



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

From which idols may no benefit be derived (through use or sale)?

**Date:** 360 CE to 400 CE

**Place:** Syria Palaestina

**Language:** Hebrew and Aramaic

**Category:** Jewish

**Literary genre:** Talmud

**Title of work:** Jerusalem Talmud

**Reference:** Avodah Zarah 3:1, 42b

### **Commentary:**

This passage from the Jerusalem Talmud is a discussion about [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:1](#), which presents an argument between Rabbi Meir and the sages regarding the classification of prohibited and permitted images. The biblical background for the prohibition of idolatry appears 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). Elsewhere, Scripture orders the destruction of idols (see, for example, Exodus 23:24; 34:12-16; Deuteronomy 7:1-5, 25-26; 12:1-3). Within this context, the Mishnah defines which idols are prohibited. This mishnaic discussion is likely considering images that were found or received by Jews. Due to their ambiguous status, these new owners then needed to determine whether or not they were permitted, and, therefore, whether they could derive benefit from such object (through use or sale).

This mishnah first presents the opinion of Rabbi Meir (who was active in the second century CE, after the Bar Kokhba Revolt), that all images are prohibited because they are worshiped at least once a year. In other words, according to his view, the prohibition of an item is not dependent on its form, but rather on its usage (Stern, “Figurative Art,” p. 404-405). Thus, Rabbi Meir assumes that all images are worshiped and therefore prohibited. However, according to the sages, an image is only prohibited if it is depicted holding a staff, a bird or a globe. Scholars debate the meaning of this teaching and the three defining symbols mentioned therein. Current explanations posit that the sages: 1) rejected the imperial cult, and, therefore, specified “a staff or a bird or a globe”; 2) broadly objected to symbols of Roman power; 3) identified these objects as signs of a deity (without focusing on the imperial cult or Roman power).

The Jerusalem Talmud then seeks to better understand the opinions of Rabbi Meir and his disagreement with the sages. According to Rabbi ?iyyah bar Abba, an amora who was active towards the end of the third century, these images were banned because they were worshiped in the city of Rome. The Talmud responds by asking: why not prohibit such objects only in the place they are worshiped? In that context, the Talmud cites Rabbi Yosi – although several sages named Rabbi Yosi (or Yose) are cited in rabbinic texts, this passage seems to reference an amora who was active in the early fourth century – who suggests that, if a certain type of image were prohibited in one location, it should logically be prohibited everywhere. Whereas the Mishnah aims to define which items are permitted and prohibited without mention of geographical location, the later rabbis cited here suggest that being worshiped in the city of Rome is sufficient for an image to be prohibited everywhere. At this point, the Talmud tries to clarify the positions presented by Rabbi Meir and the sages. First, their common ground is stated: both parties concur that images of kings are forbidden while images of rulers or governors who are local authorities (*shiltonot*) are allowed; however, they contest whether undefined images should be treated as kings (implying emperors) or governors (local authorities). According to the Talmud, Rabbi Meir assumes that unspecified images depict kings, and, therefore, prohibits them, while the rabbis classify them as local rulers and permit them. Thus, it is allowed for a Jew to derive benefit from them and there is no obligation to destroy them. It is noteworthy that this Talmudic passage distinguishes between images of kings and images of other authorities, for, according to Martin Jacobs, the latter were purely decorative (“Römische Thermenkultur,” p. 259). This source assumes, therefore, that images of Roman emperors – referred to here as kings – are objects of worship and thus prohibited.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [emperor](#)
- [governor](#)
- [idolatry](#)
- [image](#)
- [imperial cult](#)
- [king](#)
- [Rabbi Meir](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [ruler](#)

**Bibliographical references:** Jacobs, Martin, "[Römische Thermenkultur im Spiegel des Talmud Yerushalmi](#)", in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and the Graeco-Roman Culture, I*, (ed. Peter Schäfer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 219-311

**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](#)

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