



[Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 3:1, 6a; Nazir 7:1, 56a](#)

Emperor Diocletian and the sage who wanted to see him

Date: 360 CE to 400 CE

Place: Syria Palaestina

Language: Hebrew and Aramaic

Category: Jewish

Literary genre: Talmud

Title of work: Jerusalem Talmud

Reference: Berakhot 3:1, 6a; Nazir 7:1, 56a

Commentary:

This passage from the Jerusalem Talmud discusses proper protocol in the presence of non-Jewish kings, including an account of a sage who was eager to see Diocletian. Therefore, it contributes to our understanding of rabbinic attitudes toward Rome, particularly its emperors.

Section A presents a halakhic teaching from Rabbi Yannai, a prominent first-generation amora who was active in the first half of the third century, who permits priests to become ritually impure in order to see a king. In its talmudic context in Tractate Berakhot, our passage is located within a *sugya* (talmudic unit) that discusses Mishnah Berakhot 3:1, which addresses prayer during a time of mourning. This *sugya* considers the circumstances under which a person may defile himself by proximity to the dead or a burial site. According to the Torah, contact with a corpse brings about impurity. For example, in Numbers 19: “Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean seven days” (verse 11, NRSV). Graves are also a source of defilement: “This is the law when someone dies in a tent: everyone who comes into the tent, and everyone who is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days. [...] Whoever in the open field touches one who has been killed by a sword, or who has died naturally, or a human bone, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days” (verses 14 and 16, NRSV). According to rabbinic halakhah as well, graves are a source of impurity. In Scripture, priests are directly instructed to avoid ritual impurity, although there are specific exceptions: “The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: No one shall defile himself for a dead person among his relatives, except for his nearest kin: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother; likewise, for a virgin sister, close to him because she has had no husband, he may defile himself for her. But he shall not defile himself as a husband among his people and so profane himself” (Leviticus 21:1-4, NRSV). Tannaitic texts do not permit priests to defile themselves to see a non-Jewish king; however, Rabbi Yannai, one of the earliest amoraim, states that a priest may become ritually impure for this purpose, without specifying whether he is speaking of Jewish or non-Jewish kings. By contrast, the next sections of our text explicitly discuss non-Jewish kings, specifically Roman emperors.

In Section B, the Talmud presents an anecdote which supports the position that one may defile himself for the sake of seeing a king. Rabbi ?iyyah bar Abba, a third-generation amora who was active in the late third and early fourth centuries, stepped on graves in Tyre so he could see Diocletian, here referred to as “the king.” Later commentators disagreed about various elements of this text: First, was Rabbi ?iyyah bar Abba a priest? If so, this tradition corroborates Rabbi Yannai’s ruling (A). If not, perhaps the subject at hand is walking on graves and, thus, disrespect for the dead; in that case, according to the Talmud, seeing a king takes precedence over honoring the deceased. According to Jerusalem Talmud 3:1, 6a, Rabbi ?iyyah bar Abba was a priest; therefore, this tradition affirms the position attributed to Rabbi Yannai (see also Guggenheimer, *Berakhot*, p. 277). Second, who was buried in these graves, Jews or non-Jews? If non-Jews, would that affect the potential for defilement or the implications for showing disrespect for their graves? Heinrich W. Guggenheimer writes that, based on other passages, “the Yerushalmi does not seem to exclude Gentile graves from the defilement ... hence, it is not proven that Rabbi ?iyyah bar Abba stepped over Jewish graves at Tyre” (*Berakhot*, p. 277). These queries notwithstanding, the Talmud unambiguously states that this sage defiled himself and walked on graves in his effort to get a glimpse of Diocletian. It is unclear whether the sages were in fact interested in Diocletian or enthusiastic to see any Roman emperor. According to Saul Lieberman, rabbinic texts tend to honor Diocletian and their use of the title “king” indicates that Jews had positive regard for this emperor (*Studies*, p. 378-379). However, since seeing a king is the primary issue in this passage, perhaps the Talmud mentions Diocletian merely as an example of this category.



The association between Diocletian and Tyre also appears in [Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 1:4, 39d](#). In our teaching, the incident in Tyre occurs “when Diocletian the king came here.” As a geographic term, “here” usually refers to the land of Israel in the Jerusalem Talmud. Diocletian visited Palestine at least twice (for more details, see the commentary on [Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 5:3, 44d](#)). Those journeys may have included an appearance in Tyre. According to Eyal Ben-Eliyahu, this city was not considered part of the land of Israel in rabbinic texts (*Between Borders*, p. 194-195); thus, when the Talmud uses the word “here,” it does not refer to this city.

Section C cites a halakhic teaching from Rabbi Yo?anan, a second-generation amora who was active in the third century (died ca. 280), transmitted by Rabbi Yirmiyah, a third and fourth generation amora who was active from the mid-third century to early fourth century, and Rabbi ?izqiya, a fourth-generation amora who was active in the first half of the fourth century. This teaching asserts that seeing the great people of a kingdom is a mitzvah. This term means “a good deed,” “a command” or “a religious obligation.” Here, mitzvah denotes a religious obligation, specifically one that will train Jews to differentiate between the anticipated kingdom of the House of David and the current non-Jewish kingdom. This section goes beyond granting permission for a priest to defile himself to behold a king by articulating a general rule that requires Jews to look at Roman emperors, and perhaps other leading members of this empire. Although this action is justified as a form of preparation for a future Jewish realm, we have not identified earlier rabbinic texts that characterize seeing Roman emperors as a mitzvah.

During an imperial visit, the local populace typically gathered to welcome the emperor to their city or region. Simon R. F. Price describes the arrival of an emperor in a provincial city: “The emperor might be greeted by the citizens carrying the images of the gods and sacrifices were made to the gods themselves” (*Rituals and Power*, p. 213). While rabbinic texts do not permit Jewish participation in such cultic activities, here the Jerusalem Talmud encourages and even requires coming to see the emperor, which meant joining the crowds that would have assembled for this event. Roger Rees describes such a visit during Diocletian’s time: “Every imperial journey through towns and cities would provide several opportunities for the ceremonial of *adventus*. It seems that good notice was given of an imperial visit... On the day itself, a delegation would meet the emperor outside the city walls to offer welcome; this would be followed by a procession into the city, the streets lined with crowds to celebrate the emperor’s arrival, not doubt cheering and clapping” (*Diocletian*, p. 48). Thus, by the reign of Diocletian, the sages seem to have participated in the *adventus* for the opportunity of seeing the emperor; yet, the Talmud justifies this involvement by describing it as preparation for a future Jewish kingdom rather than as a way to honor the emperor.

Keywords in the original language:

- [??? ???](#)
- [????](#)
- [??????????](#)
- [???](#)
- [???](#)
- [???](#)
- [????](#)
- [?????](#)
- [???](#)
- [???](#)
- [??? ????? ?? ???](#)
- [??? ?????](#)
- [??? ?????](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [adventus](#)
- [defilement](#)
- [Diocletian](#)
- [grave](#)
- [House of David](#)
- [imperial visit](#)



- [impurity](#)
- [king](#)
- [mitzvah](#)
- [priest](#)
- [Rabbi Hiyyah bar Abba](#)
- [Rabbi Yannai](#)
- [Rabbi Yohanan](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Tyre](#)

Bibliographical references:

[Between Borders: The Boundaries of Eretz-Israel in the Consciousness of the Jewish People in the Time of the Second Temple and the Mishnah and the Talmud Period](#)

Ben-Eliyahu, Eyalbook*Between Borders: The Boundaries of Eretz-Israel in the Consciousness of the Jewish People in the Time of the Second Temple and the Mishnah and the Talmud Period* JerusalemYad Izhak Ben-Zvi2013

[“An Aramaic Inscription from Tyre from the Reign of Diocletian Preserved in the Palestinian Talmud”](#)

Greenfield, Jonas C.article-in-a-book‘Al Kanfei Yonah: Collected Studies of Jonas C. Greenfield on Semitic philology I Shalom M. Paul, Michael E. Stone , Avital Pinnick449-452“An Aramaic Inscription from Tyre from the reign of Diocletian Preserved in the Palestinian Talmud” LeidenBrill2001

[The Jerusalem Talmud: First Order: Zeraim: Tractates Berakhot](#)

Guggenheimer, Heinrich W.book*The Jerusalem Talmud: First Order: Zeraim: Tractates Berakhot* BerlinW. de Gruyter2000

[Studies in Palestinian Talmudic Literature](#)

Lieberman, SaulbookDavid Rosenthal*Studies in Palestinian Talmudic Literature* JerusalemMagnes1991

[Rituals and power: the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor](#)

Price, Simon R. F.book*Rituals and power: the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor* Cambridge Cambridge University Press1984

[Diocletian and the Tetrarchy](#)

Rees, Rogerbook*Diocletian and the Tetrarchy*EdinburghEdinburgh University Press2004

Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Jerusalem Talmud Terumot 8:11; 46b-c](#)

How Diocletian the swineherd became Emperor Diocletian, and his attempt to avenge the Patriarch and the sages



- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Terumot 8:11; 46b-c](#)

Text

[Jerusalem Talmud Kil'ayim 9:4, 32c; Ketubbot 12:3, 35b](#)

Diocletian and the Sea of Emesa

- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Kil'ayim 9:4, 32c; Ketubbot 12:3, 35b](#)

Text

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

Roman festivals

- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 1:3, 39c](#)

Text

[Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 1:4, 39d](#)

Diocletian and the fair in Tyre

- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 1:4, 39d](#)

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

- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 5:3, 44d](#)

Realized by:

[Yael Wilfand](#)





Source URL: <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/jerusalem-talmud-berakhot-31-6a-nazir-71-56a>