



[Tosefta Shabbat 17:1, 8](#)

When may Jews look at icons and their inscriptions?

Date: 3d CE

Place: Syria Palaestina

Language: Hebrew

Category: Jewish

Literary genre: Legal text

Title of work: Tosefta

Reference: Shabbat 17:1, 8

Commentary:

Roman cities were replete with images and icons that depicted emperors, gods, and prominent residents who had contributed to its welfare. Dwelling in an environment that was filled with such imagery and accompanying inscriptions, the rabbis had to develop strategies for addressing their presence, as well as any dissonance between the biblical command to destroy idols (see, for example, Exodus 23:24; 34:12-16; Deuteronomy 7:1-5; 25-26; 12:1-3) and the realities of urban Roman life.

The opening tosefta (1) in this chapter discusses the writing that appears below figures (*tzurot*; likely sculptures, paintings or illustrations) and icons (*yoqna'ot*, from the Greek, *eikōn*). According to S. R. F. Price, icons "were honorific images placed in the square or in other public places." And, furthermore: "An *eikon*, whose semantic motivation was a 'likeness,' had a denotation as wide as the English term implies; out of context it is impossible to determine whether it refers to a statue, a bust, a tondo or a painting," (*Rituals and Power*, p. 176-177). This passage from the Tosefta initially prohibits looking at the inscriptions that explain, identify or praise these images. Given its placement in Tractate Shabbat, it first discusses these ubiquitous items in the context of Shabbat laws. However, the text then clarifies that, even on regular days, looking at icons is understood as idolatrous.

Yet, it is unclear whether the statues in Roman cities were objects of worship. S. R. F. Price notes that such "labelling of statues, even if it had a practical basis in the need for identification, marks them off from divine statues, which were labeled only if they were dedicated to a god other than the one represented" (*Rituals and Power*, p. 179). Saul Lieberman reads this tosefta in reference to statues of the wealthy who acted on behalf of the city, governors and high officials, and emperors, and inscriptions that praised them (*Tosefta Ki-Feshutah*, vol. 3, p. 281). According to the [Jerusalem Talmud, Avodah Zarah 3:1, 42b-c](#), icons were sculptures of emperors that were worshiped and, therefore, were considered idolatrous. As Rachel Neis remarks, "the prohibition against looking per se is best understood in the context of a world not only in which seeing is essential to the ritual experience of sacred images, but also in which, seeing, in general, is a loaded experience" (*The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture*, p.177). However, it is noteworthy that this text treats not only icons but also their inscriptions to be problematic.

Another tosefta in this chapter (8) refers to information that was typically posted in the public areas of big cities by Roman authorities. Saul Lieberman clarifies that these inscriptions (on tablet boards or on walls) were designed to announce victories or praise the deeds of leading members of society; thus, the Tosefta considers them analogous to inscriptions that appeared with icons and images (*Tosefta Ki-Feshutah*, vol. 3, p. 285). However, if the information on such postings pertained to provincial matters, Jews were permitted to read them. The Roman practice of updating regulations and distributing announcements by dispatching documents to the provinces is well known, as Clifford Ando writes: "The government at Rome exploited every opportunity to send documents to the provinces, whether to a single city, to the cities of a single province, or to the provinces in general." Ando offers this example: "The Senate required that the next governor send copies of the relevant documents to the communities concerned: 'the letters, engraved on a bronze tablet, or, if not, either on a marble slab or even on a whitened board, be openly published in the cities in a sanctuary or agora, in such a way that the people shall be able to read them properly from ground level'" (*Imperial Ideology*, p. 81-82). Here, the Tosefta distinguishes between inscriptions that convey an important message regarding "a matter that pertains to the province," which Jews are permitted to read (perhaps even on Shabbat), and others, whose content is prohibited.



Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [icon](#)
- [imperial cult](#)
- [inscription](#)
- [province](#)
- [Roman authorities](#)

Bibliographical references: Ando, Clifford, [Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire](#) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000)

Lieberman, Saul, [Tosefta Ki-Feshutah: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta](#) (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1955)

Neis, Rachel, [The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Price, Simon R. F., [Rituals and power: the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor](#) (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1984)

Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 3:1, 42b-c](#)

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- [Read more about Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 3:1, 42b-c](#)

Realized by:

[Yael Wilfand](#)



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