

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [24]

Jerusalem Was Destroyed on Account of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza

(A Play in Five Acts)

(Insights into Babylonian Talmud Gittin 55b – 56b)

Act 2



The Story up to this Point...

Background to Our Story

Nero Caesar



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Gittin. Koren publishers Jerusalem (Page 313)

Nero Caesar – The Roman emperor Nero was killed under strange circumstances and after his death, rumors circulated that he was not actually killed but had taken refuge elsewhere. It should be noted that the name Caesar is fundamentally a family name, and many members of this family, both those born into it and those who were adopted, were called Nero either as a first or middle name, such as Tiberius, Claudius' father Drusus, and others. It therefore appears that this story refers to a member of the Caesar family who was appointed as an officer in the Roman army in the campaign against the Judean revolt. It is also known that there were several figures in the Caesar family who had a high regard for Judaism, and it is reasonable to assume that this officer eventually converted.

Nero Caesar

(From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)

Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (December 15, 37 – June 9, 68), born Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, also called Nero Claudius Caesar Germanicus, was the fifth and last Roman Emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Nero was adopted by his

great uncle Claudius to become heir to the throne. As Nero Claudius Caesar, he succeeded to the throne on October 13, 54, following Claudius' death.

Nero ruled from 54 to 68, focusing much of his attention on diplomacy, trade, and increasing the cultural capital of the empire. He ordered the building of theatres and promoted athletic games. His reign included a successful war and negotiated peace with the Parthian Empire (58–63), the suppression of the British revolt (60–61) and improving diplomatic ties with Greece. In 68 a military coup drove Nero into hiding. Facing execution, he reportedly committed forced suicide.

Nero's rule is often associated with tyranny and extravagance. He is known for a number of executions, including his mother and adoptive brother, as the emperor who "fiddled while Rome burned" and an early persecutor of Christians. This view is based upon the main surviving sources for Nero's reign—Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio. Few surviving sources paint Nero in a favorable light. Some sources, though, portray him as an emperor who was popular with the Roman people, especially in the East.

The study of Nero is problematic as some modern historians question the reliability of ancient sources when reporting on Nero's alleged tyrannical acts. It may be impossible to completely separate fact from fiction concerning Nero's reign.

Belomancy

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belomancy>

Belomancy, also bolomancy, is the ancient art of divination by use of arrows. Belomancy was anciently practiced at least by Babylonians, Greeks, Arabs and Scythians.

The arrows were typically marked with occult symbols and had to have feathers for every method. In one method, different possible answers to a given question were written and tied to each arrow. For example, three arrows would be marked with the phrases, *God orders it me*, *God forbids it me*, and the third would be blank. The arrow that flew the furthest indicated the answer. Another method involves the same thing, but without shooting the arrows. They would simply be shuffled in the quiver, worn preferably on the back, and the first arrow to be drawn indicated the answer. If a blank arrow was drawn, they would redraw.

This was an ancient practice, and probably that mentioned in the Book of Ezekiel 21:21

"For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination; he shakes the arrows, he consults the household idols, he looks at the liver."

A lost traveler might also use belomancy to find his way, by tossing the arrow into the air, and letting its angle show him the way.

"Psok li Pesukecha" (asking a child for the verse he is studying, as a way to foretell the future or understand the present)

The Talmud tells you that if you're having problems and questions which you can't solve, you should go to a young child and say psok li pesukecho (give me a posuk; tell me a sentence of what you learned today). The little child's mind has still not been contaminated and poisoned by world opinion. Unpolluted by prejudice. He'll give it to you straight the way it is.

Esau, Edom, Rome

Magdiel- this is Rome (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 38)

The rabbinic identification of Rome with the Biblical figure of Esau is basic to the traditional understanding of much of the relevant sections of the book of Genesis.

Esau's faults and shortcomings as well as his complex and tortured relationship with his brother Yakov was seen by the Rabbis through the prism of this identification, so much so that the conflict of these two brothers typifies the struggle for spiritual and moral supremacy between Rome and Jerusalem.

It is somewhat unclear, though, what supports this identification. The voluminous Roman chronicles do not appear to contain any awareness of descent from Esau, although a memory of such an ignoble descent certainly could have been lost or suppressed. Our tradition does preserve the particulars of Roman descent from Esau.

"The great kingdom of Rome was built by Zepho, son of Eliphaz, son of Esau. Tirtat of the land of Elisha attacked him and killed him (Yelamdeinu, Batei Midrashos 160)."

The identification of Rome as Esau rests on the very visible traits that Roman, and subsequently Western civilization, shares with the character traits of Esau as he is described in the Chumash. In fact, it is the impression that midrashic collections seem to highlight especially these cultural qualities when they discuss Esau.

Among such traits is the individualism and disdain for tradition and authority that is such an obvious feature of Western civilization and also of Esau who was a "self-made man". Esau willingly gave up his birthright in order to build his future with his own toil and effort. "Esau showed to others that (in his opinion) the institution of birthright is not morally correct. Rather one who is more talented, of his own right should be honored above others. Many great leaders of the nations of the worlds followed Esau's opinion and disparaged the status of birth; rather, (they held) everything depends on the natural abilities of each individual (Netsiv, Haemek Davar to Genesis 23,34).

Our rabbis were keen observers of human nature and the political and social cultures that surrounded them. They unerringly ferreted out the personality traits of Biblical figures that they were then able to match with national characters and identify one with the other. In this way, aided by received traditions, they were able to predict how these nations are likely to behave down even to our time.

Rabbi Meir

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbi_Meir

Rabbi Meir or Rabbi Meir Ba'al Ha-Nes (lit. *Rabbi Meir Master of the Miracle*) was a Jewish sage who lived in the time of the Mishna. He was considered one of the greatest of the Tannaim of the second generation. According to a legend, his father was a descendant of the Roman Emperor Nero who had converted to Judaism. His wife Bruriah is one of the few women cited in the Gemara.

There is a rule in the Talmud that all anonymous Mishnahs are attributed to Rabbi Meir. This rule was required because, following an unsuccessful attempt to force the resignation of the head of the Sanhedrin, Rabbi Meir's opinions were noted, but only as "Others say..."

"Meir" is actually a sobriquet — his real name is thought to have been Nahori or Misha. The name *Meir*, meaning "Illuminator," was given to him because he enlightened the eyes of scholars and students in Torah study. The epithet *Baal HaNess* simply means "Who Does Miracle(s)."[[]

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Gittin 55b – 56b

שָׁדַר עֲלוֹיָהּ לְגִירוֹן קִיס. ר. פִּי קֵאָתִי, שָׁדָא גִירָא לְמִזְרַח – אֲתָא נָפַל בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם, לְמַעְרָב – אֲתָא נָפַל בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם, לְאַרְבַּע רוּחוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם – אֲתָא נָפַל בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם. אָמַר לִיה לְיִנּוּקָא: פְּסוּקָא לִי פְסוּקִידָא, אָמַר לִיה: "וְיָנַתִּי אֶת נִקְמָתִי בְּאֶדוֹם בְּיַד עַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל" וְגו'. אָמַר: קוּדְשָׁא פְרִידָא הוּא פְּעֵי לְחֶרֶבִי בֵיתִיהּ, וּבְעֵי לְכַפּוּרֵי יְדִיהּ בְּהָהוּא גְבָרָא! עָרַק וְאָזַל וְאִיגֵייר, וּנְפַק מִיְנֵיהּ רַבִּי מֵאִיר

He sent against them Nero Caesar.

When he came to Jerusalem, he wished to test his fate. He shot an arrow to the east and the arrow came and fell in Jerusalem. He then shot another arrow to the west and it also fell in Jerusalem. He shot an arrow in all four directions of the heavens, and each time the arrow fell in Jerusalem.

Nero then conducted another test: He said to a child: Tell me the verse that you learned today. He said to him as follows: "And I will lay My vengeance upon Edom by the hand of My people Israel" (Ezekiel 25:14). Nero said: The Holy One, Blessed be He, wishes to destroy His Temple, and He wishes to wipe his hands with that man, i.e., with me. So he fled and became a convert, and Rabbi Meir descended from him.



Explaining the Story What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

Comprehension Questions

- ?** "He sent against them Nero Caesar" Who is the subject of this sentence?
- ?** At what point in his journey do you think Nero shoots the arrows?
- ?** Why does Nero shoot arrows towards the four directions of the compass?
- ?** Why does Nero ask a (Jewish) child to repeat for him the verse he is studying?

Analysis Questions

- ?** Asking the boy for his verse seems to be asking for a "second" opinion. Why would Nero be asking for a second opinion if the "first opinion" (the arrows) was in accordance with his original purpose?
- ?** Why does Nero accept the boy's "prediction" over the arrows' one?

? Why do you think the Sages included in the Talmud such a story about Nero Caesar?

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

- ! The courage to ask for a second opinion when we like the first one!
- ! God has His plans, yet everyone is free to make his or her own choices!



Our story –a story within a story- presents us with a thoughtful Nero Caesar (a different one from the history books). Nero, the story’s main character, teaches us that though God may have a master plan for the universe, we can still choose to a big extent, the role we will play in God’s plan. Nero Caesar also reminds us that while it is very common for people to ask for a second opinion upon hearing bad news, it takes special people to ask for a second opinion when we hear what we wish to hear.