

Chapter 1

What to Wear: Women's Adornment and Judean Identity in the Third Century Mishnah¹

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Introduction

For the early third-century rabbis who created the legal text known as the Mishnah, there was more than one way to understand the function and import of women's adornment. Most often the mishnaic rabbis considered makeup, jewelry, and other adornments as simply a part of what a woman donned in her everyday life. At times, though, they saw adornment as having a certain power: it could be used by a woman to attract the sexual attention of a man, or, even outside of her sexuality, she could employ it to express and negotiate her place within the social world.

Adornment, in the rabbinic view, had larger connotations as well. Wearing various types of ornaments was not only a practical way of acting and of interacting with others, but a means of expressing Judean identity.² The

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² There is a larger debate about the most appropriate term for "Jews" in antiquity. Using "Judeans" rather than "Jews" highlights the ethnic component of this designation that is rooted in the connection to the wider territory of Judea (and not the smaller region of Judea, which contrasts with the Galilee and other sub-regions). This term is mainly derived from its Greek usage, though appears with this meaning in Mishnah *Ketubbot* 7: 6. The Mishnah's primary terminology is "Israelite," a man or woman of the people of Israel. For a more detailed exposition of this methodological choice, with further references, see Naftali S. Cohn, *The Memory of the Temple and the Making of the Rabbis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 131–2 n.1.

Mishnah's laws and narratives make female adornment subject to a nuanced set of rules regarding how and when a woman may or may not adorn herself. This was a key part of the mishnaic project as a whole—to determine in minute detail how Judeans ought to act, under a wide variety of circumstances, in accordance with the traditional, biblically based way of life. Whatever the specific practical function ornamentation played in a woman's life, her acts of self-adornment and her interactions influenced by her ornamentation were to be framed by the schema of traditional law that the rabbis developed in the Mishnah. Thus when a woman adorned or refrained from adorning herself in conformity with the Mishnah's laws, she signaled her adherence to the traditional way of life and expressed that she was a Judean.³

This connection between the acts of the individual woman and her Judean culture and society is particularly strong because, as Mary Douglas showed nearly five decades ago, there is a cross-cultural phenomenon in which the individual body and its boundaries are associated on a metaphoric level with the body and boundaries of the social group. According to Douglas, it is necessary to “see in the body a symbol of society.”⁴ In the Mishnah, the regulated adornment and display of the female body was as much about the larger Judean social body as it was about individual Judean women. Adorning in a uniquely Judean way linked individual women to the larger group, to the people as a whole.⁵

³ This can be called “performing” Judeanness following the use of the verb typically traced to Judith Butler, in, for instance, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002; originally published 1966), 142, and also Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Routledge, 2003; originally published 1970), 78 and 772–91. See Catherine Bell's helpful discussion of more recent theorists in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 94–8. For an argument that the mishnaic rabbis took up this metaphor, see Cynthia M. Baker, *Rebuilding the House of Israel: Architectures of Gender in Jewish Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 142–3 (read together with 60–64). For an important application of Douglas's insight to the Mishnah, see also Mira Balberg, “Rabbinic Authority, Medical Rhetoric, and Body Hermeneutics in Mishnah Nega'im,” *AJS Review* 35: 2 (2011): 323–46, esp. 342.

⁵ The rabbis of the Mishnah also spoke about men's adornment and men's bodies, creating a parallel with women's adornment. I focus on the adornment of women's bodies because the metaphoric connection seems most apparent in this case. On men's adornment, see esp. Mishnah *Shabbat* 6: 2, 4, and 8–10, parallel to 6: 1, 3, 5–8, treated below, and *Kelim* 11: 8. Here, there is a special focus on a soldier's garments and arms (called “adornment”). On these texts, see Dror Yinon and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “Women's Adornments and Men's Adornments: A New Perspective on the Religious Status of

Regulating the adornment of the female body, for the rabbis, also had a wider significance in that it hinted at their more encompassing goal of determining how the entire social body of Judeans (the whole people of Israel) should act in accordance with the biblically based Judean way of life. According to the Mishnah itself, rabbis were a relatively small group within the complex social landscape of Roman Palestine and the majority of Judeans did not follow rabbinic teachings. Other sub-groups, which likely intersected and overlapped in complicated ways, and which may have included the influential leaders of towns, followers of Jesus, Samaritans, Judeans who embraced Roman culture to a greater extent, and perhaps others, likely had their own unique visions of how to define Judeanness and how to practice the traditional Judean way of life. Even though the rabbis were not particularly powerful or influential, they still saw the relationship between themselves and the entire Judean people as one of instruction. They pictured themselves primarily as legal authorities to whom Judeans would turn for guidance on how to practice the traditional way of life.⁶ Thus when a woman followed the laws of adornment as the rabbis developed them, she displayed her Judean identity and also the centrality of the rabbinic vision in defining what made that identity unique.

Women in the Rabbinic Mishnah" [Hebrew], *Reshit* 2 (2010): 1–24. On male and female bodies, see esp. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, "Regulating the Human Body: Rabbinic Legal Discourse and the Making of Jewish Gender," in *The Cambridge Companion to The Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, eds Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 270–94. On body discourse and rabbinic authority, see Balberg, "Rabbinic Authority."

⁶ For greater detail on the nature of Judean society and the rabbis' place therein, see Cohn, *The Memory of The Temple*, 17–37 (with further references). Here I espouse what is sometimes called the "revisionist" view of the rabbis (on which see Chapter 1 of *The Memory of the Temple*). On the relative powerlessness and the self-positioning of the rabbis, see also Naftali S. Cohn, "Rabbis as Jurists: On the Representation of Past and Present Legal Institutions in the Mishnah," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 60: 2 (2009): 245–63. My position is based especially on the work of Martin Goodman, *State and Society in Roman Galilee, A.D. 132–212*, 2nd ed. (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000) and Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), as well as the work of Shaye J.D. Cohen, Moshe Simon-Shoshan, Catherine Hezser, and others.

Note that this study is limited to the Mishnah, generally excluding the Tosefta and legal midrashim, which may be from the same time as the Mishnah (but many or most passages may be later). The focus is thus on what is most reliably the earliest stratum of rabbinic text. The present study also excludes the topic of women's head/hair covering, which seems to be more a cultural practice of gender than an adornment, and which is treated excellently in Baker, *Rebuilding the House of Israel*, 113–44.

Adornment and the Traditional Way of Life: Rabbinic Laws of Sabbath, Festivals, and Marriage

The Mishnah's laws frequently recognize that wearing various kinds of jewelry, accessories, and makeup was a normal part of a woman's daily life.⁷ And as with many aspects of the everyday, the rabbinic authors of the Mishnah believed that women's acts of ornamentation must be framed by traditional law. This can be seen in the Mishnah's most extensive discussion of the topic, in the sixth chapter of tractate *Shabbat*, which deals with numerous types of adornments that a woman may have wished to wear when going out of her house on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath is an important context for rules about wearing ornaments because one of the fundamental restrictions on the Sabbath is not to carry any kind of objects out of or into the home or within public space.⁸ Clothing was permitted to be worn, but adornments were ambiguous—were they clothing that could be worn or something extraneous that was being carried? Whether any particular adornment could be worn out of the home on the Sabbath, according to the Mishnah, depended on rabbinic law and legal opinion. In Mishnah *Shabbat* Chapter 6, the rabbis specify that various ornaments are either: (1) forbidden to be worn out on the Sabbath; (2) permitted to be worn outside; or (3) in a legal gray category, not strictly forbidden but not permitted either. These categories may be somewhat confusing in the abstract, but become clearer when considering the many cases in detail.

Even before spelling out specific laws, the chapter begins with a rhetorical question that highlights the importance of the rules that will follow: “With what [i.e. wearing what] may a woman go out and with what may she not go out [on the Sabbath]?” The question implies that certain objects that are worn are allowed and others are not allowed. There are nuances to observing the Sabbath law and a woman must know these nuances in order to go out of her home on the Sabbath wearing jewelry. With this brief introduction, the Mishnah begins to set out the various cases that fall into the ambiguous category:

A woman should not go out [of the home] with wool threads [or: bands], linen threads [or: bands], or with the strap/ribbon/band that is on her head [in her

⁷ For discussions of women's dress or certain types of dressing and effeminacy, see also the essays by Maria Doerfler, Erin Vearncombe, and Alicia Batten in this volume.

⁸ The mishnaic rule can be found throughout tractates *Shabbat* and *Erubin*; see their biblical precedents esp. in Exodus 16 and Numbers 15.

hair].⁹ ... And not with an ornament [*totefet*; perhaps worn on the forehead] nor with a headdress hanging to the cheeks [*sanbutim*]—when they are not sewn. And not with a hairnet [*gabul*] into the public domain. And not with a city of gold. And not with a necklace and rings [nose rings], and a ring that does not have a seal on it. And not with a needle that has no hole. But if she went out [of the home wearing these items], she is not obligated to bring a sin offering [for having transgressed Sabbath law]. (Mishnah *Shabbat* 6: 1)¹⁰

As noted, this category is betwixt and between the more obvious categories of forbidden and permitted. It classifies items that should not be worn, but do not merit the biblically mandated punishment if they are indeed worn.¹¹ The list is not extensive, but the cases are quite specific; particular types of hair accessories and jewelry that ought not be worn out of the house, but do not incur a punishment if they are worn.

The chapter continues and lays out the next category of things that must not be worn and *do* merit the biblical punishment (and thus should be treated much more seriously). Again these examples are very specific:

A woman may not go out [of the home] with a needle with a hole in it, a ring which has a seal, a *cochlear* [spoon-shaped pin for removing snails from their shells; or, snail or spiral shaped ornament], or a bottle or bowl of *foliatum* [spikenard oil]. And if she went out [of the home wearing these items], she is obligated to bring a sin offering [this is a theoretical punishment, as the Temple had been long destroyed]. These are the words of Rabbi Meir. But the sages exempt her [from the sin offering] in the case of the bottle or bowl of *foliatum* [treating it like necklaces or rings]. (Mishnah *Shabbat* 6: 3)

⁹ The third item “strap/ribbon/band” is a different word than the previous two, yet it appears redundant. Thus the first two may be bands or string that are not in her hair, but somewhere else, and the third item may add the case in which a band or ribbon is specifically in her head (which would nevertheless be redundant). The Hebrew abounds in ambiguity.

¹⁰ Note that some of these terms are biblical terms and others Greek or Latin; some are simply ambiguous. Here and below I follow the Jastrow dictionary, acknowledging that it is somewhat dated. All translations of the Mishnah are my own, based on the texts of MS Kaufmann and MS Parma, but following the standard enumeration.

¹¹ This is typically interpreted to mean that these are forbidden by the rabbis as a supplement to biblical law, under which carrying these items would be permitted. This also means that ideally one must not carry/wear them, but under certain circumstances, it may be permitted to carry/wear them.

The Mishnah itself provides no rationale for why some items are simply not recommended (or, forbidden but not punishable) and others forbidden outright (and punishable). Whatever the reason, the particular types of adornments listed in this second paragraph are considered most problematic and forbidden.

The third category, those types of adornment permitted outright, once again includes a number of very specific examples, many of which are minor variants on the cases in the first category:

A woman may go out [of the home] with strings/bands made of [human] hair, whether her own or that of her friend, or from an animal. And with an ornament [on the forehead] and a headdress hanging to the cheeks, when they are sewn [as opposed to when they are not sewn, see 6: 1 above]. And with a hairnet and with a wig into the courtyard [as opposed to the public domain above]. And with a spongy substance for the ears, the sandals, or that she prepared for her menstruation. And with pepper and a piece of salt or anything she might place in her mouth, so long as she does not place it there intentionally on the Sabbath. And if it falls out, she should not put it back in. And in the case of an inserted human tooth or gold tooth—Rabbi [Judah the *nasi*] permits. The sages forbid. [...]

Girls may go out [of the home] with threads [or: bands] and even small sticks in their ears. Arab women [namely, Judean women of Arabia] may go out veiled [in an Arabian fashion]. Median women may go out with their cloaks thrown over their shoulders. And these apply to all people, but the sages used actual examples. (Mishnah *Shabbat* 6: 5–6)

The similarity between several of the cases permitted outright and those at the beginning of the chapter forbidden but not punished begs the question never addressed in the Mishnah of what distinguishes the analogous cases. What, for instance, is the difference between wool or linen hair bands, forbidden in 6: 1, and human hair bands, permitted in 6: 5? What difference does sewing make for head ornaments (6: 1 vs. 6: 5)? Why are these ornaments and not necklaces or rings? Why is a young girl different than a grown woman?

The absence of a rationale keeps the emphasis of the chapter on what *is* given: an array of three distinct categories and a larger picture of many specific types of ornaments classified within the three-part schema.¹² Similarly, the lack of an

¹² Passages in the Tosefta provide a slightly different perspective (and some different adornments) than these mishnaic passages. See Tosefta *Shabbat* 4: 6–7, 4: 11–13, 8: 33, and 9: 13. On types of women's adornments, see also Mishnah *Kelim* 11: 8–9, where the issue is susceptibility to impurity.

explanation as to why a woman is allowed to wear one type of adornment and not another highlights the fundamental obligation itself not to transport objects on the Sabbath. Fulfilling this obligation is what is crucial, and to do so one must have knowledge of the nuanced rules of whether a given ornament falls into one category or another. When a woman wears certain adornments and refrains from wearing others on the Sabbath, her bodily comportment demonstrates her adherence to the obligations of the traditional way of life and it advertises visibly her Judeanness.

For the Mishnah, what is demanded is not merely a generic type of Judeanness that would have been shared by other Judeans more widely, but a rabbinic one. This is highlighted by the uniquely rabbinic nature of the schema developed in the Mishnah that frames a woman's adornment on the Sabbath. Compared with available earlier Judean texts, including the sections of rules in *Jubilees* and the *Damascus Document*, as well as other texts that do not present systematic rules of Sabbath observance, such as the works of Philo, the works of Josephus, and the Gospels, only the Mishnah goes into such detail and classifies specific examples to such an extent.¹³ Further, there are no other texts but rabbinic ones that even mention the ambiguous category central to the chapter, forbidden but not punished if violated. What the Mishnah sets out is very much the rabbinic version of the traditional way of life, highlighted yet further by the legal opinions attributed to named rabbis sprinkled throughout the chapter. To properly fulfill the obligations associated with the traditional way of life and exhibit one's Judeanness, in the rabbinic view, one had to follow the rabbinic understanding of what defined that traditional way of life and that Judeanness.¹⁴ This, they believed, was what God demanded.

A very similar paradigm of the rabbinic legal framework informing a woman's everyday practice of adornment can be seen in the Mishnah's prescriptions for the use of makeup on the Sabbath and festivals. Unlike its treatment of jewelry, hair ribbons, and other worn ornaments, the Mishnah is rather strict concerning makeup on the Sabbath. According to two different rulings, using various cosmetic products—painting the eyes with kohl (*kohal*; stibium) and painting the face white with a lime-based substance (*sid*) or red with rouge (*phukos*)—is

¹³ See, for instance, Chapter 50 of *Jubilees* (esp. 50: 8–13); *The Damascus Document* CD-A 10: 14–11: 21 (found in 4Q270 and 4Q271), and Qumran scroll fragment 4Q265 frag. 7; Philo, *The Life of Moses* 2: 22, 2: 211–12, 2: 219, and *Special Laws* 2: 65; Josephus, *Judean War* 2.147; Matthew 12: 1–14 and Luke 6: 1–10 and 13: 10–16 (and parallels), Luke 4: 16–21 (and verse 31; and parallels). See also description of not fighting on the Sabbath in 1 Maccabees 2: 32–41, 9: 43–4, and 2 Maccabees 8: 25–8.

¹⁴ This is true of all practices regulated in the Mishnah, not just adornment.

forbidden (Mishnah *Shabbat* 8: 3–4 and 10: 6). On the festival, however, there is a different rule.¹⁵ Mishnah *Mo'ed Qatan* 1: 7 establishes that “a woman may apply her adornment [*takhshitehab*] on the festival.”¹⁶ Rabbi Judah disagrees with this first anonymous opinion, adding that “she should not apply lime-based makeup,¹⁷ since it is a disgrace to her [*nivul*, the same word as the physical disgrace given the accused adulteress in Mishnah *Sotah*].” Rabbi Judah appears to be arguing for an exception to the general rule stated at the outset, implying that this general rule (“a woman may apply her adornment on the festival”) is specifically about face makeup.¹⁸ Between the two views, then, most types of makeup are permitted on the festival.

While makeup is thus allowed in general on festivals (with Rabbi Judah’s single exclusion), there is a nevertheless a restriction on Passover, according to the view of Rabbi Eliezer in Mishnah *Pesahim* 3: 1. Rabbi Eliezer holds that any “women’s adornments [*takhshitei nashim*]” containing grain derivatives must not be worn on Passover—though a woman does not incur the biblical punishment of excision (*karet*) if she does wear them.¹⁹ In all likelihood this “adornment” is makeup composed in part by a grain ingredient that is considered able to become leavened and thus forbidden (to be eaten) on Passover. As in the case of jewelry and accessories on the Sabbath, there are occasions on which makeup

¹⁵ Eye makeup and white makeup in Mishnah *Shabbat* 8: 3–4, and eye makeup and rouge in *Shabbat* 10: 6. 10: 6 also discusses hairdressing and grooming of nails. Cf. Gail Labovitz’s interpretation of 8: 4 in “The Omitted Adornment: Women and Men Mourning the Destruction,” in *Introduction to Seder Qodashim: A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud*, eds Tal Ilan, Monika Brockhaus, and Tanja Hidde (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 138–9. Note that the move to limit the application of face makeup on the Sabbath may stem from its similarity to writing or dyeing, among the 39 “categories of work forbidden on the Sabbath” (Mishnah *Shabbat* 7: 2).

¹⁶ “Festival” is understood here as the intermediate days of the pilgrimage festivals, not the first and last festival days on which work is prohibited as on the Sabbath.

¹⁷ This could, alternatively, mean lime-based depilatory.

¹⁸ The Talmud interprets Rabbi Judah as referring to a lime-based depilatory rather than face makeup, which may cause pain, and is thus forbidden. This interpretation leaves the two views as rather disconnected. An alternative explanation of Rabbi Judah’s view is that he feels that lime-based makeup is inappropriate for the festival because it smells bad. Another possibility is that he may partially buy into the Roman anti-cosmetic tradition (see Kelly Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman: Presentation and Society* [New York: Routledge, 2008]), though it is unclear why he would only criticize lime-based makeup.

¹⁹ Both the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud attest to this reading of the Mishnah, though the Babylonian Talmud emends it to “women’s paste,” which is interpreted to refer to a depilatory. The Jerusalem Talmud offers this as an alternate reading of the Mishnah’s text.

is permitted on the festivals and occasions on which it is forbidden, depending on the festival, the type of makeup, and the particular rabbinic opinion. The passages about makeup scattered throughout the Mishnah thus create a similar legal regime under which the application and wearing of makeup or the refraining from its use on the Sabbath and festivals indicates one's compliance with the traditional rules, as elaborated by the rabbis.²⁰

Women's Adornment and Sexuality

If the Mishnah most frequently treats adornment as simply a part of a woman's daily routine, as everyday acts framed by Judean/rabbinic law, at times these practices are also understood to have their own power. In these instances as well, the rabbis see women's adornment as marking ethnic specificity and bolstering their own authority. One type of potency inherent in adornment was its capacity to help a woman attract the sexual attention of men. The rabbis seem to have shared the assumption widespread among Roman authors of roughly the same time that female ornamentation was tied to female sexuality.²¹ The most striking example of this way of thinking in the Mishnah occurs in tractate *Sotah* 1: 1–3: 4, a narrative description of how the biblical *sotah* ordeal (Numbers 5: 11–31), the drinking of bitter waters given to a woman accused of infidelity by her husband, was performed when the Temple still existed in Jerusalem. In their rewriting of the biblical ritual, the Mishnah's rabbinic authors explicitly tied a

²⁰ In this case the rabbinic nature of the rules is highlighted not only by attributing a potential ruling to rabbis but also, in the case of the Sabbath, by the rabbinic innovation of minimum amounts necessary to transgress and incur the biblical punishment—one eye in the case of kohl and the full face of a very small girl in the case of white face makeup (Mishnah *Shabbat* 8: 3–4). Outside of the realm of the Sabbath and festivals, women's adornments are made subject to the laws of purity in a similar but far less detailed way in Mishnah *Kelim* 11: 8–9.

²¹ This can be seen, for instance in book 3 of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*. Many more references can be found in Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*. See also Amy Richlin, "Making Up a Woman: The Face of Roman Gender," in *Off With Her Head: The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, eds Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 185–213; Maria Wyke, "Woman in the Mirror: The Rhetoric of Adornment in the Roman World," in *Women in Ancient Societies: An Illusion of the Night*, eds Léonie J. Archer, Susan Fischler, and Maria Wyke (New York: Routledge, 1994), 134–51; and Kristi Upson-Saia, *Early Christian Dress: Gender, Virtue, and Authority* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 15–32.

woman's adornment to improper sexuality.²² Further, they made the removal of adornment, the reversal of what she had (purportedly) done, a key part of the ritual procedure. According to the Bible, before the woman is forced to drink the bitter waters that will determine her guilt or innocence, the priest "stands her up before God" and "unbinds her hair [or: uncovers her head]" (5: 18). In the mishnaic account, this act of public humiliation upon her body is expanded significantly and explained:

A person is measured by others according to the measure with which the person measures [namely, a person's punishment matches the crime]. She [the *sotah*, the accused adulteress] adorned [*qishtab*] herself for sin and God physically disgraced her. (Mishnah *Sotah* 1: 7)

Earlier in the mishnaic narrative, the physical disgrace is described as both stripping her partially naked so that her breasts are bared (1: 5) and removing her nice clothing and jewelry:

If she was covered with white garments, they cover her with black. If there were gold items, necklaces [*qatela'ot*], rings [nose rings], and rings [or ringed garment fasteners], they remove them from her in order to physically disgrace her [*lenavlah*]. (1: 6)

In these passages, a woman who had supposedly used her adornments in order to commit sexual sin was stripped of these accoutrements to sin as punishment, in a manner that fit the crime.²³

A related passage in the Tosefta develops in great and lurid detail the parallel narratives of a woman adorning herself to seduce her lover and the resulting "physical disgrace" of her punishment:

She stood before [her lover] to appear beautiful before him; therefore the priest stands her before everyone, to show her disgrace ... She spread out a sheet for [her lover]; therefore the priest removes the head-covering from her head and places it

²² For two different readings of the nature of the ordeal, see Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 15–18, and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *The Mishnaic Sotah Ritual: Temple, Gender, and Midrash*, trans. Orr Scharf (Leiden: Brill, 2012; originally published in Hebrew as *The Rite that Was Not*, 2008).

²³ Unlike in the Mishnah, in the Bible the ritual is not necessarily done in public. For a detailed analysis of why the rabbis expand this public humiliation, particularly in light of rabbinic conceptions of female modesty, see Rosen-Zvi, *The Mishnaic Sotah Ritual*.

beneath her feet. She braided her hair [for her lover]; therefore the priest undoes [her hair]. She adorned her face for [her lover]; therefore her face turns green [when the grotesque punishment begins to take effect]. She painted her eyes with kohl for [her lover]; therefore her eyes bulge out [as part of the punishment]. She showed him her finger [perhaps some sort of sexual gesture]; therefore, her fingernails fall out. She revealed her flesh to [her lover]; therefore the priest rips her garment and reveals her shame to the crowd. She wore a belt [or: girded herself with strings or fringes]; therefore the priest brings an Egyptian rope and ties it above her breasts and anyone who wishes may gaze. She spread out her thighs, therefore her thigh decays [after Numbers 5: 21, 27]. She received him on her belly; therefore her belly distends [after Numbers 5: 21, 27]. (Tosefta *Sotah* 3: 2–5, MS Vienna)²⁴

This version of the same explanation found in the Mishnah—that the punishment fits the crime—imagines an extended seduction scene in which a woman adorns herself in various ways as a precursor to intimacy with her lover.²⁵ What the Mishnah calls generally “adorning” herself and the Tosefta specifies as wearing nice clothing, fashioning the hair, and painting the face and eyes are associated with a woman actively attracting a man in order to engage in sexual activity, in illicit sex with a man other than her husband.

The mishnaic narrative renders the woman’s acts of ornamentation ethnically specific in two ways in this example. First, it puts traditional Judean male authorities in a position of punishing and taming the problematic female adornment and sexuality.²⁶ Second, it locates the ritual de-adornment and

²⁴ The text differs slightly in MS Erfurt. Note that the list continues with her serving a meal and wine to her lover. As Rosen-Zvi points out in *The Mishnaic Sotah Ritual*, 136, the stages of the seduction can be organized as follows: preparations, adornment, intercourse, and the meal. On the relationship in general between the Mishnah and Tosefta, see note 4 above.

²⁵ On the disturbing nature of the punishment part of the narrative, see esp. Bonna Devora Haberman, “The Suspected Adulteress: A Study of Textual Embodiment,” *Prooftexts* 20 (2000): 24.

²⁶ I draw this interpretation from Daniel Boyarin, “Women’s Bodies and the Rise of the Rabbis: The Case of Sotah,” in *Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy*, ed. Jonathan Frankel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 88–100; and Rosen-Zvi, *The Mishnaic Sotah Ritual*. My reading in this section is heavily dependent on that of Rosen-Zvi, and detailed analysis of these passages can be found there. My understanding of law in relation to women’s sexuality has also been shaped by Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), and Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Women’s Lives, Men’s Laws* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). Further, the approach taken here is also dependent on Charlotte E. Fonrobert, *Menstrual*

disgrace of the accused specifically at the Temple (*Sotah* 1: 5), a place universally tied to Judean identity, and among the Judean people who witness the spectacle of her punishment.²⁷

The *sotah* example considers adornment for sexual attraction in a negative light, but elsewhere in the Mishnah self-beautification is treated more positively, as creating appropriate attraction within marriage. In these instances, female adornment and sexuality are once again brought under male control, but not because they are sinful or wrong. As with ornamentation on the Sabbath and festivals, adornment leading to appropriate sexual attraction is made subject to the dictates of traditional law as developed by the rabbis. This can be seen in Mishnah *Ketubbot* 7: 3, which rules that “a man who takes a vow that his wife may not adorn herself [*shelo titqasbet*] with any of the types [of adornment] must divorce her and pay her marriage settlement.” If a husband’s vow prevents a wife from making herself beautiful, the husband will not be attracted to the wife and the marriage will be undermined. Consequently, mishnaic law mandates a dissolution of the marriage by divorce. There is a similar concern in Mishnah *Nazir* 4: 4–5, in the case of a woman who takes a nazirite vow. If the portion of the ritual in which she shaves her head will make her unattractive (*menuvelet*) to her husband, the husband is allowed to nullify the vow so that she remains attractive to him. Here, too, attraction is crucial to marriage and mishnaic law intervenes to ensure that this attraction continues.²⁸ The rulings in both of these marriage examples create an inversion of the case of the *sotah* (the accused adulteress). The accused adulteress adorned (*mitkashetet*) herself for inappropriate sexual attraction and so to punish her and discourage such behaviour her adornments are removed and she is made unattractive (*menuvelet*). Within the bounds of marriage, in contrast, the rabbinic legal system prevents de-adornment and lack of attractiveness and ensures that a woman is able to adorn herself within an appropriate context.

Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

²⁷ There is extensive literature summarizing the importance of the Temple. Some key primary and secondary references can be found in Cohn, *The Memory of the Temple*, Chapter 5.

²⁸ On the importance of an attractive appearance within marriage, see also Sifra to Lev 15: 33 (*Zavim* 9: 12). Note that the Mishnah also deals with a woman being attractive to a potential spouse. See *Nedarim* 9: 10 and see *Taanit* 4: 8, discussed below. A husband’s obligation to clothe his wife, elaborated in *Ketubbot* 5: 8, considers clothing as a basic need rather than adornment. Sexuality itself is unproblematic in the Mishnah, regulated in a manner similar to what is discussed here in passages such as Mishnah *Eduyyot* 1: 1 and *Niddah* 1: 1, 1: 7, 2: 1, and 10: 8.

Adornment and the Negotiation of Social Relationships

A second type of power inherent in women's adornment lies beyond the limited and limiting bounds of sexuality. Women, according to two different mishnaic examples, may have adorned themselves not to attract the sexual attention of men, but in order to play an active role in and to negotiate social interactions. The rabbinic authors construe women as having a relatively high degree of agency, although this agency is ultimately circumscribed by Judean tradition and by male rabbinic authority. Thinking of women's interactions in these ways, the rabbis further insinuated the importance of their understanding of the traditional way of life and the power of adornment to express this particular vision.²⁹

This way of treating women's adornment, as a means of social negotiation, is most explicit in a passage in Mishnah *Ta'anit* 4: 8 that describes a ritual purportedly performed in Temple times. The ceremony involved young women dancing together before a group of young men and wearing attractive clothing:

Rabban Shimon son of Gamliel said: There were no greater festival days for Israel than the fifteenth of [the month of] Av and the Day of Atonement, for on these [days] the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in borrowed white clothing—[borrowed] so as not to embarrass those who did not have. ... And the daughters of Jerusalem would go out and dance in the vineyards. And what would they say? 'Young man, lift up your eyes and see what you choose for yourself. Do not look at beauty but at family.'

The rabbinic narrator in this passage asserts that twice a year young women ("daughters") would participate in a ritual dance in vineyards outside of Jerusalem. They would adorn themselves in white—the same white clothing of which the accused adulteress was stripped—presumably to attract the gaze of the eligible young men indicated as the audience to the dance. The young women in this passage downplay beauty as the key to choosing a mate, yet the adornment itself seems to be a key part of the attraction here. The young women, after all, instruct the young men to "lift their eyes and see." Further, in a parallel

²⁹ For a more detailed analysis of the interrelationship between the Mishnah depicting women's agency and this agency being circumscribed by rabbinic authority see Naftali S. Cohn, "When Women Confer with Rabbis: On Male Authority and Female Agency in the Mishnah," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 6: 2 (2011): online. http://jtr.lib.virginia.edu/volume6/number2/TR06_02_Cohn.html.

version of this narrative in the Babylonian Talmud, those young women who were pretty would tell the young men to choose based on beauty!³⁰

The young women in this passage are treated, not surprisingly, as objects for the male gaze, and adornment serves to attract that very gaze. Yet these women are hardly passive objects. They are imagined taking an active role in attracting the young men of their choice, calling out to them and encouraging the young man they address to choose them. Further, the passage also seems interested in the women's world, in the relationships among those who do and do not have white clothing for the ritual, and the active role some women play in taking care of others in this social group. As in the case of Roman women described by scholars of Roman culture, these young Judean women seem to engage in adornment—and in ritual—as active agents who can, to a degree, manipulate the cultural practice to their own advantage.³¹

The narrative of the accused adulteress in tractate *Sotah*, discussed earlier, provides intimations of a similar social function played by jewelry and adornment. On the day the accused woman is dragged from the local court to the Great Court in Jerusalem and finally to the Temple for the ordeal, the passage says that “if” she was wearing white garments, gold necklaces, gold nose rings, and gold rings, then they were removed. She may or may not have been wearing such items; they were not a necessary part of the ritual. On her way to the Temple, this was merely what she may have been wearing. Within the ritual procedure that follows, the adornments become tied to her sexuality and her purported act of seduction, but up to that point they are, as in the rest of the Mishnah, part of her everyday routine. The mishnaic account hints further that these ornaments may have had a social function as well. It can be no coincidence that the narrator who imagines this woman bedecked in fine gold jewelry also imagines her owning male and female slaves (who are not allowed to gaze upon her; *Sotah* 1: 6). She is a woman of status, and by wearing fine jewelry and clothing, she was displaying her status and asserting her social authority and power, much as any wealthy Roman woman would.³²

These two examples show that in the rabbinic understanding different kinds of women—women of high social standing making an appearance at the Temple and eligible young women attempting to woo potential husbands—could

³⁰ Babylonian Talmud, *Ta’anit* 31a.

³¹ On adornment and Roman women’s agency, see Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 96–112.

³² Regarding this function among Roman women, see Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*. One might speculate that wearing jewelry and finery could even have served as a form of resistance against the ritual that worked to humiliate her.

manage their own appearance and make use of adornment in order to assert themselves within particular social situations.³³ Here, too, this pragmatic function of female adornment is placed squarely within the framework of Judean tradition and culture. The accused adulteress who is wealthy, as noted, wears her jewelry specifically to the Temple and her acts of adornment are subjected to male Judean authority and to the biblical ritual as interpreted by the rabbis. Similarly the dancing daughters make themselves attractive with white clothing in order to celebrate traditional sacred days, guided by the traditional rules laid out in the Mishnah. As in all the mishnaic examples of women's adornment, the rabbis considered wearing jewelry and finery for the purpose of negotiating social interactions to be potentially infused with a sense of Judeanness.³⁴

Adornment and the Body of Israel

There is one additional way in which the narrative of the dancing daughters of Jerusalem makes the young women's adornment into an ethnically specific act, and this manner of linking female dress to Judean identity points to the deeper meaning of regulating these practices for the rabbis. At the start of the account, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel makes an observation about this ritual that connects the daughters' ornamentation to the people as a whole: "Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: there were no greater festival days for Israel than the fifteenth of Av and the Day of Atonement, for on these [days] the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in borrowed white clothing" (*Ta'anit* 4: 8, emphasis added). These two festival days, and the ceremonial adornment of women associated with them, were, in hyperbolic terms, the greatest for the whole people of Israel. What makes the days great for the entire people is, according to Shimon ben Gamliel, the ritual adornment and display of female bodies described. This

³³ Note the jewelry and "objects of a cosmetic nature" found in the "Cave of the Letters," the same cave in the Judean desert in which Babatha's archive was found (Yigael Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba: The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome* [New York: Random House, 1971], 115). Perhaps such ornamentation served as a mark of status for Babatha or other women hiding in the cave. On the potential relationship between the rabbinic construal of women's everyday actions and social reality, see Cohn, "When Women Confer with Rabbis."

³⁴ Additional texts not discussed here make a similar connection: Tosefta *Sotah* 15: 14 and *Bava Batra* 2: 17, both tied to remembrance of "Jerusalem," namely, the destroyed Temple. See also Mishnah *Avodah Zarah* 1: 8, where it is forbidden to make adornments for idolatry. This example also links adornment to ethnic identity because idolatry marks the antithesis of Judeanness.

is the nearest the Mishnah comes to explicitly making the metaphoric link between the individual body and the social body that Mary Douglas points out.³⁵ Shimon ben Gamliel's statement suggests that more than simply imbuing acts of adornment with Judean significance and meaning for particular women, the rules and regulations deriving from the Bible and elaborated by the rabbis lend meaning and significance to the acts of the larger social body, to those of the people of Israel.

When the dancing women all wore the same type of clothing, they formed a cohesive group, and this was part of what made the event so important for all of Israel. On the larger scale of the whole people, the same process of becoming united appears to be a key component of the larger rabbinic vision expressed in the detailed laws they legislate that are to inform Judeans' everyday lives. By adorning herself in accordance with the traditional rules developed in the Mishnah, each Judean woman becomes unified with other women following the same regulations. Her everyday ornamentation and its various social functions take on larger significance as they help her express allegiance to her people and her God and to the rabbinic vision of what it is that God has instructed and that makes Judeans distinct. So, too, every Judean who followed the nuances of rabbinic law in the practice of everyday life took her or his place among the people through devotion to the traditional way of life, and thus assured a wider unity for all of Israel. Judean society at the time of the Mishnah was complex and variegated. There were different sub-groups of Judeans with a multiplicity of interpretations of the most appropriate way to lead the traditional way of life. The rabbinic vision, expressed on a small scale in what the rabbis say about women's adornment, would bring together these disparate groups to form a single people of Israel.³⁶ The potential the rabbis saw in their system for the strengthening of the people in their devotion and in their social cohesiveness thus resided in an act even as small as a woman choosing to wear or not to wear a particular ornament.

³⁵ The repeated connection between the regulated display of women's bodies and the observances and institutions central to and defining of the body politic of Israel—Temple rituals and *Shabbat* and festival ritual—may further hint at an awareness of this metaphoric association.

³⁶ See Cohn, *The Memory of the Temple*. Outside the realm of adornment, the Mishnah also links the centrality of Temple and festival with the importance of the rabbinic views on the traditional way of life in the foundational myths associated with Rabban Yohanan in Mishnah *Rosh HaShanah* 4: 1–4, *Sukkah* 3: 12, and perhaps *Menahot* 10: 5. After the Temple's destruction, this original rabbi is said to have changed, in general, for all of Israel, festival ritual practices associated with the Temple.