



## [Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 3:1, 42c \(part two\)](#)

Despised and honored objects: Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel's criteria for idols from which benefit may be derived

**Date:** 360 CE to 400 CE

**Place:** Syria Palaestina

**Language:** Hebrew and Aramaic

**Category:** Jewish

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**Title of work:** Jerusalem Talmud

**Reference:** Avodah Zarah 3:1, 42c (part two)

**Commentary:**

This passage is a commentary on one of the three opinions in [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:1](#) regarding the features that render an image prohibited. Its original context is as follows:

“All images (*tzelamim*) are prohibited because they are worshiped once a year. [These are] the words of Rabbi Meir. But the sages say: It (an image) is prohibited only if it has a staff or a bird or a globe. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: Any [image] that has something in its hand.”

This mishnaic discussion seems to address images that were found or received by Jews. Due to their ambiguous status, the new owners were then obligated to determine whether or not these objects were permissible and, therefore, whether benefit could be derived from them (through use or sale).

The biblical prohibition against idolatry provides the foundation for this discussion (for the relevant verses, see the commentary on [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:1-2](#)). For Rabbi Meir, who was active in the second century, after the Bar Kokhba Revolt, all images are prohibited because they are worshiped at least annually. According to this view, an image seems to be defined as an idol if it had been an object of worship. Most commentators offer a similar explanation of the sages' words (“It is prohibited only if it has a staff or a bird or a globe”), suggesting that this list specifies symbols of power, which therefore indicates that these images were worshiped. AsHanoach Albeck writes: “These are signs of authority and these are certainly worshiped” (*The Mishna*, vol. 4, p. 332). Following this reasoning, the prohibition of an item is not dependent on its form, but rather on its usage (Stern, “Figurative Art,” p. 404-405). Thus, although the Mishnah specifies the image being portrayed, this is a means of assessing the probability that a certain item was worshiped. However, since these items were not always worshiped (Price, *Rituals and Power*, p. 177), it is plausible that the sages' definition is not based on an image's use in polytheistic praxis but, rather, on its role as a symbol of Roman power. Nicole Belayche situates these objects in that imperial context: “Scepter, eagle and *orbis terrarum* – explicitly linked to the emperor's power and to tutelary Jupiter” (Belayche, *Iudaea-Palestina*, p. 126). One's understanding of the sages' teaching may influence how the third opinion, by Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, is interpreted. This rabbi, who was active in the second century, after the Bar Kokhba Revolt, claims that an image's status depends on whether it holds something in its hand. His opinion may be read two ways: First, the act of holding an object in one's hand indicates worship and, therefore, an idol that displays this gesture is prohibited (although we now know that not all images that were depicted holding items in their hands were worshiped in the Roman empire). Second, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel is referring to an image which holds symbols of Roman power, such as those mentioned in [Tosefta Avodah Zarah 6:1](#).

The Jerusalem Talmud lists additional representations of Roman power, as itemized in the Tosefta, in its commentary on the sages' opinion ([Avodah Zarah 3:1, 42c \[1\]](#)); as such, our source does not seem to read Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel's as a reference to symbols of Roman power. This evidence may strengthen the impression that, according to the Talmud, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel aims to define whether an object had been worshiped. However, the Talmud does not accept the notion that any object held in the hand of an idol signals worship, as its presentation of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel's comments on prohibited items demonstrates:

“Any [image] that has something in its hand' (Mishnah, Avodah Zarah 3:1). But only if [what the idol holds] is an object of honor. A basket, thorns and rags are [each considered a] despised item. Paper and pen (from the Latin *calamus*) are [each] an object of honor. [The case of the] pen-case (or “ink-well,” from the Greek *kalamarion*) is unclear (lit. [further discussion] is needed).”



In [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:3](#), Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel is credited with prescribing the differentiation between despised and honored items as the standard for determining idolatrous items:

“The one who finds vessels and upon them is an image of the sun, an image of the moon, [or] an image of a dragon (*dragon*, from the Greek *drak?n*) should carry them to the Dead Sea (lit. the Sea of Salt). Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: ‘[If these images appear] on [vessels that are] honored, [they] are prohibited; but [if these images appear] on [vessels that are] despised, [they] are allowed.’”

Here Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel distinguishes between images that adorned vessels which were honored and, likely, expensive, from despised and, seemingly, cheap ones. [Tosefta Avodah Zarah 6:1](#) provides examples for each category, placing jewelry in the first group and various cooking vessels in the second group. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel thereby claims that the function and value of an object are reliable predictors of its use in cultic worship and, consequently, its permissibility for Jewish owners. The Jerusalem Talmud uses Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel’s opinion in [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:3](#), to explain his view in [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:1](#) (“Any [image] that has something in its hand”). The Talmud does not state whether the presence of these objects indicates that the images that hold them had been worshipped, or whether all idols that hold a respected object should be banned, regardless of that item’s use in idolatrous ritual.

Several of the despised objects mentioned in the Talmud were not understood by commentators, for multiple identifications are offered. However, it is noteworthy that the Talmud defines “paper and pen” as honored objects, thus prohibiting Jews from deriving benefit from images that hold them, as per Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel’s view. The Talmud concludes this discussion by suggesting that a “pen-case” (or, “ink-well”) requires further deliberation before it may be classified.

The Greco-Roman reality that the rabbis inhabited was replete with idols and images. This culture conflicted with the biblical command to spurn idolatry and abolish its artifacts. In this context, the rabbis developed strategies for following this biblical law while living in a polytheistic setting. One tactic was to distinguish images that were worshipped from those that were not. Others may have included: defining objects that symbolized Roman power and differentiating between honored and despised items, thus placing conditions on the biblical commandment against idolatry and, consequently, easing restrictions on life in the Roman empire.

Keywords in the original language:

- [?????](#)
- [????](#)
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Thematic keywords in English:

- [bird](#)
- [globe](#)
- [idol](#)
- [idolatry](#)
- [image](#)
- [ink-case](#)
- [paper](#)
- [pen-case](#)
- [Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel](#)
- [Rabbi Meir](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [staff](#)



- [vessel](#)
- [worship](#)

**Bibliographical references:** Albeck, Hanoch, *The Mishnah* (Tel Aviv : Dvir, 1959)  
Belayche, Nicole, *Judaea-Palestina: The Pagan Cults in Roman Palestine (Second to Fourth Century)* (Tübingen: Mohr Sibeck, 2001)  
Stern, Sacha, "[Figurative Art and Halakha in the Mishnaic-Talmudic Period](#)", Zion 61 (1996) : 397-419

**Other sources connected with this document:** Text

## [Tosefta Avodah Zarah 6:1](#)

Should Jews derive benefit from idols, jewelry, and vessels adorned with idolatrous images (through use or sale), or must they be destroyed?

- [Read more about Tosefta Avodah Zarah 6:1](#)

Text

## [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:1-2](#)

Should Jews derive benefit from whole or fragmented idols (for a particular purpose or by selling them)?

- [Read more about Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:1-2](#)

Text

## [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:3](#)

Should Jews derive benefit from inscribed vessels bearing depictions of the sun, the moon or a dragon (through use or sale), or must they be destroyed?

- [Read more about Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:3](#)

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