The Temple in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish worship until its destruction in 70 CE, was officially restricted to Jews alone. But while only Jews could approach the physical space of the Temple and offer sacrifices therein, many non-Jews participated in its cultic life by procuring animals with their own funds and asking that these animals be sacrificed on their behalf. Perhaps the most notable non-Jewish provider of sacrificial animals for the Jerusalem Temple was the Roman imperial family, at whose expense and on whose behalf a sacrifice was made on a daily basis, apparently for several decades.

Why was the Roman emperor inclined to offer sacrifices (by proxy) at the Jerusalem Temple? If you asked Jews who lived in the first century CE, their answers would vary greatly. The Hellenistic-Jewish author Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE–50 CE), who argued for perfect harmony between Jews and the Greek and Roman world, presented imperial sacrificial gifts to the Temple as a gesture of genuine good will of the Roman emperor toward the Jews, as well as an expression of admiration and reverence toward their god. In contrast, anti-Roman Jewish groups fighting for political Jewish sovereignty, such as the zealots described in the works of the historian Flavius Josephus (37–100 CE), disdained those imperial sacrifices. They thought of them as a medium through which the Romans asserted their power over the Jews, effectively requiring them to show loyalty to the Empire by sacrificing for its sake, and as a way for the Romans to implicate themselves forcefully into the most sacred arena of Jewish life.

Neither of these extreme views should be taken at face value as historically accurate, but both views have some truth. The imperial sacrificial gifts to the Temple expressed a tacit status quo between Jews and the imperial administration, a status quo
that could be summarized as follows: the Roman Empire will respect and even enable the Jews’ peculiar customs and ways, and the Jews in return will remain loyal and cooperative. Animal sacrifice could serve to maintain and pronounce this status quo because sacrifices were a practice that both Jews and Romans had in common (along with most of the other ethnic and religious groups living in the ancient Mediterranean world). Both Jews and Romans worshiped their respective gods primarily through sacrifice, and both Jews and Romans considered the custom of contributing money for the procurement of sacrifices an act of benevolence and piety. Sacrifice was a language in which all the peoples in the Roman Empire were fluent, and as such it could serve as means of communication between different peoples and different groups.

In the summer of the year 66 CE, this status quo was disturbed. As tensions between Jews in Palestine and the Roman governors rapidly increased due to continuous violent frictions with the Roman procurator Gessius Florus, a young Jewish priest named Elazar made a bold move: he convinced the priests officiating in the Temple to stop accepting sacrifices from non-Jews, including from the imperial family. This decision, according to Flavius Josephus, who recounts the events leading to the great war with Rome, effectively changed history: “This was the true beginning of our war with the Romans,” he writes, “for [the priests] rejected the sacrifice of Caesar on this account, and when many of the high priests and principal men besought them not to omit this sacrifice, they would not be prevailed upon” (The Jewish War, 2.17.2). Versed in the sacrificial language that was spoken throughout the Roman world, both Jews and Romans knew exactly what the refusal to accept a sacrifice from the emperor meant: a declaration of rebellion. The results of this rebellion, which persisted for four full years, are well known: most famously, they led to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

In the Talmudic period, several hundred years after the events leading up to the great war with Rome, the rabbis developed their own account of the crisis. Their version, like that of Josephus, similarly points to the priests’ rejection of the imperial sacrifices. But whereas Josephus presents that rejection as the language through which the priests expressed their rebellion against Rome, the rabbis picture the priestly rejection of imperial sacrifices as misunderstood by the Romans as a rebellion even though it was not intended this way.

There are two different versions of the rabbinic story on the rejection of the imperial sacrifice that led to the war: a Palestinian version, which appears in the sixth-century Midrash on the book of Lamentations Eikha Rabba, and a Babylonian version, which appears in tractate Gittin of the Babylonian Talmud. Although the two versions differ from each other in numerous details, the basic plot is identical. Both versions identify the culprit of the entire mishap as a person named Bar Kamtza who was accidentally invited to a dinner party where he was unwanted, and was publicly shamed by the host when he arrived and finally thrown out. To take vengeance on the rabbinic leaders who were present at the party and did not stop the host from treating him so badly, Bar Kamtza decided to tell the imperial officials that the Jews reject the imperial sacrifice. To provide proof for this accusation, Bar Kamtza injured the animals designated for the imperial sacrifice so that they become “blemished” (ba’al mum) — and thereby, according to Jewish law, unfit for sacrifice. The priests were forced to refrain from making the sacrifice, and the emperor — wrongfully! — took it as unequivocal indication that the Jews had rebelled against him and he commenced a war.
In creating this story, the rabbis creatively recalibrated and adapted a presumably well-known historical anecdote—that the rejection of the imperial sacrifice initiated the war with the Romans—in order to make it fit better with their own agenda. First, they told the story in a way that exonerated the Jews from the blame of actually rebelling against Rome. Second, they presented the events that led to the war as stemming from unkind and hateful behavior amongst the Jews themselves, thereby turning the destruction of the Temple into a moral cautionary tale. However, the rabbinic account has an additional dimension: it serves to make the point that at the end of the day, Jews and Romans do not speak the same essential sacrificial language. For the Romans, the rabbinic story suggests, the rejection of a sacrifice is an act of rebellion, whereas for the Jews it is a ritual decision based on strict halakhic (legal) consideration. Rather than sacrifice serving as a way for Jews and Romans to understand each other without words, it seems to create further misunderstandings.

This adaptation powerfully captures the rabbis’ ongoing attempt to define sacrifice—that ritual practice common among almost all the peoples of the Roman Empire—as a site of Jewish difference.