by his own longevity and the assurance that his twelve sons would be succeed him as high ranking officials and commanders. In honor of his obedience and self-sacrifice, that day was named “Calends Yyanoveris.”

Unlike Rav, who describes the first man to have proclaimed the beauty of this day, Rabbi Yo?anan presents it (or January 2<sup>nd</sup>) as a mournful, “black day.” According to David Flusser, the Greek phrase *melaina ?mera* (“black day”) is analogous to the *dies ater* (“black day”) of the Roman calendar, namely the second of January (“Januvis-Janus,” p. 100). Perhaps this context influenced the Talmud’s placement of this teaching by Rabbi Yudan: “Whoever sows lentils on that day, they do not prosper.” Rabbi Yudan ‘Antidaryya was a fourth- or fifth-generation amora (perhaps from Ein Tundra) who was active in the fourth century. It seems that the teachings from Rav and Rabbi Yo?anan were incorporated into the Talmud at an earlier stage, whereas this comment by Rabbi Yudan was added later since it seems as a comment on the “black day.”

As mentioned above, this discussion of the origins of the Calends is closed with a halakhic deliberation: According to Rav, it is prohibited to do business with any gentile on the Calends and three days prior, whereas Rabbi Yo?anan restricts this prohibition to those who worship on that day. This opinion echoes [Tosefta Avodah Zarah 1:4](#): “Calends (from the Latin *Kalendae*) – Although everyone celebrates [this festival], it is only prohibited [to negotiate and work with] those who worship.” It is interesting to consider whether these rabbis’ explanations for the origin of the Calends relate to their halakhic views on engaging in commerce with non-Jews in advance of or on this festival. It may be suggested that Rav, who posits that a universal human experience initiated the Calends, advocates a similarly broad application to its related prohibitions, while Rabbi Yo?anan, who linked this day to Roman history and envisions the Calends as a “black day,” would analogously adopt a narrower scope to these restrictions on economic activity.

Section C addresses the Saturnalia. In contrast to the discussion on the Calends (B), this section begins with a halakhic deliberation – probably because it continues the immediately preceding halakhic discussion on the Calends. The Talmud first states that conducting business with non-Jews before and during this holiday is prohibited; it then quotes Rabbi Yo?anan who, consistent with his view in the previous section (B), permits such transactions with gentiles who do not worship on the Calends and the Saturnalia. The Talmud then cites rabbis who discuss the status of wives of these worshipers, then to Rabbi Abbahu’s question (or statement) regarding the military regiment in Caesarea. However, according to Saul Lieberman, Rabbi Abbahu is not discussing the troops but, rather, the Samaritans – who served as officials to the proconsul of Caesarea – and the other group mentioned, which refers to another Roman office (*Studies*, p. 378). In both cases (the worshipers’ wives, and the



troops or officials), it is unclear whether the rabbis being quoted present these teachings as questions or as statements since the Aramaic verb (*b - ' - y*), which introduces their words, can denote “to ask” or “to state, to assert” (Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, p. 107-108). Rabbi Abbahu was a third-generation amora who lived in Caesarea in the late third century and a disciple of Rabbi Yo?anan. Rabbi Abbahu’s view of Samaritans as idolaters also appears in [Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 5:3, 44d](#) (see the commentary on that text for more on Samaritans in Caesarea).

Halakhic concerns regarding the Saturnalia seem to have remained unresolved during this period, for this source presents more than one position regarding engaging in business with non-Jews on these festivals. The narrative about Rabbi Bibi and Rabbi Ze’ira shows that even some sages made purchases during the Saturnalia. According to Fritz Graf, this story “records the market fair on the Saturnalia” in Scythopolis (also known as Beit Shean; “Roman Festivals in Syria Palaestina,” p. 442). Rabbi Bibi, Rabbi Ze’ira, and Rabbi Yosi were all active circa the late third century. Rabbi Bibi thought that Rabbi Yosi would allow him to make a purchase at the Saturnalia fair, following Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s teaching, but Rabbi Yosi prohibited it in accordance with Rabbi Yo?anan. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was a first-generation amora who was active in the first half of the third century. From this narrative, we learn that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi permitted purchases from the Saturnalia fair itself. Thus, whereas Rav prohibited any business with non-Jews during this festival, and Rabbi Yo?anan prohibited business only with worshipers on that day, from this text, it seems that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi permitted business even with worshipers and with vendors at the Saturnalia celebrations themselves.

Following this halakhic discussion, the Talmud then cites opinions from Rav and Rabbi Yo?anan on the timing of these two festivals in relation to the winter solstice: “Rav said: ‘Calends takes place (lit. is) eight days before the [winter] solstice and Saturnalia takes place (lit. is) eight days after the [winter] solstice.’ Rabbi Yo?anan said: ‘*Proqto* (perhaps from the Greek *tropikos*) is the head of the solstice’ [...]”

Section C concludes with a discussion on the nature of the Saturnalia and the meaning of its name. The Talmud defines Saturnalia as “hidden hater,” explaining it as an acronym of the Hebrew statement: “[He] hates, avenges, and reserves [his] anger,” in reference to Esau’s animus toward his brother Jacob. In rabbinic texts, the name Esau had become an epithet for Rome; therefore, the Saturnalia is linked to Rome’s hatred of Israel-Jacob. To support this view, the Talmud cites the verse: “Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, ‘The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob’” (Genesis 27:41, NRSV). This biblical passage conveys the murderous hatred that Esau harbors toward Jacob and his plan to suspend his revenge until their father died and the period of mourning had ended.

The Talmud then cites Rabbi Yitzhak bar Rabbi Eleazar. Two amoraim had this name: one was active in the second half of the third century, and the other during the fourth century. According to Michael Sokoloff, one of these sages stated that, in Rome, they would call Jacob “the senator of Esau” (*A Dictionary*, p. 383). This title (from the Latin *senator*) refers to a member of the senate; this term also resembles an Aramaic word that denotes “a watchman” (Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, p. 383-384). Thus, this reading remains uncertain. Following *Arukh*, the dictionary by Alexander (Chanoch Yehuda) Kohut, Sarit Kattan Gribetz translates Rabbi Yitzhak bar Rabbi Eleazar’s remark as: “In Rome they call it Esau’s Saturnalia”; she explains that: “While in the biblical story this passage evokes Esau’s great loathing of his brother Jacob, the rabbinic text implies that it is now Esau, Jacob’s nemesis and the imagined progenitor of Rome, who was also reviled; this festival thus represents not celebration of Rome’s greatness but abhorrence of it” (“A Matter of Time,” p. 60). However, Rabbi Yitzhak bar Rabbi Eleazar’s comment makes no direct reference to Saturnalia and, in a later text, this teaching appears in a context that makes no mention of the Saturnalia but broadly speaks of the hatred that Esau holds for Jacob (see Genesis Rabbah 67:41, Theodor-Albeck edition, p. 763).

Section D discusses Qartisim, a term that is derived from the Greek *krat?sis*, meaning “might,” “power” or “dominion.” The Talmud first states that this festival celebrates the day when Rome seized the kingdom (or the empire), and then questions this assertion since it replicates the origin of Calends presented by Rabbi Yo?anan (in Section B). Rabbi Yosi the son of Rabbi [A]bon, who was active in the mid-fourth century and is one of the latest sages mentioned in the Jerusalem Talmud, resolves this question by claiming that Qartisim refers to the second time that Rome seized the kingdom. Both this question and Rabbi Yosi’s answer appear to be a later addition to the text whereas, at an earlier stage, the text began by defining Qartisimas the day when Rome seized power, similar to [Tosefta Avodah Zarah 1:4](#): “The day when they seized the kingdom: Qratasis,” then discusses the relationship between Jewish transgressions and the Roman rise to power by associating events described in the Bible with formative narratives from Roman history. The Talmud cites Rabbi Levi, a third-generation amora who



was active circa the late third century CE, who connects three events in Jewish history with episodes in Roman history. This correspondence suggests that the establishment of Rome resulted from Israel's sins. This concept may echo the rabbinic view that Israel's enemies can only gain strength and prevail over them when Israel has sinned. Our source, however, turns to biblical history to link instances of Israelite transgression with events in the founding of Rome. Let us now consider these links:

1) King Solomon marries into the family of Pharaoh Neco, king of Egypt (as described in 1 Kings 3:1) – King Solomon's weddings with foreign women, including the daughter of Pharaoh, were associated with idolatry: "King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the Israelites, 'You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you; for they will surely incline your heart to follow their gods'; Solomon clung to these in love" (1 Kings 11:1-2, NRSV). In response to this matrimony between King Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter, which was seen as a sin, the angel Michael was said to have descended from the heavens to thrust of a reed into the sea. From this reed grew the large thicket that would become the site of the city of Rome. Thus, as Sarit Kattan Gribetz states: "Solomon is held responsible for the emergence of the geographical area that would eventually become the city of Rome, the center of an idolatrous empire that came to rule over the Jews." She also explains that: "The Tiber and the reed crown are commonly associated with Rome's origins in texts, statues, and coins ... the personified Tiber grasps a reed, as though he is about to insert it into the water, just as the angel Michael does in our midrash. The reed, celebrated in Roman mythology and iconography, becomes a negative element in the Talmud's account, and the biblical angel Michael replaces the mythologized Tiber" ("A Matter of Time," p. 68).

2) Jeroboam, king of Israel (the northern kingdom, following the division of Israel into two realms - Judah and Israel - after the death of Solomon) erects two golden calves –

In an attempt to dissuade his subjects from worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, Jeroboam built alternative holy sites in his kingdom: "So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people, 'You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.' He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. And this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one at Bethel and before the other as far as Dan" (1 Kings 12:28-30, NRSV). Our text asserts that this idolatrous act foreshadows the building of two huts in Rome by Remus and Romulus, as Sarit Kattan Gribetz explains: "The rabbinic passage couples this biblical episode with the mythological story of Rome's founding by Remus and Romulus, creating a parallel between Jeroboam's two golden calves and the two founders of Rome. The popular tale of the birth of Remus and Romulus and the latter's consequent establishment of the city of Rome is presented by Livy as the mythical origins of the empire, and also widely depicted on Roman coins through the fourth century. As Solomon's sins caused the geological formation of the territory that became Rome, Jeroboam's idolatry caused the mythical founding of the city by the twin brothers. The brothers erect two huts, a reference to the establishment of the earliest community in Rome: this moment of mythological founding is associated with the beginning of Roman society, which developed once the geological parameters of Rome had been established" ("A Matter of Time," p. 71-72).

3) Elijah ascends to heaven – "As they (Elijah and Elisha) continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings 2:11, NRSV). Although the biblical texts does not relate this event to Israelite transgressions, rabbinic texts often understand the death of a righteous person to have negative effects in this world. For example, according to Tosefta Sotah 12:5, following the death of Elijah, the Holy Spirit became less present in Israel. Sarit Kattan Gribetz suggests that: "Elijah's disappearance symbolizes the departure of an active attempt to root out idolatry and idolatrous practices" ("A Matter of Time," p. 73). The Talmud claims that a king was nominated in Rome on the day of Elijah's ascent. The Talmud then cites 1 Kings 22:48, which is usually translated as: "There was no king in Edom; a deputy (*nitzav*) was king" (NRSV, v. 47). The Hebrew word *nitzav* may denote 1) "to stand," "to be poisoned," or "to be erected"; or, 2) "a supervisor" or "a governor." Thus, in the in the Jerusalem Talmud, this verse may also be translated as: "And there was no king in Edom, so a king was set" or "And there was no king in Edom, a governor ruled" (1 Kings 22:48). As mentioned above, rabbinic texts often read Edom as a reference to Rome. Following the first alternative translation, Sarit Kattan Gribetz claims that "A lack of Israelite leadership coincided with (and, according to this rabbinic narrative, also caused) the installment of a king in Edom" ("A Matter of Time," p. 75).

While neither the exact definition of Qartisim nor the festival to which it refers are known with certainty, Rabbi Levi's examples emphasize the relationship between Roman power and Israel's sins – especially regarding idolatry – that allowed Rome to gain power.



Section E comments on “the *ghesiya* day of kings,” with an explanation that draws on a biblical verse: “On the third day, which was Pharaoh’s birthday...” (Genesis 40:20, NRSV). The Jerusalem Talmud understands the *ghesiya* as the birthdays of kings, which were celebrated in the Roman empire. The Talmud’s choice of this verse about Pharaoh to explain this term is interesting, as Sarit Kattan Gribetz writes: “The emperor’s birthday festivities are paralleled with Pharaoh’s birthday feast. This explanation casts the contemporary Roman leader in the shadow of an ancient enemy of the Jews, a biblical character who epitomizes the enslavement of Israel and the denial of God.” Thus, she refers to this example and the reference to Esau (see Section C) when noting that the “biblical enemies of Israel are evoked in reference to Rome and its sacred days” (“A Matter of Time,” p. 60).

These sections in the Jerusalem Talmud integrate the legendary origins and significance of prominent Roman festivals with halakhic discussions of the permissibility for Jews to conduct business non-Jews during the preparations for and celebrations of these days. These explanations present messages against idolatry (for example, the teaching attributed to Rabbi Levi), negative views of Rome and its power, and an emphasis on Roman hatred toward Israel, as well as deep knowledge of Roman mythology and multiple views on Jews engaging in business with celebrants during these festivals.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Adam](#)
- [birthday](#)
- [business](#)
- [Caesarea Maritima](#)
- [Calends](#)
- [Egypt](#)
- [Elijah](#)
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- [Esau](#)
- [festival](#)
- [foreign woman](#)
- [genesiya](#)
- [Gentiles](#)
- [golden calf](#)
- [hatred](#)
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- [Jacob](#)
- [January](#)
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- [Saturnalia](#)
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- [serpent](#)
- [sin](#)
- [Tiber](#)
- [winter solstice](#)

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Restrictions regarding festivals of idolaters, including celebrations of the Roman Empire's rise to power and major moments in the emperors' lives.

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Text

### [Tosefta Avodah Zarah 1:4](#)

Restrictions regarding festivals of idolaters, including celebrations of the Roman Empire's rise to power and major moments in the emperors' lives.

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Text

### [Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 5:3, 44d](#)

Diocletian's edict which ordered all inhabitants of the empire to offer sacrifices; and, the permissibility of Samaritan wine for consumption by Jews

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