



[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?

Date: 3d CE

Place: Syria Palaestina

Language: Hebrew

Category: Jewish

Literary genre: Legal text

Title of work: Tosefta

Reference: Avodah Zarah 6:1

Commentary:

These passages expand on the prohibition against idolatry that is articulated in the second of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God...” (Exodus 20:4-5, NRSV). In several additional passages, Scripture orders the destruction of idols (see, for example, Exodus 23:24; 34:12-16; Deuteronomy 7:1-5, 25-26; 12:1-3). In this source, the Tosefta discusses images that Jews might have found or received, seeking to define which of these objects are permitted and which are prohibited.

Section A enumerates the articles that would classify an image as idolatrous, were it holding one of them in its hand. This passage begins abruptly, for it seems that the sages are countering a teaching that is not included in the Tosefta. Perhaps the editor is responding to [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:1](#) (or, perhaps, an unknown source). A parallel text in that mishnah lists the first three elements named in this tosefta: “a staff or a bird or a globe.” First, a staff, which could refer either to a scepter that symbolized authority and command, the caduceus, which is a staff with two tangled snakes and two wings at its top that was carried by Hermes and his Roman equivalent Mercury, or to the Staff of Asclepius, which includes only one snake and has no wings. Second, a bird, because birds were associated with several gods: Zeus and his Roman equivalent Jupiter were accompanied by an eagle, Athena and Minerva were associated with an owl, Aphrodite with a dove or sparrows, and Hera with a bird. Birds and doves were also associated with the Syrian goddess (Elmslie, *The Mishna on Idolatry*, p. 45; Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans*, p. 105). Third, a globe, which symbolized worldwide domination. Emperors and certain gods were often presented with a scepter that showed their power and *imperium*, and a globe that symbolized their rule over the whole *orbis terrarum*, or *oikoumenè*. For example, Jupiter was often depicted with a scepter that symbolized his power over gods and humans, and the eagle, a bird that was associated with imperial power. These three symbols mentioned by the sages may be associated with imperial power, and, therefore prohibited. Nicole Belayche explains these objects in the parallel mishnah in that context: “scepter, eagle and *orbis terrarum* – explicitly linked to the emperor’s power and to tutelary Jupiter” (Belayche, *Iudaea-Palestina*, p. 126).

This tosefta then mentions a sword, another representation of Roman power; and a crown (or, specifically, a laurel crown), which symbolized military victory and was associated with the imperial cult (Ando, *Imperial Ideology*, p. 279-281). This symbol was used on coins and other artifacts on which emperors and gods were depicted with a laurel crown on their head, which was an emblem of honor. As Robin M. Jensen writes: “Laurel crowns were awarded to conquering generals and, later, a decoration generally reserved for emperors. In Roman iconography, the goddess Victory usually holds the crown just above the head of a victorious general or emperor” (“The Emperor Cult,” p. 164).

The next item is described with ambiguous wording. It could indicate “a seal ring,” namely a ring that bears an image, which may also signify a ruling authority. However, this phrase may describe two separate items: a ring and an image (*tzelem*). While the first option makes more grammatical sense, it is possible that an idol may have been shown holding another idol in his hand (for example, see the upper portion of the Sacrifice to Silvanus in the Hadrianic Tondi). There is abundant evidence that rings were used as seals, and, as Section C of this Tosefta indicates, rings may have been engraved with images. Up to this point, each item prohibited by the Tosefta may be associated with the imperial cult, and some are also linked to Greco-Roman deities.



A serpent concludes this list in the Tosefta. Given that dragons were legendary serpents, they were so closely related to snakes that these creatures were sometimes difficult to differentiate from one another (for more about snakes and dragons, see the commentary on [Mishnah, Avodah Zarah 3:3](#)). The dragon was also a Roman military standard: “The draco was a dragon-shaped battle-ensign, constructed like a wind sock from fabric attached to a metal head with open jaws, designed to catch the wind, making it billow out and writhe like a live serpent” (Nickel, “Of Dragons,” p. 24).” Thus, this symbol may also represent Roman power. Thus, each of these proscribed images had idolatrous connotations, but all were directly associated with Roman rule and its emperors.

Section B distinguishes between images that adorn objects that are honored, exemplified by several types of jewelry, and those depicted on despised objects, primarily represented by various cooking vessels. In a parallel, [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:3](#) ascribes this opinion to Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, who was active in the second century after the Bar Kokhba Revolt, but without providing examples. These passages indicate that the function and value of a vessel signal its status vis-à-vis idolatrous practice, and, therefore, whether it was prohibited or whether benefit could be derived from it. As James B. Rives points out, “In addition to works that had no function beyond that of representing the gods, divine images occur on an incredibly wide range of utilitarian objects: signet rings, hairpins, mirrors, tableware, lamps, and coins ... The depiction of gods in what appear to be such secular contexts has led many people to distinguish images that had genuine religious significance from those that were merely decorative” (Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, p. 35). After contending that this distinction originates in the Mishnah, rather than from a Greco-Roman perspective, Rives claims that: “This careful distinction between cultic and decorative images of the gods allowed the rabbis to function in a world where images of the gods were everywhere” (Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, p. 35).

Section C specifically discusses rings found by Jews. The Tosefta directs the finder to take the ring to the Dead Sea to destroy it if it bears an image of the sun or the moon (or a dragon, according to MS. Erfurt). The sun may refer to Helios (the Greek sun god), his Roman counterpart Sol, or Apollo. Their images typically depicted as a man with a radiate crown (with rays emanating in a geometric pattern) and riding a chariot drawn by four horses, or only his head with a crown of rays. Such depictions may not have been limited to gods, since Nero, for example, had his image portrayed on coins “with the radiate crown of the Sun” (Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire*, p. 46). Duncan Fishwick writes that under Octavian, “Apollo was identified with the sun, so further analogy could now be drawn between the sun, portrayed ... as the ruler of the celestial bodies, and the earthly ruler, the monarch” (Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult*, I. p. 80). For that reason, sun-gods continued to be associated with emperors and the imperial cult. In the Greco-Roman world, the moon was also worshiped; this celestial body was primarily identified with specific goddesses, including Selene, Diana, and Luna. Gentile worship of the sun, moon, and stars is mentioned in several rabbinic texts, such as Mishnah, Avodah Zarah 4:7, and Sifre Deuteronomy 318.

While Section C resembles [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:3](#), it is noteworthy that the Tosefta discusses rings whereas the Mishnah speaks of vessels. Another teaching that is unique to the Tosefta is attributed to Rabbi Yehudah, who was active in the second century, especially after the Bar Kokhba Revolt. He adds images of a nursing female and of Serapis to the list of prohibited items. While Serapis is a well-known god that originated in Ptolemais, Egypt, which was also popular in the Roman Empire (for evidence from the land of Israel, see Nicole Belayche, *Iudaea-Palestina*, p. 60-62, 157-161, 177, 288-289), scholars suggest various explanations for this nursing female. According to the most common explanation, suggested by Saul Lieberman, this image refers to Isis feeding her son Horus. Emmanuel Friedheim rejects this identification, claiming that archaeological findings from Palestine indicate that the cult of the nursing Isis was not widespread in that region during the Roman period. Rather, he relates this iconography to the cult of Dionysius (for this opinion, a summary of earlier opinions, and associated bibliography, see Friedheim, “Who Are the Deities Concealed behind the Rabbinic Expression: A Nursing Female Image?”). Alternatively, this image may refer to the she-wolf who nursed Romulus and Remus in the foundation myth of Rome. According to Friedheim, this motif was well-known in the land of Israel and appeared on several coins minted in this province. According to Nicole Belayche, this image is especially common on coins from Aelia Capitolina and Neapolis (*Iudaea-Palestina*, p. 126, 200, 203, 281). Yet Friedheim rejects this option based on a parallel in the Babylonian Talmud (Avodah Zarah 43a) which specifies that the nursing female in the Tosefta is a woman (“A New Approach,” 147-148). However, the Tosefta does not necessarily indicate a woman, but rather a female, so the she-wolf could be intended.

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 observing the biblical law while living in a polytheistic setting. This tosefta demonstrates their familiarity with idolatry and its associated symbolism in the Roman world.



Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Aphrodite](#)
- [Apollo](#)
- [Asclepius](#)
- [Athena](#)
- [bird](#)
- [crown](#)
- [Diana](#)
- [Dionysius](#)
- [dove](#)
- [dragon](#)
- [globe](#)
- [Helios](#)
- [Hera](#)
- [idolatry](#)
- [Isis](#)
- [Jupiter](#)
- [laurel crown](#)
- [Luna](#)
- [moon](#)
- [Nero](#)
- [owl](#)
- [Remus](#)
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- [Roman power](#)
- [Romulus](#)
- [sceptre](#)
- [Serapis](#)
- [serpent](#)
- [she-wolf](#)
- [Sol](#)
- [sparrow](#)
- [staff](#)
- [sun](#)
- [sword](#)
- [victory](#)

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Other sources connected with this document: 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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