

Commentary

JANUARY 1957 CULTURE & CIVILIZATION

The Study of Man: Pagan Symbols in Jewish Antiquity

Scholars delving into Jewish graves and synagogues of the Greco-Roman period have found material that points to hitherto little recognized...

by **Erwin R. Goodenough**

THE DECORATIONS ON JEWISH GRAVES AND SYNAGOGUES DURING THE Greco-Roman period have long been known in part, but the number of such decorations uncovered is now increasing. They constitute a body of evidence more important for the history of Judaism (and Christianity) than the Dead Sea Scrolls, yet they have aroused little interest. They show a strange combination of recognizable objects used in Jewish worship—the *shofar*, *lulab*, *ethrog*, menorah, and Torah shrine—with figures from paganism. These latter range from the apparently innocent rosette and grapevine to representations of the eagle, and of pagan deities or semi-deities. Few figures are carved in the round, though some lions in the round have been uncovered, lions that apparently guarded the Torah. But Helios the Sun God, the Seasons, Winged Victories offering wreaths, Ares clothed only in helmet and spear, the goddess Fortuna or Tyche—these and many others appear in mosaic or painting or are represented in deep relief.

Ornament of this kind has been found on Jewish monuments in Rome, South Italy, Tunisia, Asia Minor, the Crimea, and as far east as Dura on the Euphrates. It especially abounds in all parts of Palestine, and every year Israeli archeologists report new and startling discoveries. Strangely, the only response both Jewish and Christian scholars have made in the past to these discoveries is to try to explain that they have no historical importance whatever. As an

instance, it was proposed some forty years ago that the incredibly carved synagogues of Galilee were thrust upon an unwilling Jewry by pagan donors, a suggestion taken seriously by but few scholars today, if only because the synagogue ornament corresponds closely to what is to be found on Jewish graves of the time—and certainly the pagans were not making tombs for the Jews.

More recently it has been urged that since these ornaments were approved by the rabbis they could have had only a decorative importance. To support this, statements of various rabbis have been cited, including a gloss of the 5th century (C.E.), which states that R. Abaye's prohibition against making any images whatsoever applied only to images made for worship. Occasionally rabbinic statements do admit this distinction, but for the most part they maintain the traditional prohibition against all image-making. When they are permissive they allow Jews to use objects made by pagans on which an image has been represented, but the *Sifra* and *Sifre* unqualifiedly forbade Jews themselves to make images of any kind. Two other rabbinic sayings are much quoted, one to the effect that R. Johanan, of the 3rd century C.E., did not forbid it when Jews "began to have paintings on the walls"; another that R. Abun, a generation or two later, did not prohibit the making of designs in mosaic. But Salo Baron has for a number of years recognized that the wide prevalence of the art work is not explicable in the light of such passages: it was, rather, the popularity of the art which forced the rabbis for a time to legalize it—though actually only a few rabbis gave their authorization. Conspicuously, scholars have not asked why, with the undisputed traditional attitude what it was, Jews insisted on using such pagan forms at all.

In the latest attempt to explain the images as being only ornaments, scholars have pointed to the illuminations in Jewish manuscripts from medieval times, and to the painted marriage contracts of the Baroque period, the silver "breastplates" for the Torah, the Haggadah books for the Seder, and the carved tombstones. A very adequate selection of such ornament may be seen in the volume *Jewish Ceremonial Art* by Kayser and Schoenberger.¹ The obvious conclusion is that the law forbidding images was often observed in the breach: when Jews have wanted ornament they have frequently made it, whether they were Orthodox or not. And this is quite the most powerful argument for

supposing that a row of cupids over the entrance to an ancient synagogue had no more significance than cupids in the margin of an 18th-century Jewish marriage contract. But is it correct?

Faced with this evidence, one must admit that in various times and places Jews have suddenly relaxed the prohibition against images, and have made them, both animal and human, with great freedom. Why loyal Jews in medieval and modern times thus dismissed their aniconic traditions to make images at all, only a close student of the Judaism of those years can hope to explain. That they did so, however, by no means dismisses the problem of the ancient representations. For that problem is not, essentially, how ancient Jews could have made human or animal forms, but how they could have made the particular forms they did at the time and in the environment they did.

The problem at once becomes an entirely different one when put in this way. The ornament borrowed by Jews in later centuries seems to have been symbolically dead; that is, it had lost any specific implication and potency for non-Jewish religions. No one would suggest, for example, that the cupid had any symbolic religious value during what we call roughly the Renaissance and Baroque periods. True, it still had its power of adding a bit of emotional warmth to a church, or before a Madonna, but it could convey nothing more. Similarly, the other forms appearing on Jewish objects at that time were either illustrative, like figures of the patriarchs, or forms from antiquity whose symbolic force the secular spirit of Renaissance art had thoroughly killed.

Live symbols of the Baroque period were completely taboo. For, in contrast to the cupids, Jews never considered putting Christian crosses, or figures of the Madonna and Child, on their marriage contracts or Chanukah lamps. To suggest that they might have done so is to introduce an entirely new dimension into the discussion. The forms they borrowed obviously offered no threat to Jewish monotheism or Jewish particularism. But the crucifix or the Virgin, as live symbols of a competing religion, could not have been used unless the basic Judaism of the time had been modified. Significantly, I have not seen a trace of Christian symbolism on any Jewish object in the Jewish Museum in New York.

Christians could use Jewish figures, and did, for Christians never forgot their Jewish heritage however far they strayed from it. But no Christian symbols could appear on Jewish objects so long as the Jews who made them remained true to Judaism.

The difference between the modern and the ancient borrowing at once becomes striking. Jews have for centuries delighted in the story of the little group of scholars who gave their lives in an attempt to take down a golden eagle—which represented Helios the Sun God—from one of the gates of Herod's Temple. Strict Jews apparently would not tolerate such things. But on the walls of synagogues built only a century and a half later, eagles appear in great numbers. The zeal of the martyrs shows clearly that an eagle in those days meant something far more powerful than a cupid on a Baroque marriage contract—something so symbolic in pagan terms that it desecrated the Temple and had to be removed at the cost of one's life. But it had no less symbolic power in paganism two centuries later when the Jews put it prominently on their synagogues, and it was soon to become one of the favorite symbols of Christianity. That is, observant Jews of the period regarded the pagan eagle much as a later rabbi would regard a cross, for the eagle was a very living symbol at the time Jews borrowed it. Yet borrow it they freely did.

When we examine the rest of the ancient borrowings, they clearly appear to have been equally alive. Helios driving his chariot in the Zodiac was in the Fate Roman Empire adopted by religion after religion, country after country, as a symbol of the ultimate god of the universe. He was apparently given many different names to suit local traditions, but the figure became a common symbol for all, since all the pagan religions recognized a single monotheism above their local god names. The figure of Helios meant god as clearly as the words *deus* or *theos*, more clearly than the words Helios, or Osiris, or Zeus. It indicated the god common to the Roman world as definitely as the crucifix indicates the Christian God. This living symbol the Jews of Palestine put into two synagogues that we know, probably into three others, and quite possibly into many now unknown.

Throughout the Greco-Roman world, the vine had come to represent the availability of god for men, ceremonially in a cup of wine, artistically in a great variety of presentations—grapes, vines, birds or animals in the vine or eating the

grape, a spouting wine cup, or birds drinking from a cup. Such representations of the vine, originally associated primarily with Dionysos or Bacchus, were adopted by almost every religion that offered men such a share in the divine nature as to promise them immortality. The vine also came to symbolize the central cultic act of the new Christianity. And in all of these religions it expressed the same basic hope of immortality through a giving of God's nature or self to man, spoke that hope as directly as words, if not more so. Yet in this very period of the vine's highest and clearest symbolic power, Jews took it over for their synagogues and graves. The spouting vase, with birds and the tree of life beside it, was in mosaic on the floor of a synagogue in Tunisia; birds eat grapes and vines offer their fruit in synagogues everywhere in Palestine; and Jews were buried with the symbol in Rome and Pannonia. A great crater, or mixing bowl, with a pair of Dionysiac felines above it, was painted immediately above the Torah shrine at Dura.

Many other symbols, too, were borrowed. The lion became so associated with the Torah shrine that of all the forms taken into Judaism at this time the lion (with, in Poland, the Zodiac) alone survives. That the lion, as is usually maintained, simply represents "Judah" is refuted by the fact that Jews cannot now use it separately from the Torah shrine for casual or generally symbolic presentation, and some rabbis remove it even from there. Clearly it represents the Torah, or guards the Torah, rather than generally symbolizing the tribe of Judah. In Jewish symbolism of the Greco-Roman period, however, the lion not only accompanied the Torah shrine but also appeared freely in many other places—on a sarcophagus where it is represented in the act of killing a man, or on synagogues. It might be paired with a bull at the entrance of a synagogue, two lions might guard a wine cup, or its head be carved or painted on tombs and synagogues. It is readily demonstrable that the lion thus borrowed had at the time deep symbolic value in paganism, value which continued on into Christianity, where the lion came to represent the inspiration of Mark the Evangelist.

In addition to the images already mentioned, the following appear so commonly as to require examination: the fish, bread in baskets or loaves, the bull, the tree, the crown of Victory; rosettes, wheels, masks, the Gorgon head; birds, including the dove, the goose, and duck, wading birds, the quail, the peacock, the cock; the sheep, the hare, the shell, the cornu copia, the centaur, the griffin, Pegasus, the ladder, the boat, and various astral symbols. The list appears desultory and miscellaneous, and it seems at first preposterous that these forms could have anything in common.

But as their history is traced through the civilizations lying behind their Jewish and later Christian adoption, it becomes clear that each of these objects had vivid symbolic power in their various environments, and that each indicated facets of a single type of religious experience. Very rarely, we see these symbols presented in ancient Judaism with such an artistic effect as to recall the art of the Renaissance. Most of the representations are clumsily done, and in a great many cases they are ludicrously crude scratchings whose makers could have had no artistic motive. So they appear especially on the little stone markers used on graves in the catacombs. Increasingly we sense that Jews are saying in symbolic language something very like what pagans, and soon Christians, were expressing by the same vocabulary.

Before trying to explain what all three groups were saying by the symbols, or hoped from the symbols, I should point out that the Jewish borrowings from paganism by no means included the whole vocabulary of Gentile religions. Most conspicuously, no scenes from pagan cult or mythology appear in what can safely be called either Jewish or Christian art. This generalization is illustrated by two striking possible exceptions. On one sarcophagus found in a Jewish catacomb in Rome, Bacchic cult is plainly shown: Dionysos stands over a boy ministering to the mystic basket from which a snake rises. This unique representation of a scene from pagan cult startles us by its complete incongruity with the art as a whole. Similarly, there was a unique reference to pagan myth on a sarcophagus in the great Galilean cemetery of Beth Shearim. Represented on its long face was the battle between the Greeks and the Amazons, and on a short end Leda and the swan. Only a man of great wealth could have ordered that sarcophagus, and apparently his fellow Jews in his own day did not dare forbid him to place it in their cemetery. The archeologists who discovered it,

badly broken up, were confident it had been smashed in antiquity, however, and I suspect that it did not stand in the cemetery many generations before the Jews demolished it. For this representation also was going too far. Jews could and did use the duck, goose, and other water or wading birds as symbols, but specific illustration of the adventure of Leda was apparently intolerable. It seems clear that individual Jews, then as now, might have ventured beyond the group's approval, so that it is dangerous to take as "Jewish" a symbol found only once, or not directly associated with recognizably Jewish tokens. On this basis one can safely say that the Jews of the time carefully avoided pagan cultic and mythological scenes.

The restriction has great significance. Christianity, strikingly, drew the same line: it accepted the abstract symbols but not the representations of pagan cults or myths. In making this distinction, both religions seem to reflect their scorn for the pagan gods, myths, and cults. But it has long been recognized that while Christianity scorned the pagan gods and cults, in contrast to the rabbinic traditions of Judaism, it absorbed into itself much of the motivation, the idea of salvation, which pagan religions, and especially the mystery religions, offered. Nevertheless, Christianity allowed no syncretism—that is, no conscious blending of religions—and it never presented itself to the pagans as on a level with pagan religions, or as simply another religion. It was the "one true" faith. Similarly, Judaism could not have remained Judaism had it not all along been doing just that, since God's intolerance of rivals has always been one of its leitmotifs. Christians inherited the attitude from Judaism, and it registered again in Moslem exclusivism. In rejecting the scenes of pagan cult and myth, Jews and Christians demonstrated their rejection of the gods and rites of their neighbors. But that at the same time Jews, like Christians, made use of the more abstract symbols suggests that along with other use, Jews had appropriated many of the hopes and attitudes of the pagans, to enrich their own Judaism.

An analogy may be found, perhaps, in the way in which Jews living in America accept the ideals of democratic society, which were born out of the political experience of England, France, and the early American colonies, and which have come to be a basic part of the structure of America. In accepting these ideals

Jews feel them to be an integral part of their Judaism. Two centuries ago most Jews and Christians would indeed have been surprised if told that such social ideals constituted an integral part of their religion. But Judaism and Christianity alike seem to me deeply enriched by the new conceptions, and by no means “secularized” (the modern equivalent of the ancient “paganized”).

How can we evaluate or discuss what came into Judaism (and Christianity) with the symbols? The method has already been suggested—that of tracing each symbol through its history in the ancient Levant and Mediterranean world to discover its real meaning. The historical approach must precede the anthropological; what the latter might yield is still to be ascertained: history has to establish and order the facts before anthropology can set to work on them. We learn from history that the meaning of a symbol has two aspects or levels. The obvious first level is what one who uses a symbol says it means; that is, the “explanations” he himself will give of it and why he uses it. Sometimes a symbol long outlives its explanation, as with us the potency of the horseshoe or four-leaf clover has done. Perhaps these never had any explanation at all, just as “three on a match,” originating in World War I, was explained in so many different ways that clearly none had any validity. On a deeper level, however, these symbols have a meaning quite sub-verbal and immediate. This second meaning can be called their “value.”

The value of a horseshoe or rabbit’s foot is that to have one, or find one, brings good fortune. Deeper religious symbols, such as the Shield of David is becoming in our own day (why, we hardly know), have a much more complicated value. The Shield appears to represent, and inspire, that most intangible potency, Jewish loyalty, though the nuances of its impression will vary with every Jew, as the implications of the flag vary for individual Americans. Both Shield and flag, however, have the value of representing a great entity, and registering as well as inspiring loyalty to it.

A symbol with such a living value cannot be used as mere ornament. A loyal Jew would no more consider a gold cross an ornamental object to be worn in his buttonhole than a Gentile would feel comfortable, or ornamented, wearing a

Shield of David. A living symbol is alive by virtue of its having impact—that is, value—not by virtue of its having explanations. Unless one is willing, however remotely, to feel the impact of the cross one cannot wear a cross. This is why Jewish artists of the Baroque centuries could not use a crucifix: the value is inseparable from the symbol so long as the symbol is alive. Sometimes one does deliberately want to share in the values of another religion, and so uses its symbols. For example, as a Gentile, I should not think of wearing a Shield at David, because I do not “belong.” Similarly I could not wear a Union Jack, let alone a hammer and sickle. But when I attend a Seder or a Sabbath meal I like to take my *yarmelke* and wear it, because I want the people I am with to know that I too am registering much of the value of the ceremony: thus I signal my sharing in the inherent Jewish values. A man who refused sympathy with the Jewish rite on such an occasion could not show it more clearly than by declining to cover his head.

The value, then, goes with the symbol as long as the symbol is alive. The cup or grape could be said to represent the beneficence of Dionysos or Jesus, each in its own religion, and be explained in terms of the legends associated with first one divinity and then the other. But quite unchanged for both religions, the ceremonial cup of wine represented available divine beneficence, and seems to have done so wherever it went, even when no explanations or myths accompanied it.

The evidence seems to present itself in almost syllogistic form: (a) if live symbols carry their value wherever they go; (b) and if the symbols ancient Jews borrowed were very much alive; (c) then the conclusion seems inevitable: when the ancient Jews borrowed the symbols they took into their experience as Jews the values of those live symbols. I have added “as Jews”—though it does not properly belong in the conclusion of the syllogism—because the pagan symbols were so frequently associated with Jewish symbols on synagogues, graves, lamps, and the like, that the Jews seem to have taken the values directly into their Judaism as Christians took them into their Christianity.

What were those values—what was the central reality of which the various symbols presented only facets or aspects? The answer to that question has been suggested for a few of the symbols. Actually it should be given only after the reader has tortuously followed the historical use of each symbol, since the symbols take us into a thought world as strange to the Judaism most people know as are the symbolic forms themselves. For the value of the symbols, individually and collectively, in paganism and Christianity alike, was that of a mystic hope—the hope that one could share in the divine nature to the extent that one would come into a larger range of living in this life, and into immortality after death. The details and nuances of this hope cannot be simply explained, for the hope itself represents a type of religious aspiration quite foreign to what George Foot Moore called “normative” Judaism, which Harry A. Wolfson now calls “native” Judaism. Yet it has manifested itself in Judaism, even in the Judaism of the rabbis, since probably long before the Christian Era. Gershom Scholem has for a number of years been working out the tradition of it in his rich works on Jewish mysticism, but there is much of the early period that he has not included. “I do not intend to give much space,” he says (in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*), “to hypotheses concerning the origins of Jewish mysticism and its relation to Greco-Oriental syncretism.” As a matter of fact, he pays no attention to the problem at all, so that his work may be said to begin where the evidence here discussed leaves off. It is of the greatest importance that the religious aspirations of Philo Judaeus, before the time Scholem takes as his point of departure, and the mysticism Scholem describes from periods after the archeological evidence ceases, are all of a piece. Though an element of Oriental apocalypticism had established the forms of much mystic thought before the Roman armies crushed Jewish political hopes, it cannot be discerned in the Jewish art of the Greco-Roman period. Later writing indicates clearly that Jewish mystics took in general the road which Philo had walked, and this is the sort of Judaism to which the symbols seem to attest.

A sort of gnosticism full of Neo-Platonic elements, taught in terms of tags from the Torah, became very popular. With this type of Judaism, practiced by Jews still deeply loyal to Jewish precepts, the basic value of the symbols completely agrees. In Jewish writings of this type the fish, bread, and wine came to a startling Jewish mystical fulfilment. The *kiddush*, especially, was regarded as

the Jewish “cup of salvation,” while the Jewish mystics steadily looked for, and found, experiences similar to those which pagans and Christians were expressing by their cup, as well as by the other symbols.

I have suggested an answer, then, to the basic question of why it was that Jews borrowed the symbols they did, and at the time they did. It appears highly likely that they did so in order to say that, as mystic Jews, they found in their Judaism the same experiences pagans and Christians sought. Like them, Jews probably found in the symbols both stimulus and hope for the experiences. This is not to say that they became pagans or Christians in the process: their avoidance of images out of Gentile myth and cult clearly testifies to the contrary. But unless the Whole theory of the continuity of symbolic value collapses, it seems clear that the Jews who made these designs on their graves and synagogues added to their loyal obedience to Jewish law and customs, as they locally knew them, the mystic aspirations that are abundantly attested to in Jewish literature before and after the period of the art.

One further question: through what process did Jews become thus influenced by Hellenistic ideas?

Not until after the period of this ornament did Judaism universally come to acquire its great Babylonian Talmud, its devotion to the Hebrew and Aramaic languages of the tradition, its system of rabbinical training in it, and its feeling that each congregation should be led and instructed by a rabbi who had had such training. When this great new tradition and stabilizing heritage took hold upon Jewish minds, Jews for the first time developed the sort of religious exclusiveness and self-sufficiency that we have for nearly a millennium and a half associated with them. In earlier times, as the prophets attest vividly, popular Judaism, and many of the kings of Israel and Judah, widely used the festivals, images, and rites of their neighbors: even the small core of loyal men who finally edited the books of the Bible could not remove from them the many traces of pagan ideas and practices. This has so long been accepted that it need here be only stated.

But when did this Jewish availability to Gentile values in religion cease? That question has never, to my knowledge, been directly asked at all. The reaction from Hellenization led by the Maccabees shows how far Gentile values had affected Jews before then, but we have little evidence as to how thoroughgoing the reform was in Palestine, and no evidence at all as to the common life of Jews in Alexandria and Rome. Recently Saul Liebermann and others have been pointing to definite invasions of Hellenism into even the Talmudic writings of the rabbis. If Hellenism appears there, we must presume that under less strict conditions than those in the Palestinian and Babylonian academies, it would have penetrated much more deeply.

One of the avenues by which popular Judaism seems to have been affected was what we now call magic. A great number of magical incantations are preserved, primarily addressed to the God of the Jews, but with the most extraordinary admixture of pagan gods also, so that it frequently becomes hard to decide whether a given incantation was written by a Greek who borrowed the names of the Jewish God, patriarchs, and angels, or by a Jew who borrowed the Greek names. On the assumption that when the incantations primarily address Jewish names they were produced by Jews, when primarily Greek or Egyptian names by Greeks or Egyptians, a startling number appear to have been made by Jews. Similarly, while it cannot always be determined whether Jews or Gentiles made the little amulets preserved from the period with the figures of pagan deities carved upon them, apparently a large number of them *were* made by Jews. We must assume that these amulets, like all amulets, were worn or put into graves for their potency—that, as with the incantations, Jews used them to get results, used them with a sense of their value. When for example, on such an amulet, Harpocrates sits in an Egyptian sun boat as the symbol of protection and immortality, but in clear letters underneath is given the Greek equivalent of the Jewish secret name of God, Iao, one can only conclude that the Jewish owner wanted immortality from Iao, but could explain what he wanted to himself and to Iao, could get what he wanted, most directly by using the figure of Harpocrates.

Such charms and amulets go much further than the ornaments on synagogues and in Jewish cemeteries. But they show a popular adjustment to potent Gentile images which must have had a long history before Helios could appear on a

synagogue floor, or Victory on a Jewish grave. From the other side, Philo and later Jewish mystics show the mystical ideas of the Greeks becoming part of the Judaism of the more intelligent and sensitive Jews who had had a pagan education. The two seem combined in the symbols approved by Jewish groups for their graves and synagogues. From the amulets and incantations Jews had learned to use the value and potency of the pagan figures and symbols. The more thoughtful retained these values while teaching the group to keep free of paganism itself.

So the decorations on the graves and synagogues show that as a group Jews had a surprising eagerness for symbols with mystical and saving value but that they stopped far short of the syncretism of the charms and amulets. The mystic aspirations and their symbolic representation used in official Jewish places seem a conservative compromise, made by Jews completely loyal, like Philo, to the Jewish God and people, but by Jews who were finding in Judaism itself the spiritual reality that, as Philo and the Christians often said, pagans had vainly sought.

¹ Reviewed in COMMENTARY, June 1956, by Alfred Werner.—ED.



