



[Jerusalem Talmud Sukkah 5:1, 55a-b](#)

Trajan and the destruction of the great synagogue of Alexandria

Date: 360 CE to 400 CE

Place: Syria Palaestina

Language: Hebrew

Category: Jewish

Literary genre: Talmud

Title of work: Jerusalem Talmud

Reference: Sukkah 5:1, 55a-b

Commentary:

This selection from the Jerusalem Talmud opens with a detailed description of the great synagogue of Alexandria as the consummate manifestation of Israel's glory (Section A), then a brief comment that its demise was caused by Trajan the wicked (Section B). These contrasting sections, respectively, describe this lavish synagogue as a symbol of the Alexandrian Jewish community's prosperity and present the Roman emperor as solely responsible for the destruction of that famous institution.

Section A includes a tannaitic teaching (*barayta*) attributed to Rabbi Yehudah, a fourth-generation tanna who was active in the mid-second century. This teaching, which has a parallel in Tosefta Sukkah 4:6 (more on this text in Fine, *This Holy Place*, p. 43- 45; Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, p. 84-85), describes the architectural features of this synagogue, its splendor, and the activities within it. Scholars acknowledge an affinity between descriptions of the Temple in Jerusalem and this structure (see, for example, Fine, *This Holy Place*, p. 44- 45; Hacham, "From Splendor to Disgrace," p. 564-476). The great synagogue of Alexandria is also mentioned by Philo (*Embassy CXXXIV*); this teaching from the Tosefta and the Talmud likely refers to this same edifice (Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, p. 85).

According to this description (A), this building follows Roman norms, such as: a double colonnade and basilica; and, golden thrones for prominent members of the community who had the financial means to secure this honor (alternatively, the Talmud may cite the price of these elaborate chairs, not the cost of attaining the privilege to be seated on them; on this synagogue, see Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, p. 84-89). Such hierarchical designations for seating were also typical in the Roman world. As Michael J. Carter writes: "Seating arrangements at performances in the theatre and spectacles were regulated following a general pattern of diminishing importance away from the stage or arena to represent the hierarchical social structure of Roman society, from the emperor to women and the lowest ranks of society... Senators and equestrians occupied the best seats, but other subgroups in society were allocated their own sections" ("Gladiators," p. 156; see also Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, p. 87).

The account of these golden thrones and the defined areas for each profession (the version in the Tosefta offers examples of specific trades) also seems to follow Roman practices. According to our source, this layout facilitated newcomers' and visitors' ability to locate their professional peers among the residents of Alexandria, who could assist them in finding a source of livelihood. This passage also depicts liturgical leadership within the synagogue, detailing the role of an appointed officer during services, and speaks of another community member reading from the Torah. Thus, the text presents a vivid portrait of this monumental synagogue in Alexandria.

In Section B, the Talmud asks who destroyed this synagogue, and simply replies: "Trajan the wicked!" This terse response implies that its demise was caused by the malice of Trajan alone. A select group of Roman emperors are referred to as "wicked" in rabbinic texts: especially Titus, who demolished the Temple, and Hadrian, who subdued the Bar Kokhba revolt. Later in this *sugya*, the Talmud provides additional explanations for this catastrophe (see [Jerusalem Talmud Sukkah 5:1, 55b](#)), but here, Trajan bears full responsibility for this calamity. Historically, the downfall of the Jewish community in Alexandria resulted from an uprising that had been initiated by Jews. From 115-117 CE, Jewish communities in Egypt, Libya (Cyrene), and Cyprus first fought against their Greek neighbors, then against Romans, in what was later named "the Diaspora Revolt." Non-Jewish sources depict the extreme brutality of this Jewish outburst (Pucci Ben Zeev, *Diaspora Judaism*, p. 123). Our source (and the following sections in this *sugya*) make no mention of Jewish aggression. That textual silence with respect to historically attested violence by Jews enables the Talmud to contrast the glory of Israel – the great synagogue that is portrayed



as the source of life and livelihood to the Alexandrian Jewry, through blessings, gatherings and professional associations – versus the evil Roman emperor, who brings about destruction.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Alexandria](#)
- [basilica](#)
- [colonnade](#)
- [destruction](#)
- [Diaspora Revolt](#)
- [glory of Israel](#)
- [honor](#)
- [Jewish community](#)
- [profession](#)
- [Rabbi Yehudah](#)
- [seating arrangement](#)
- [Second Temple](#)
- [synagogue](#)
- [throne](#)
- [Trajan](#)

Bibliographical references: Carter, Michael J., [“Gladiators and Monomachoi: Greek Attitudes to a Roman ‘Cultural Performance’”](#), in *Sport in the Cultures of the Ancient World: New Perspectives* (ed. Zinon Papakonstantinou; New York: Routledge, 2010), 150-174



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Levine, Lee Israel, [*The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*](#) (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999)

Pucci Ben Zeev, Miriam, [Diaspora Judaism in Turmoil, 116/117 C.E., Ancient Sources and Modern Insights](#) (Leuven: Peeters, 2005)

Other sources connected with this document: Text

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Trajan and the destruction of the Jewish community of Alexandria

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