

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Wives' Work: Gender and Status in a List from the Mishnah

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Abstract

A curious list from the Mishnah lists seven labors that a woman does for her husband. The juxtaposition of these seven tasks in a list creates a hierarchy among them, which dictates the order in which the performance of a task is transferred to an enslaved woman as the size of the woman's dowry increases. Scholars read this text to understand how wealth shapes a woman's labor obligations, but they have taken the form and contents of the list as a given. This article argues that the list establishes the category of wives' work in rabbinic literature and defines it as work that is performed interchangeably by the wife or enslaved women. The form of the list can be compared to other lists within the Mishnah as well as lists of housework in contemporary traditions. These comparisons allow for a more critical stance toward the interplay of slavery and status in the Mishnah. The Mishnah's framing of a wife's work as interchangeable belies how the individual tasks were embedded in broader social, economic, and technological transformations.

Keywords: domestic labor; rabbinic literature; late antiquity; Near East; slavery

A curious list from the second-century CE compilation known as the Mishnah recounts the labors a wife does for her husband. According to the Mishnah, these labors number seven: grinding, baking, washing, cooking, breastfeeding, making the bed, and spinning in wool. After enumerating this list of labors, the Mishnah goes on to say that if a married woman brings her husband an enslaved woman in her dowry, then she is exempt from certain labors. If she brings two enslaved women, she is exempt from even more, and so on, until she brings four enslaved women and is exempt from all seven labors. The text reads as follows:¹

These are the labors that a woman performs for her husband:[²] She grinds, she bakes, she cooks, she washes, she nurses her son, she prepares the bed, and she works in wool.

¹ The translation that follows is mine, and it is based on the MS Kaufmann A50. At the moment, a critical edition of the Mishnah is not available, although one is being prepared under the direction of Hayim Lapin and Daniel Stökl ben Ezra (<http://editions.eRabbinica.org/>). A new English translation of the Mishnah was recently published: Shaye Cohen, Robert Goldenberg, and Hayim Lapin, eds., *The Oxford Annotated Mishnah: A New Translation of the Mishnah with Introductions and Notes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

² In the characteristic verb aspect of the Mishnah, a wife *does* the following labors for her husband. The Mishnah uses the participle form here, which is best translated as simple present tense because the simple present tense in English preserves the way the Hebrew verb form slips between a modal and a descriptive sense. The wife *should do*, but indeed is already *doing*, these labors for her husband. This use of the participial form is extremely characteristic of the Mishnah.



If she brought him one enslaved woman, she does not grind or bake or wash. Two, and she does not cook, and she does not nurse her son. Three, and she does not make the bed. She sits in an easy chair.^[3]

R. Eliezer said: Even if she brought him a hundred enslaved women, he may compel her to work in wool, because idleness leads to lewdness.

R. Shimon b. Gamaliel said: A man who takes a vow preventing his wife from doing labors must divorce her and give her her ketubah, since idleness leads to dullness. (Mishnah, Ketubot 5:5)⁴

This text has functioned in scholarship as a shorthand for the kinds of work that wives do. In the second half of this mishnah, the wife's obligations diminish as she brings more enslaved women in her dowry. Scholars have read the entire mishnah as an account of how wealth affects a wife's status. They understand that the seven tasks constitute the wife's labor obligations, but that she may fulfill those obligations by bringing enslaved women into the household if she pleases. Wealth affects status in that wealthier women can be released from their labor obligations.⁵

Within these discussions of wealth and status, the list itself has mostly escaped comment, as scholars take the choice of seven tasks as unremarkable. The exception here is spinning wool, which is the last item in the list and also the only labor that the wife cannot be exempt from through recourse to enslaved women.⁶ The labors of baking and breastfeeding have also invited further scholarly attention in their own right, but these discussions happen in isolation from how these labors function within the list of seven.

The list is a rich text for understanding the impact of wealth on labor and status in Roman Palestine, and there is more to be analyzed than the focus on textile work as the last item on the list and the task that all women must do regardless of their wealth or status. This

³ The standard printed edition of the Mishnah differs here. It states that a woman who brings three enslaved women in her dowry is also released from working in wool, and if she brings four, then she sits in an easy chair. By stating that the woman is released from working in wool, the standard printed edition sets up the counterpoint of R. Eliezer, who says that a woman may not be released from working in wool no matter how many enslaved women she brings. In both MS Kaufmann A50 and in MS Parma 3173, the text indicates that a woman who brings three enslaved women in her dowry is *not* released from working in wool.

⁴ The composition as a whole is called the Mishnah, but each passage is called a mishnah (with a lowercase *m*). "Ketubot" is the name of the tractate, and 5:5 indicates that this is the fifth mishnah of the fifth chapter within that tractate.

⁵ Michael Satlow writes of this mishnah: "A wife is responsible for seven tasks. The Mishnah views these tasks as making an economic contribution to the household. [It] is unconcerned with how she meets these tasks: her responsibility is to make a certain contribution, and if she uses the slaves given to her by her family, all power to her." For Satlow, the list itself is not worthy of comment, beyond the fact that it stands in for the wife's economic contribution to the household. He refers to the mishnah as setting up a *quid pro quo*, a subtle instance of how the language of law shapes the interpretation of this text. Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 220.

Gail Labovitz writes, "The mishnah begins by enumerating the tasks that the author(s) of this text imagines a wife is supposed to perform within the household. As initially presented, however, the wife may not be personally responsible to do them herself, and if she is able (from her own or familial wealth) to provide slaves to do the labor on her behalf, this is perfectly acceptable." Gail Labovitz, *Marriage and Metaphor: Constructions of Gender in Rabbinic Literature* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 168. Labovitz emphasizes the list as what the author *imagines* a wife to do, adding a qualification to indicate the text's fraught relationship to real life. Labovitz, however, also reports the list as if its contents are self-evident, and understands the growing number of enslaved women as literally substituting for the wife's work.

⁶ Miriam Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender, and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Peskowitz writes of this list that wool work is "the only task that women cannot trade away." It is "the symbol of marital piety for Jewish women," and if a woman refrains from spinning wool, it is as if she has forsaken her sexual morality. Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies*, 99.

mishnah inaugurates the category of wives' work in rabbinic literature by placing these seven labors in list form. Moreover, the individual labors invite further analysis on their own and by virtue of their placement in this hierarchy of labors.

For instance, during the first few centuries CE—a period contemporaneous with the classical rabbinic period—a woman's participation in the work of grinding grain would have been shaped by her wealth and status as well as her household's access to stone tool technologies and proximity to retail grain markets. The case of grinding grain provides an illustrative example of the artificiality of wives' work as a category. The seven labors on this list make different claims on the woman's own body and on those of other enslaved and free laborers, and they entail variable relationships with material objects. Although I focus on grinding grain, every task on the list opens questions about when it would be considered complete and what kinds of labor and technology are necessary to perform it.

I address the list of labors and its interpretation to crack open what at first glance appears to be a neutral description of wives' work. Indeed, even as scholars of rabbinic texts have become increasingly sensitive to questions of gender and status, the familiarity of the tasks (cooking, cleaning, baking) has obscured this text's importance as a cultural or literary product rooted in any specificity. The list of seven labors seems like the kind of enumeration that could hold as true of Egypt as Palestine, as true of the third century CE as the fifth. Reading this list alongside material evidence, however, can illuminate how texts legible as religious or legal documents shape ideologies about labor in the household.

The Mishnah and the Rabbinic Movement

The form of the Mishnah has shaped the sorts of questions people have asked about it in general, and about the list of seven labors in particular. Much of what I say about the Mishnah may sound familiar to scholars working on other corpora that are legible as legal texts and classified as religious texts. The methodological challenges of writing about domestic labor in the late antique Near East will also sound familiar beyond the narrow purview of scholars working on rabbinic texts. The historical context offers a way to situate these methodological challenges. Similarly, as I discuss below, Islamic juristic texts offer a comparandum for the Mishnah's discussion of wives' work.

In the wake of two failed revolts (66–70 CE and 132–135 CE) and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, Jewish society in the newly reorganized Roman province of Syria-Palestine underwent a series of political, economic, social, and religious transitions. Throughout the course of the first and second centuries CE, changes in Roman imperial administration transformed the face of local governance in the Near East, as client kings were replaced with regimes of direct taxation. The revolts themselves had caused death and dislocation in at least the parts of Judea that served as epicenters for rebellion. The preceding centuries had already laid the foundations for a Judaism that was not centered on the Temple and priesthood, with both institutions being the object of sustained critique within segments of Judean society. After the first century CE, however, the existential challenges to retaining Jewishness as a local ethnic identity only intensified. In the aftermath of the Temple's destruction, this fragmented identity may have amounted to “no more than an attenuated sense of a common past, [and] a mild feeling of separation from their neighbors.”⁷

⁷ Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 103.

In the face of changing legal and religious regimes, several diffuse reactions may have emerged among subelite Jewish populations of Roman Palestine. The scholastic tradition retroactively referred to as the rabbinic movement was one such emergence, although the rabbis as such may not have constituted a group at all in the first few centuries after the revolts. To the extent that it is possible to see the rabbis in continuity with pre-70 CE Judea, scholars have seen them as spiritual descendants of the Pharisees. The rabbis, however, are not reducible to that singular origin.⁸ Moreover, as Seth Schwartz writes, “it would be misleading to focus attention only on the rabbis and implicitly suppose the rest of the Jewish population either ... quietly waiting to be convinced or, alternatively, under the temporary religious control of some nonrabbinic group.”⁹ Although the rabbis’ intellectual output shows that they addressed themselves to Jewish society at large, there is little reason to think that they initially enjoyed any formally recognized authority as a group or any particular influence beyond their own circles.

This is the context for the circa-200 CE emergence of the Mishnah as “the first rabbinic book.”¹⁰ The Mishnah is neither law code nor law collection. It may be described as a compilation of opinions akin to the *Digest* compiled under the orders of Roman emperor Justinian, but the Mishnah renders opinions both in the anonymous voice of the editor and in the voices of individual named sages. In addition to statements, the Mishnah also contains lists, disputes, anecdotes, biblical exegesis, and descriptions of rituals associated with the Temple.¹¹

The Mishnah is organized in six sections (called *orders*) on such overarching topics as agriculture, festivals, women, and damages. These orders are then divided into tractates, on such topics as the Yom Kippur ritual of the high priest, the practices of Shabbat and holidays, marriage contracts, divorce and manumission documents, and much more. Although the Mishnah draws on biblical material to frame its treatment of these varied topics, it is organized along thematic rather than canonical lines. This thematic ordering casts a long shadow, as the Mishnah (and a roughly contemporary compilation known as the *Tosefta*) became the subject of iterative study and commentary among the rabbis. This process of study resulted in the compilation of two Talmudim—the earlier, less heavily edited Palestinian Talmud, and the later, more heavily edited Babylonian Talmud. Along with various works of midrash (a form of biblical interpretation) spanning from the third century to the ninth century CE, these works together make up what is referred to as the classical rabbinic corpus.

Compilations, of course, are never neutral; the Mishnah preserves a form of multivocality even as it reflects the traces of its editors’ distinctive orientation. Traces of this editorial work are most apparent when one compares the Mishnah to its companion compilation, the *Tosefta*. Parts of the *Tosefta* clearly post-date the Mishnah as they quote Mishnaic passages and comment on them, but other parts of the *Tosefta* seemingly predate the parallel Mishnaic material. Comparison between the two illustrates the ruptures and dissonances in the Mishnah’s presentation of the material.¹²

The circa-200 CE dating for the Mishnah refers to the period of its editing and compilation, although some of the material may have originated from earlier periods. Much like the subsequent works of the classical rabbinic corpus, the Mishnah is the product of a setting

⁸ Shaye J. D. Cohen and Hayim Lapin, introduction to *The Oxford Annotated Mishnah: A New Translation of the Mishnah with Introductions and Notes*, ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen, Robert Goldenberg, and Hayim Lapin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 1–8, at 3.

⁹ Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 103.

¹⁰ Cohen and Lapin, introduction to *The Oxford Annotated Mishnah*, 1.

¹¹ Cohen and Lapin, 1.

¹² Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Mishnah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 17–24.

where it was the object of intensive oral study, rather than one where it was an aid in forensic use. This account of the Mishnah's use tracks with what we know to have been the marginal social and political position of the rabbis themselves. Nevertheless, it is clear from their work that the rabbis saw both daily life and ostensibly defunct institutions like the destroyed Temple as equally worthy and urgent topics of interpretation.

The Mishnah also exhibits a few other features that contribute to its textual character. First, the Mishnah makes virtually no reference to contemporary historical events. On the other hand, the text is shot through with historical memory, as is clear in the numerous tractates pertaining to the defunct Temple cult, its priesthood, and its rituals. Second, the Mishnah is clearly produced for and by an insider audience. As such, it does not offer a programmatic discussion of any topic, but instead assumes a knowledgeable readership that can jump right into the middle of a discussion.

All the Mishnah's peculiarities mentioned up to now shape the horizon of the questions one may ask about the list of seven labors. The list appears about halfway through the fifth chapter of the Mishnaic tractate on Ketubot ("marriage contracts"). It does not provide a straightforward prescriptive account of what wives ought to do, but it typifies the rabbis' interest in matters of daily life. The list offers a particular vision of how wealth shapes a woman's status and obligation to work, and the individual labors can be further contextualized within the social realities of Roman Palestine. Doing so makes it possible to view this mishnah as something other than a timeless abstraction of women's work. The significance of this mishnah does not depend on our ability to determine whether or not this list was somehow implemented in people's households. As I suggest below, the very form of the list frustrates the notion that it can serve as a prescription of what wives ought to do.

On Lists of Housework

By some accounts, the list is "perhaps the most basic information technology made possible by writing."¹³ In Jack Goody's definition of lists, the distinction between written lists and oral discourses relies on the list's reliance on discontinuity rather than continuity and the visual form that lists take. The list identifies a clear beginning and a clear end, and it draws attention to categories. For Goody, all these features make the written list distinct from oral discourse.¹⁴

Lists of many types and sizes abound in the Mishnah. The compilers of the Mishnah relished the form, and they put it to a number of uses. Some Mishnaic lists play a significant role in organizing the tractate as a whole.¹⁵ Others seem more incidental. Our list of wifely labors falls into the latter category, appearing as it does in the middle of the fifth chapter of Ketubot, with no clear impact on the tractate's content or structure beyond. Like many lists in the Mishnah, this list begins with the demonstrative pronoun ("these") and a superscription ("the labors that a wife does for her husband"), followed by the seven labors themselves.¹⁶

The lists in the Mishnah challenge the distinction between orality and literacy in Goody's discussion of lists. We are dealing in the Mishnah, as Martin Jaffee writes, with an "'orality' which is at the same time a reflection and creation of writing."¹⁷ Although rabbinic culture

¹³ Andrew Riggsby, *Mosaics of Knowledge: Representing Information in the Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 10.

¹⁴ Jack Goody, *Domestication of the Savage Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 81.

¹⁵ This is the case with Mishnah, Maaserot 1:5–8, which is discussed by Martin Jaffee, "Deciphering Mishnaic Lists: A Form-Critical Approach," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, vol. 3, *Theory and Practice*, ed. William Scott Green (Chico: Scholars Press, 1981), 19–34.

¹⁶ Roy Shasha, "The Forms and Functions of Lists in the Mishnah" (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2006), 56–80.

¹⁷ Martin Jaffee, "Writing and Rabbinic Oral Tradition: On Mishnaic Narrative, Lists and Mnemonics," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (1994): 123–46, at 143.

was deeply committed to the oral mastery of earlier traditions, writing played a crucial role in facilitating this oral mastery and was in turn the product of a robust environment of oral study.

List-making is a cyclical process through which value is not only recorded but created.¹⁸ Items of value are added to a list, but the items' inclusion in the list gives them extrinsic value that makes them worthy of listing again.¹⁹ The place of the Mishnah within rabbinic tradition means that the list of seven labors undergoes a similar cyclical process. Although we do not have access to the processes by which this list was conceptualized and included in the Mishnah; subsequent rabbinic texts that comment on this mishnah in the classical rabbinic corpus and beyond testify to the life that the list takes on.

As far as lists go, the list of labors is neither “charmingly excessive,” nor “celebratory.”²⁰ It is apiece with rather more mundane lists, including other lists of labors that appear both within the rabbinic corpus and beyond. Marion Holmes Katz suggests that the operationalization of wives' work into list form is a striking and perhaps strategic response to the problem of defining what we might today refer to as housework or domestic labor. She writes, “To the extent that there is any specificity about the work involved, it tends to come in the form of lists of tasks (cooking, baking bread, cleaning) that, while sharing certain core items, are both open-ended and vague; they gesture toward shared contextual expectations more than they inform us about the specifics involved. The focus is on the routine, repetitive tasks of daily life.”²¹

As Katz notes, lists of housework are notable not for their charming excesses or exhaustiveness, but for their noticeable sense of vagueness and incompleteness. Margrit Eichler and Patrizia Albanese make similar observations regarding the lack of specificity about what constitutes “housework” in modern contexts. This work is often defined through a “list of pre-established activities,” but as they note, it is usually “clear that this is a selection of activities, rather than a complete listing.”²² This is because the activities listed are not in fact self-evident, and the list does not indicate when a task is considered complete. The list masks the myriad processes that are crucial to completing each labor. In the case of cooking in a modern home, this might include the work of meal planning, grocery shopping while adapting to local food availability, safely storing the ingredients, preparing the meal, and serving the meal. Reducing these processes to the single word *cooking* hides the quantity and complexity of work involved. The lists make no pretense to comprehensiveness, but each individual item on the list also constitutes an oversimplification of the work involved.

The Mishnah's earliest readers also picked up on the list's lack of comprehensiveness, as well as the vagueness over when a task is considered complete. The parallel passage in *Tosefta*, Ketubot 5:5, says that the mishnah names these seven categories of labor, but that this is not an exhaustive description of the wife's obligations. The tension over defining when a task is considered complete is most apparent in the Talmudic discussions of breastfeeding that are occasioned by this mishnah. Both Talmudim engage in discussions—the Babylonian Talmud an especially lengthy one—about how long a mother is obligated to continue breastfeeding

¹⁸ Athena Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists: Catalogue and Inventory across Genres* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 2.

¹⁹ Kirk, *Ancient Greek Lists*, 2.

²⁰ Kirk, 1, 12.

²¹ Marion Holmes Katz, *Wives and Work: Islamic Law and Ethics before Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 31–32, at 32.

²² Margrit Eichler and Patrizia Albanese, “What Is Household Work? A Critique of Assumptions Underlying Empirical Studies of Housework and an Alternative Approach,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 32, no. 2 (2007): 227–58, at 231.

her child.²³ Whereas the mishnah's list form conspicuously removes the tasks from any placement in season or time, the Talmudic discussions reflect an interest in defining the completeness of tasks that the mishnah leaves open-ended.

Furthermore, later commenters on the mishnah introduce a distinction that recognizes that some labors on this list entail a far more personal dimension than others. The Babylonian Talmud cites a sage who holds that even a woman who brings four enslaved women in her dowry should still pour her husband's cup, and make his bed, and wash his face and hands and feet.²⁴ This opinion seems to recognize a distinction between making the bed and the other labors on the list. This distinction may well arise from a perception that making the bed constitutes a form of personal service that differs from the other labors.²⁵

On the other hand, breastfeeding is the most intensely embodied of the labors on the list, and at least the Babylonian Talmud recognizes it as such.²⁶ Nevertheless, the mishnah does not view breastfeeding as exceptional in its consideration of whether a labor can be transferred to an enslaved woman. Within the ranking of the mishnah, breastfeeding is on par with cooking, as a wife who brings two enslaved women is released from both these labors, as well as grinding and baking. Despite the embodied nature of breastfeeding, the rabbis would sooner allow for the performance of this labor to be transferred to an enslaved woman than the work of making the bed.

Until now, I have referred to the list as comprising an enumeration of wifely labors, and I have noted its overlap (or lack thereof) with modern notions of domestic labor or housework. The word used in the Mishnah itself is *melakhot*, a word that has no special association with women or housework. Its most recognizable use is in the Mishnah's enumeration of the categories of labors (*melakhot*) that are prohibited on Shabbat. In the tractate Shabbat, the Mishnah lists thirty-nine such labors. The significance of this list as a whole is uncertain, and Judith Hauptman notes that just three processes (producing a loaf of bread, producing a piece of fabric, and producing a piece of leather) account for thirty-one of the labors.²⁷

The list in Mishnah, Shabbat 7:2, has some overlap with the *melakhot* from our list: baking, grinding, and spinning wool are all mentioned in both. It is not an exhaustive list of labors prohibited on Shabbat, because it mentions neither cooking nor laundry, both of which are proscribed elsewhere in the tractate. Both cooking and laundry, of course, are mentioned in our list of *melakhot* done by the wife.²⁸ We do not know how the compilers of the mishnah understood the relation between these two lists that make use of the word *melakhot*, but the concept seems not to have an exclusive association with women or housework.

Fantasies of Domestic Labor

After its list of the seven labors a wife does for her husband, the mishnah starts describing which of a wife's labors she is exempt from, depending on how many enslaved women she

²³ Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 59b-61a.

²⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 61a.

²⁵ Katz notes something similar in the *fiqh* sources. Discussions of *khidma* (service), she writes, indicate that in writing about housework, "Muslim jurists seem also to envision a component of 'waiting on' another person." Katz, *Wives and Work*, 32.

²⁶ Miriam-Simma Walfish, "Upending the Curse of Eve: A Reframing of Maternal Breastfeeding in BT *Ketubot*," in *Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination*, ed. Jane Kanarek, Marjorie Lehman, and Simon Bronner (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 307–25.

²⁷ Judith Hauptman, "A New Interpretation of the Thirty-Nine Forbidden Sabbath Labors," in *The Faces of Torah: Studies in the Texts and Contexts of Ancient Judaism in Honor of Steven Fraade*, ed. Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, Tzvi Novick, and Christine Hayes (Bristol: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 323–38, at 332–33.

²⁸ This leaves the labors of breastfeeding and making the bed. Breastfeeding is permitted without restriction on Shabbat, but expressing milk for later use is strictly prohibited. As far as I know, there is no special discussion of "making the bed" elsewhere in connection with Shabbat.

brings in her dowry. The references to a growing number of enslaved women are not a straightforward reflection of slavery in the region. That slavery was an unremarkable institution in Roman Palestine is apparent throughout the rabbinic corpus. The conceptual centrality of slavery did not, however, necessarily translate to the physical presence of large numbers of enslaved people. Catherine Hezser notes that there were likely fewer numbers of enslaved people in Roman Palestine than there were in Italy.²⁹ This mishnah represents an example of how slavery was central to the rabbis' conceptual frameworks even when enslaved persons made up a small portion of the population.

The text does not function as a faithful description of how many enslaved women a wife must bring to be free of her labor, but rather as an account of how the rabbis imagine wealth intersecting with labor in the household. Miriam Peskowitz writes that the second half of the mishnah considers "how a woman's economic status might affect domesticity."³⁰ Gail Labovitz writes, "The combination of freedom and socioeconomic status has (potentially) tremendous impact on a woman's (imagined) daily life."³¹ While these statements have the ring of truth to them—wealth certainly shapes a woman's relationship to her labor—they do not describe how the mechanics of the list create this hierarchy of wealth, labor, and status.

To be a free wife in the mishnah is to be free of labor obligations, and the way to be free of labor obligations is to enslave another person, or indeed several people. The mishnah defines *melakhot* as an assemblage of women's work that is transferable between the wife and the enslaved women in her dowry. This category of women's work, however, is itself a fiction. Peskowitz writes that we are "deeply immersed in the realm of rabbinic fantasies about domesticity," and Labovitz concedes that what she describes as the "obvious sense of parity between slave and free woman" is perhaps only "textually established" and not a reflection of actual households.

Recognizing that we are in the realm of fantasy is helpful for prompting a more critical posture toward texts that seem to offer mere descriptions of daily life. That these are fantasies, however, does not make them less valuable for understanding how legal texts reflect and shape norms around work and economic exchange within the home. This latter point was key to Peskowitz's own intervention, but it has tended to fall out of scholarly discussions in the years since.

The parallel scholarly conversations about marriage, sexuality, and labor in Islamic jurisprudence can offer a helpful reframing of this opposition between what is fantasy and what is real. Katz describes her methodology toward these texts as follows: "my objective will not be primarily to assess whether classical legal texts really 'require wives to do housework' (and therefore are disadvantageous to women 'on the ground'), or the converse, but to understand *why* jurists affirmed or denied a person's obligation to do housework and what role this obligation played in their overall models of marriage and the family. ... [T]his study treats the terminology and logic of its source texts as objects of inquiry in their own right rather than as imperfectly transparent media for the reconstruction of realities beyond the text."³²

A similar methodological posture would be constructive for the study of the mishnaic list. The value of this list does not lie in whether it tells us the specific work women do, or whether it provides a plausible account of how wealth affects a free(d) woman's labor obligations. Instead of evaluating the list's relationship to reality, we might ask: Who does the list render interchangeable?

²⁹ Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 250.

³⁰ Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies*, 98.

³¹ Labovitz, *Marriage and Metaphor*, 168.

³² Katz, *Wives and Work*, 9.

The Talmudic discussions of this mishnah reflect its continued interest in the fiction of labor that can be transferred seamlessly from the wife to the enslaved women. Both Talmudim express surprise that the mishnah requires several enslaved women to substitute for a single freeborn woman's work. The Palestinian Talmud suggests that a wife may bring a single enslaved woman to work for her, but this suggestion is countered by a sage who suggests that multiple enslaved women are necessary because the burden would be too much for a single enslaved woman to bear.³³ The Babylonian Talmud suggests that with every additional enslaved woman brought in her dowry, the wife might say that she has brought someone to work in her stead.³⁴ In other words, the Babylonian Talmud also asks if a single enslaved woman may not substitute for a wife's labors. The Babylonian Talmud argues, however, that as a wife's wealth and status grow, so do the household's obligations toward guests and travelers. Therefore, a single enslaved woman can never substitute for all of the wife's labors. In other words, wealth affects a free or freed woman's labor obligations not by releasing her from labors, but by articulating the relationship between the work a woman does and her social status.³⁵

Meanwhile, Ingrid Mattson has questioned the very framing of enslaved women "freeing" wives from domestic labor. This framing is presented in ancient jurisprudential texts but is often repeated or paraphrased uncritically by modern scholars. Mattson discusses a *hadith* narrated by Asma' bint Abī Bakr, who relates the work that she did: grazing her husband's horse and providing it fodder, grazing the camel, drawing water, and more. She mentions that she is additionally responsible for kneading dough but not for baking bread, as she relies on her neighbors for the latter task. Asma' says she did all this backbreaking work, "until Abū Bakr sent a female servant who took the responsibility of looking after the horse from me. I felt as though she had emancipated me."³⁶

Mattson notes Asma's striking statement that she felt as though the servant had manumitted Asma' from her work. The parallels to scholarship on the Mishnaic list, where the enslaved woman gives the wealthy woman "a way of escaping her domestic assignment" are clear.³⁷ The intentional and paradoxical uses of "emancipation" in the *hadith* parallels the language of escape and empowerment that modern scholars associate with this list. The list promises a form of release to the free woman who has access to servants or enslaved women. "Who could not identify with Asma's story?" writes Mattson.³⁸ But it is precisely the creation of "wife" or "woman" as a subject position that makes it possible for readers today to identify with Asma' while occluding the dynamics of status and power within this *hadith*. As Mattson asks, "[i]f Asma' felt 'manumitted' by her servant, what did her servant feel?"³⁹

One might make a similar observation about the function of the Mishnaic list. The list defines a category of work (*melakhot*) that is transferrable between a wife and a growing number of enslaved women. The list typifies the vagueness and incompleteness that is found in other enumerations of work within the Mishnah, elsewhere in premodern legal texts, and even in modern definitions of housework. As noted above, the key question is not whether the list is an accurate list of housework or whether women really had to do this work. Instead, this enumeration of wifely labors participates in the mishnah's creation of *wife* as a

³³ Palestinian Talmud, Ketubot 5:6, 30a.

³⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 61a.

³⁵ Katz, *Wives and Work*, 21.

³⁶ Ingrid Mattson, "A Believing Slave Is Better than an Unbeliever: Status and Community in Early Islamic Society and Law" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1999), 183–230, at 183.

³⁷ Labovitz, *Marriage and Metaphor*, 169.

³⁸ Mattson, "A Believing Slave Is Better than an Unbeliever," 183.

³⁹ Mattson, 184.

subject position that is defined through labor obligations. Labor obligations and property interests—and the intersection of these two in the figure of the enslaved woman—are essential to the articulation of a free(d) woman’s economic status.

Homes and Markets: The Case of Grinding Grain

The mishnah places the seven labors on this list under the aegis of the husband. By construing the husband as the sole recipient of these labors, the mishnah circumscribes the wife’s activities to domesticity or leisure. Peskowitz reads this binding of labor and domesticity as part and parcel of the rabbis’ move to “extend the privilege of Jewish husbands by giving them greater control over the family economy and over their wives.”⁴⁰

The scholarly narrative that the rabbis circumscribe a woman’s economic agency by turning paid work into unpaid work has relied on spinning wool as a paradigmatic example. Spinning wool has been the only labor to receive sustained scholarly attention by virtue of its inclusion in this list. This is in part because of Rabbi Eliezer’s statement that the wife is not released from this labor, no matter how many enslaved women she brings in her dowry. Spinning wool is also legible as work that can be performed for home consumption or sold as a commodity. These dual purposes of spinning wool fit into the narrative about the rabbinic transformation of work done for the market into work done for home consumption.⁴¹

The claim that the rabbis turn commodified work for the market into decommodified work for home use presumes that the rabbis themselves understood the home as disconnected from the market. While there is some merit to this narrative about the transformation of commodifiable labor into *melakhot*, the case of spinning wool does not tell the whole story. I turn here to grinding grain, which is the first labor to be listed, and the first from which the wife is released. The case of grinding grain shows the inadequacy of the home/market distinction as applied to this text. Textual references and archaeological evidence for grinding grain reflect that this was an industry rooted in domestic production. Grinding grain does not represent an instance of commodifiable work turned into unpaid domestic labor. Instead, this work transcends the oft-positing contrast between work done by women for home use and work done by professionals (assumed to be men) in commercial contexts. As Katz writes, we are not rescuing so-called domestic labor from the obscurity of unpaid work so much as we are dealing with a time before this work was artificially separated from the market and made part of a private realm—in other words, before domestic labor became domestic labor.⁴²

To appreciate why grinding grain was an industry rooted in domestic production, one must first understand the technological changes in grain processing during the first millennium CE in the Levant. Beginning as early as the Neolithic period and for millennia thereafter, the predominant category of tool for processing grain was the saddle quern. The term *saddle*

⁴⁰ Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies*, 105. Elsewhere, she refers to this process as the “cultural and economic decommodification of female labor.” Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies*, 205n17. Cynthia Baker argues that by juxtaposing a “baker” with a “woman who bakes to sell,” Mishnah, *Hallah* 2:7, implies that women are not bakers. Although the bread produced by women is not decommodified—indeed, it is explicitly described as being for the market—Baker says the rabbis participate in the deprofessionalization of a woman’s work. Cynthia Baker, *Rebuilding the House of Israel: Architectures of Gender in Jewish Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 80–82.

⁴¹ Notably, chapter 5 of Mishnah Ketubot refers to textile work both as *melakhah* (singular of *melakhot*) and as *ma’aseh yadayim* (Mishnah, Ketubot 5:4, 9). Peskowitz writes that the former term establishes “nonwaged work’ ... at home,” while the latter category consists of “work through which a wife or daughter brings new property ... into the family economy.” Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies*, 102. By remanding control of a wife’s *ma’aseh yadayim* to the husband, the rabbis extend a form of economic control over her earnings.

⁴² Katz, *Wives and Work*, 32.

quern encompasses a large variety of shapes and sizes, but the most common (and the most long-lasting) version consisted of a lower rectangular stone and an upper rubbing stone—not unlike a rolling pin—that was moved back and forth to crush the grain or other item. The last few centuries BCE, however, saw the development of several more efficient milling technologies that changed the face of grain processing in the region.

These new styles of mills began appearing in the Levant as early as the Hellenistic period, but most became well established in Palestine in the first few centuries CE.⁴³ First was a lever mill that came to be named the hopper-rubber or the Olynthus mill. There are several morphologies and types for the Olynthus mill, but one standard type consists of rectangular lower and upper stones. The upper stone contains a rectangular depression with sloping sides that ends in a slit. This is the hopper through which grain is fed to be ground between the stones. The upper stone also contained slots to which a wooden rod was attached, and it was the lever movement of this rod that made the operation of the Olynthus mill possible. One end of the lever was fixed to a vertical pin or attached to a niche in the wall. The mill could then be operated by moving the lever in an arc motion.

While the Olynthus mill originated in the east (maybe in Greece or Anatolia), the rotary mill seems to have originated in the western Mediterranean at around the same time. The rotary mill also consists of two stones with a hopper mechanism in the upper stone. But the two stones are round, and the mill is operated through a circular movement rather than a lever movement.

The Olynthus mill slowly moved west across the Mediterranean, and the rotary mill moved east—but at different times and with different results. The Olynthus mill was brought west very early by Greek settlers. The simultaneous use of the Olynthus and rotary mill in the western Mediterranean may have led to the development of the Pompeian mill or donkey mill, which archaeologists first encountered in Sicily. The donkey mill was the first of the western types to be used in the east, and it seems to have arrived in Palestine by the first century BCE. However, the rotary mill was much slower to move east, and it seems the Olynthus mill remained dominant in the Levant throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

Although the first few centuries CE saw a great deal of technological change in mill types in Palestine, the history of milling is not a straightforward one about progressively more efficient mills replacing earlier manual technologies, or of women's household work turning into men's monetized work. Carol Meyers describes the first two centuries CE in Roman Palestine as a time when "milling with machines replaced grinding with simple tools." With the development of more efficient technologies like the Olynthus mill and donkey mill, she writes, household grinding was replaced by commercial milling, at least in urban settlements. Meyers suggests that rabbinic texts tend to depict men working at the more mechanized mills, and that the shift to more efficient technologies entails a shift toward "professional" male millers.⁴⁴

Meyers associates both Olynthus mills and donkey mills with the male professional turn in milling. Considering the finds from two sites—rural Nabratein and urban Sepphoris—she argues that the urban site sees a much higher number of mechanized mill types whereas older saddle querns persist at the rural site. Archaeological surveys at Nabratein found twenty-two saddle querns (all Roman), six rotary mills (all Byzantine), but no Olynthus mills

⁴³ Rafael Frankel, "The Olynthus Mill, Its Origin, and Diffusion: Typology and Distribution," *American Journal of Archaeology* 107, no. 1 (2003): 1–21.

⁴⁴ Carol Meyers, "Grinding to a Halt: Gender and the Changing Technology of Flour Production in Roman Galilee," in *Engendering Social Dynamics: The Archaeology of Maintenance Activities*, ed. Sandra Montón-Subías and Margarita Sánchez-Romero (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2008), 65–74, at 70, quoting Robert I. Curtis, *Ancient Food Technology* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 284.

or donkey mills. By contrast, surveys at Sepphoris found fifteen Olynthus mills, two pre-Roman saddle querns, one donkey mill, but no rotary mills.⁴⁵

I would caution against this association of Olynthus mills with a professionalizing of milling, because so-called commercial baking was “largely born of domestic production.”⁴⁶ Although grinding stones in archaeological contexts are usually found in secondary use, the few in situ examples of mills illustrate the difficulty of distinguishing between domestic and professional production. For instance, at Gamla the distinction between domestic and commercial production is often made on the basis of the typology of mill pieces found or the size of the room, but the placement of the installation relative to areas labeled as domestic quarters suggests that the distinction between domestic and commercial flour production is not always easy to discern.⁴⁷

Rabbinic texts also challenge the association of women with manual technology for home use.⁴⁸ For instance, while some texts depict men operating what appear to be Olynthus mills, there are also clear references to women operating these mills. A verse in the New Testament depicts two women grinding together at what is widely understood to be an Olynthus mill.⁴⁹ In the *Tosefta*, the rabbis also depict two women grinding at an Olynthus mill.⁵⁰ Additionally, several rabbinic texts discuss Olynthus mills as domestic installations. These texts are concerned with the mill’s placement within a room, the requisite distance from any shared walls with the neighbor’s domicile, the status of the mill in case the property is sold, and so on.⁵¹ Both men and women are depicted working at these mills, and they are frequently described as domestic installations. The fact that both men and women are depicted working at these mills and that they are described as domestic installations undermines a facile association of women with small-scale manual grinding at home and only for the home.

The opposition between women’s grinding and men’s professional milling hews to the common argument about the rabbis’ decommodification or deprofessionalization of work done by women. The case of grinding grain, however, shows that this opposition presumes rather than establishes whether the rabbis understood the house as a site of decommodified labor.

Conclusion

Sometime in the tenth century, Rabbi Sherira Gaon, an Iraqi Jewish jurist, responded to a query about a wife’s obligations to perform the labors from this mishnaic list.⁵² The questioner asks what happens if a woman refuses to do the first two tasks on the list—grinding grain or

⁴⁵ Meyers, “Grinding to a Halt,” 69, table 1.

⁴⁶ Jared Benton, *The Social and Professional Lives of Bakers in the Western Roman Empire* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 23.

⁴⁷ The excavators describe the installation as “larger than usual for domestic flour production,” but also note the proximity of this installation to a wing labeled as a domestic. Zvi Yavor, “The Architecture and Stratigraphy of the Eastern and Western Quarters,” in *Gamla II. The Architecture: The Shmarya Gutmann Excavations, 1976–1989*, ed. Danny Syon and Zvi Yavor (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2010), 13–112, at 63–67 (quotation at 67).

⁴⁸ Keying textual references to particular typologies can be a fraught endeavor because rabbinic texts over time use the same term (*riḥa de-yada*) to refer to both Olynthus mills and rotary hand mills. I am following Rafael Frankel’s provisional identifications of what mill-type is referred to in various rabbinic references. Rafael Frankel, “Mills and Querns in Talmudic Literature—A Reappraisal in Light of Archaeological Evidence,” *Cathedra*, no. 110 (2003): 43–60 (Hebrew).

⁴⁹ Matthew 24:41.

⁵⁰ *Tosefta*, Niddah 7:3.

⁵¹ Mishnah, Bava Batra 2:1, 3:5; *Tosefta*, Bava Metzia 8:30, Bava Batra 1:3.

⁵² *Oṣar ha-ge’onim*, Ketubot 59 (no. 429).

baking.⁵³ The questioner asks whether a husband can tell his wife to sell property from her dowry to purchase an enslaved person to do her work for her. It also asks if, in the absence of a dowry, a man can purchase an enslaved woman from the money accounted towards his wife's ketubah, namely the surety he owes her in case of death or divorce. Rabbi Sherira's answer to both these questions is an unequivocal no.

The exchange as a whole reveals that the list of seven labors remains a useful site for generations of jurists to consider the intersections of a woman's labor obligations and her property rights within marriage. At one point, for instance, Rabbi Sherira states that women may be more accustomed to grinding grain in villages than in cities like Baghdad. The transition from grinding to milling in particular is often painted as a watershed in gender, labor, and professionalization. Rabbi Sherira's observation about grinding in villages and milling in Baghdad would certainly seem to support this narrative about the professionalization of milling. This account of grinding makes intuitive sense, just like the modern scholarly interpretations that understand this list as showing how wealth shapes labor obligations.

Too often, however, that which makes intuitive sense occludes our ability to understand what makes a certain state of affairs seem intuitive. There is nothing intrinsically natural or logical about the list of labors from the Mishnah. It is not *sui generis*, and it should be contextualized not only within the Mishnah but alongside other late antique and modern formulations of lists of domestic labor.

The ancient and medieval interpretation of the Mishnaic list tended to focus on individual labors to the exclusion of others. The Babylonian Talmud contains a lengthy discussion of breastfeeding and next to nothing about baking or washing. Rabbi Sherira's discussion of grinding grain and cooking represents a new turn within the interpretation of this list. Modern scholarly work about this list has retained this focus on individual labors, but the discussion has concentrated mainly on textile work as the last item on the list. As a result, the rest of the labors and the form of the list itself have mostly escaped notice.

Considering Mishnah, Ketubot 5:5, alongside other lists of labors redirects attention to the list as a literary form. What else we can say about domestic labor besides the truism that wealthier women had to do less of it? I situate grain processing as an industry rooted in domestic production, and grinding grain as a labor that challenges the distinction between decommodified labor for domestic use and commodified labor for the market. Archaeological and textual evidence about grinding grain can push scholars to take a more critical posture toward teleological narratives of technological progress, professionalization, and gender.

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⁵³ The choice of these two labors is significant because these are the two labors from which the wife is released if she brings a single enslaved woman in her dowry. The query as a whole appears to be a theoretical one, rather than based on an actual situation that arose in a community.

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