

# Recreating Jewish Sacred Space: An Examination of Jewish Symbols on Ancient Oil Lamps

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*Oil lamps from the “Holy Land” of Israel, Syria, and Palestine have been the subject of much collection and debate. Many of these objects whether they possess religious symbols or not, have been labeled as “Jewish” without much thought as to what that label really signifies. For instance, does a menorah found on a lamp indicate that the buyer or seller was Jewish, or was it simply an aesthetic choice? The Jewish symbols found on lamps from the third century CE on are largely cult implements, objects from the Temple in Jerusalem, or even the Temple itself. I argue that these oil lamps recreated sacred space, both in synagogues and in homes where people read sacred texts. An analogue can be found in Roman lamps, which depict a cult statue, which Peter Stewart argues also created sacred space. This study does not seek to explain the meaning of every Jewish symbol on every oil lamp, but rather propose a common use or attitude towards lamps with Jewish symbols. Namely that these symbols, which referenced actual sacred spaces and items, recreated sacred space themselves.*

### “Jewish” Lamps

Beginning in the third century C.E. and continuing throughout Late Antiquity, a variety of Jewish symbols appear on oil lamps from the region of Syria-Palestine. These symbols include cult implements or objects such as the *lulab*, *ethrog*, *shofar*, incense shovel, menorah, and sacred spaces such as the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> This study seeks to understand why these symbols appear on lamps by placing them within the cultural and spiritual milieu of the Roman Empire and comparing them to other symbols from Greco-Roman religions. Peter Stewart argues that Roman lamps with miniature cult statues may recreate sacred space by reproducing the space within the gods corresponding temple.<sup>2</sup> This study argues that a similar phenomenon occurred with lamps with representations of objects found within Jewish sacred spaces and even the spaces themselves.

For some time oil lamps have been labeled as Jewish or Christian, without much thought being given to what that means or if the object warrants such a label.<sup>3</sup> There are two core issues when it comes to the study of Jewish and Christian art and the history of the subject. Namely, the innate biases that come with the study of a currently practiced religion and the history of the development of the field. The study of Jewish and Christian art has its origins in the 1930's, during which the burgeoning field of art history was dominated by German scholars and subsequently influenced by Nazism.<sup>4</sup> This created a desire to separate the art of Jewish, Christian, and other Greco-Roman religions into different categories and to not acknowledge connections or influences between them.<sup>5</sup> In reaction to this earlier scholarship Jas Elsner argues for a pluralist approach, rather than examining one religion's art in isolation.<sup>6</sup> Bearing Elsner's criticisms in mind, this study seeks to understand so-called “Jewish”

symbols by comparing them and putting them into context with Christian and Greco-Roman art.

Scholars like Rachel Hachlili argue simultaneously for a Judaism, which assimilated into the Roman Empire, but also asserts a specific Jewish identity through the proliferation of Jewish symbols.<sup>7</sup> This argument not only isolates Judaism, but also assumes a monolithic Judaism as opposed to the multiple competing strands of the religion identified by Erwin Goodenough.<sup>8</sup> Hachlili also assumes objects with Jewish symbols were exclusively used by Jews, while other authors have identified Jewish symbols appearing in Christian and other religious contexts.<sup>9</sup> This study proposes one way in which an object with Jewish symbols could be used or viewed by a Jewish audience, instead of assuming every object with Jewish symbols was used by Jews or had a Jewish meaning.

Ancient attitudes towards religions necessitate a pluralist approach when discussing their iconography. It is important to examine the context of “religion” in its ancient context, as it is very different from its modern connotation. Ideas of religious choice, personal belief, and communities are all modern ones, especially the idea of exclusive belief in a single “religion.”<sup>10</sup> Instead it is clear that for ancient people, religious practice could involve the worship of both the god of a mystery religion like Isis and a god from the traditional pantheon such as Jupiter without any sense of contradiction.<sup>11</sup> Even worshippers that believed in a single god did not regard themselves as members of a “religion,” but were simply doing the right things according to their god just as every member of the community did. This does not exclude any sense of belonging to a group, but participation in religious rites rather than a set of specific beliefs, provided a sense

of inclusion.<sup>12</sup> The ancient attitude towards religion necessitates a pluralist approach that does not separate religions but that treats spirituality in the ancient world as a whole. I use such an approach to explain at least some ways in which ancient audiences might have viewed Jewish symbols. This will be done by examining the symbols found on so-called “Jewish” lamps not in isolation, but rather among the many symbols used by religions in the Greco-Roman world.

### Oil Lamps and their Use

Oil lamps were the main source of artificial light in the ancient world, and were available to all segments of society.<sup>13</sup> The lamps themselves could be any vessel or container with some type of oil and a wick.<sup>14</sup> The material used for vessels was usually clay or bronze, the wicks were made of any fibrous material, and the most common fuel was olive oil, although any oil could be used.<sup>15</sup> In addition to being used during the night, oil lamps would have been needed during the day in poorly lit interiors.<sup>16</sup> Clay oil lamps were made in three ways during virtually every period: handmade, wheel-thrown, or mold-made. Mold-made lamps have their origin in the third century BCE, but are most common in later periods.<sup>17</sup> These were made by pressing together molds made of clay, wood, or plaster for the top and bottom halves of the lamp.<sup>18</sup> Afterwards the lamps may or may not have been covered with slip before finally being baked in a kiln.<sup>19</sup>

In Judaism, lamps were used in a variety of rituals in addition to being present in places of worship. Lamps were used at weddings to signify the couple’s married status to the public, and lamps were commonly lit at tombs.<sup>20</sup> Since lighting lamps or adding oil to them was forbidden during the Sabbath, a lamp was lit once at the beginning, and at the end of the Sabbath, the Havdalah light

was lit and a blessing was said.<sup>21</sup> During the Feast of the Tabernacles many lamps were lit with wicks, which were made from the robes of rabbis.<sup>22</sup> The menorah, a lampstand with multiple branches, which became the most common symbol in Judaism, would have been present in at least some synagogues.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the lamp itself may be seen as a religious object in addition to the symbols commonly represented on them.

### Jewish Iconography on Oil Lamps

A diverse range of Jewish symbols are found on oil lamps, and this study will examine the menorah, the Torah shrine, the temple façade, the *lulab* and *ethrog*, the *shofar* and incense shovel, and wine. These symbols appear alone and in many combinations, although some tend to appear together. While these symbols are strongly connected to the Jewish faith, they are still borrowed from, or borrowed by, other contemporary religions. This aspect of the symbols is often ignored, but becomes clear when examining the objects without the prescribed labels of “Jewish” or “Christian.” Finally, the meaning of the symbols in Judaism also warrants discussion, even if the symbols have meaning in other contemporary religions.

The menorah is the symbol most frequently found on oil lamps classified as “Jewish” and indeed Jewish art in general.<sup>24</sup> The depiction of the menorah in Herod’s temple in Jerusalem, from which the symbol likely originates, is forbidden by Rabbinic law, so it often appears with five, six, or eight branches. However, the prohibition likely only applied to the reproduction of a three-dimensional menorah, but not those in relief or made in other materials, since seven branched menorahs do appear in various representations including on oil lamps (See Fig. 1).<sup>25</sup> Other examples include an inscription, numerous depictions in art with

other cult implements, and a stone menorah found in a synagogue in Tiberias near the Sea of Galilee.<sup>26</sup> The symbol does not appear until after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, and does not become popular until the late second or early third century C.E.<sup>27</sup>

Despite modern associations to the story of Judas Maccabeus and the oil which lasted eight days, Goodenough asserts that the menorah was originally highly abstract.<sup>28</sup> There are two main interpretations for the menorah, either that it symbolized the tree of life or that it represented the seven planets.<sup>29</sup> The former would tie the menorah back to the Sumerian cosmic tree, which grows from a mountain. Another representation of that tree from Susa dating to the fourth millennium B.C.E. offers another close parallel.<sup>30</sup> The large base of the menorah reflects the mountain and the circular buds often depicted on menorahs are meant to represent fruit or leaves, to show it was a living tree.<sup>31</sup> The other and most common interpretation is that the seven lights represent the seven known

planets comes from Josephus.<sup>32</sup> The menorah is represented on oil lamps in a variety of styles from simple lines to more elaborate designs, and it is the most common symbol by far.

The image of Torah shrine found on oil lamps represents a physical item in the synagogue. Both in reality and on oil lamps the shrine consists of a niche with a single arch supported by two columns or three openings with three arches supported by columns (See Fig. 2). Many depictions show a single oil lamp hanging in the middle, but other depictions show a variety of objects within the shrine including a menorah, a *lulab*, a fish, a sheep, a wine cup, and several others. Ovoid lamps with bow-shaped nozzles referred to as Beit Natif type lamps from the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. commonly show the Torah shrine with a single arch and a lamp hanging in the center.

The temple façade also represents a physical location, this time depicting the place of worship. This fact is confirmed by a lamp depicting the temple of the Samaritans, another Semitic group closely related to the Jews. This lamp depicts the temple at the top of Mount Gerizim with its identifying set of stairs leading up to it (See Fig. 3).<sup>33</sup> Other lamps from Syria-Palestine show a temple without the steps, either with columns depicted on the shoulders of the lamp and a roof or arch on the nozzle, or with the entire façade on the nozzle.<sup>34</sup> These lamps would probably be interpreted as a general shrine if it were not for the Mount Gerizim lamp, that indicates they may be depicting a specific building.

The *lulab* and the *ethrog* often appear together, especially in funerary settings on tombs but occasionally separately on many oil lamps.<sup>35</sup> The *lulab* can simply be a palm branch, but also appears as a bundle of twigs



Figure 1. Early Samaritan lamp depicting a menorah, dating from the fourth to fifth century C.E. Ruth & Stephen Adler.



Figure 2. Beit Natif type lamp with a torah shrine and hanging lamp on the nozzle, dating from the fourth to fifth century C.E. Ruth & Stephen Adler.

with myrtle and willow.<sup>36</sup> The *ethrog* was a special type of citrus fruit similar to a lemon or lime.<sup>37</sup> The *lulab* and *ethrog* were used in the Feast of the Tabernacles (where many lamps would have been used) and in the Temple by the altar.<sup>38</sup> Both were also associated with the Passover Feast, which had some messianic implications. This may be why it is adopted by Christians as the palm branch (*lulab*) and the fruit of the tree of life (*ethrog*).<sup>39</sup> While most commonly found in funerary contexts, the *lulab* and *ethrog* appear on oil lamps such as the Darom type lamps from the first and second century C.E.

It would be convenient to label every lamp with a *lulab* or *ethrog* as a lamp used in the Feast of the Tabernacles but this is unlikely since they often appear with other cult

implements not associated with the Feast of the Tabernacles. The Feast of the Tabernacles was a harvest celebration, which included a procession with people carrying lamps. The *lulab* and *ethrog* are clearly connected to the Feast of the Tabernacles both symbolically and as actual objects used in the procession.<sup>40</sup> The ritual occurred at the time when farmers harvested wine and fruit, and people would process carrying the *lulab* and *ethrog*. Along the procession were dancers and jugglers, and sometimes the festivals got out of control to the point where the courts ordered special stands to be built for women to keep them separated from the men. The Festival of the Tabernacles clearly has commonalities with the festival of Dionysus or Bacchus, and these similarities did not escape ancient authors either.<sup>41</sup> Josephus calls the *lulab* and *ethrog* a “θύρσος” (*thyrsus*), a staff topped with a pinecone and covered in ivy and leaves.<sup>42</sup> Plutarch outright calls The Feast of the Tabernacles the festival of Bacchus.<sup>43</sup> Just as the menorah (if one accepts the tree



Figure 3. Early Samaritan lamp depicting the temple of Mount Grizim with its staircase on the right shoulder, dating to the fourth to fifth century C.E. Ruth & Stephen Adler.

of life interpretation) may appear in slightly different forms in Judaism and Christianity, the *lulab* and *ehtrag* appear in similar forms both in the cult of Dionysus and in Judaism.

Although not symbolically connected like the *lulab* and *ethrog*, the *shofar* and the incense shovel often appear together. Often, both the *shofar* and the incense shovel appear flanking a menorah or a *lulab* but not as a pair alone.<sup>44</sup> The *shofar* is a horn made from a ram's horn, which was blown to mark important days or occasions.<sup>45</sup> The symbolism of the *shofar* as Erwin R. Goodenough puts it, "cannot be traced," but does have two important connotations.<sup>46</sup> It is more generally associated with the New Year, and more specifically with the story of the binding of Isaac, when Abraham agreed to sacrifice his son when commanded by god.<sup>47</sup>

The incense shovel is depicted as a rectangle with a handle and sometimes circles or little mounds are present on the rectangle representing burning coals. Other Greco-Roman religions use this same ritual and it is likely the Jews simply borrowed the ritual.<sup>48</sup> There is some debate as to whether incense was burned in synagogues or only in the Temple at Jerusalem. Literary references, the fact that it was used by Chinese Jews and Yemenites, and countless depictions alongside other cult implements suggest that incense was burned in the Temple and synagogues. As to the incense shovel's symbolic meaning, much like the *shofar*, little is known. It was probably burned during prayer but beyond its use as a cult implement it is impossible to ascertain.<sup>49</sup>

Finally the Jews also used wine in their symbolism, as did many religions around the Mediterranean. Wine is usually represented by vines with grapes on the end sprouting from a vessel variously interpreted as an amphora or a cup (See Fig. 4).<sup>50</sup> As to the

symbol's meaning, a connection to fertility seems to make the most sense. An amulet with this symbol found in a undisturbed Jewish grave where it was placed on the deceased's vulva supports this interpretation.<sup>51</sup> Wine was used in Jewish ritual, most importantly at communal meals, when a group of ten or more men gathered to eat, and blessed the bread and wine. The ritual is the same one that Jesus performed in the New Testament before he died, which was then turned into the Holy Communion.<sup>52</sup> Wine was also used in various rituals such as circumcisions, weddings, and funerals.<sup>53</sup> Although common in many religions this symbol brings to mind the cult of Dionysus once again. In the passage mentioned above Plutarch describes Jews as Dionysiacs, although some scholars do question the validity of this passage.<sup>54</sup>

While some Jewish symbols seem to be mainly used in reference to that religion, it is not difficult to connect almost every symbol with an either earlier precedent or a later adaptation. This simply illustrates how symbols could be adopted and modified by various religions. When they appear on oil lamps however, it is difficult to say much about the person who used the object. Just because an object has Jewish symbols on it does not mean a Christian would not have used it. When lamps bear an overwhelming amount of Jewish symbolism on them it does suggest some sort of connection to Jewish meaning and use. Whether this means the manufacturer of the lamp was Jewish, or that the lamp was made for a Jewish audience, or it was made in an area where Judaism was the prevalent faith, cannot be said with absolute certainty. Instead this study proposes one way in which a specific audience may have thought about or used these objects.

### Recreating Sacred Space

Comparing the symbols of Judaism with other

contemporaneous religions gives rise to new conclusions. Many of the symbols on lamps discussed above are cult implements, items found within Jewish sacred space, or the sacred spaces themselves. The temple façade is a recreation of the Jerusalem Temple, and the Torah shrine is an overt recreation of a space found within synagogues.<sup>55</sup> The *lulab* and *ethrog* were used in festivals and feasts not to mention the fact that they often appear on Torah shins and mosaic floors within synagogues, such as in the synagogue at Beth Alpha.<sup>56</sup> The *shofar* and incense shovel were also used in this way and also appear elsewhere in mosaics, usually flanking the menorah.<sup>57</sup> As both depictions of space and the objects found within them, these symbols recreate a sacred space.



Figure 4. Beit Natif type lamp depicting a amphora flanked by grape clusters, dating from the fourth to fifth century C.E. Ruth & Stephen Adler.

Peter Stewart asserts that Roman lamps with miniature cult statues may create a sort of sacred space that mimics the sacred space of the temple.<sup>58</sup> However, Stewart stops short of arguing that these lamps serve as portable shrines bringing a cult space with them wherever they are carried.<sup>59</sup> In addition to answering the question as to whether lamps with Jewish symbols recreate sacred space, this study must examine the idea of Jewish sacred space itself. Most of the lamps examined attempt to display images of objects within the temple or the Jerusalem Temple itself, which can be seen as Jewish sacred space *par excellence*.<sup>60</sup> The objects depicted on oil lamps also appear in synagogues and their decoration. The proliferation of synagogues begins in the second century B.C.E., when they served as places for reading and studying sacred texts.<sup>61</sup> Whether or not synagogues are sacred space has been questioned, and the synagogues may have even been a recreation of the sacred space of the original Temple as opposed to being innately sacred.<sup>62</sup> If true, this idea only further suggests that oil lamps with the same symbols as those found as decorative elements in synagogues, like the synagogues themselves, serve to recreate sacred space. Even if synagogues simply recreate the sacred space of the Temple, does that not in turn make them sacred? In this same way lamps can recreate sacred space without being innately sacred themselves.

By examining Jewish and Greco-Roman art together it becomes clear that some lamps in both religions were used to recreate sacred space. Lamps with Jewish symbols depict cult implements and spaces, and were themselves used both in cult activity, and within the synagogue. All this suggests they could recreate sacred space outside the synagogue, for instance in private homes when they worshipped or read sacred texts. There is even a degree of ambiguity between

homes and synagogues as the former was often turned into the latter.<sup>63</sup> While such lamps may not have been viewed as portable synagogues, they clearly reference sacred space, cult implements, and cult activity. In this way Jews used lamps with Jewish symbols in order to recreate sacred space. This conclusion not only has implications for lamps with Jewish iconography, but the study of artifacts with religious iconography as a whole. The fluid nature of ancient religions necessitates this pluralist approach, which examines one religion's art within the broad spectrum of religions found in the ancient Mediterranean. Using such an approach, this study demonstrates one way in which objects with a specific range of iconography were used or thought about by a specific group.

Endnotes:

1. Goodenough 1953, 78
2. Stewart 2003, 201.
3. Elsner 2003, 115.
4. Elsner 2003, 120.
5. Elsner 2003, 120.
6. Elsner 2003, 125.
7. Hachlili 1998.
8. Goodenough 1953, 184-5.
9. Hachlili 1998; Elsner 2003, 117.
10. Elsner 2003, 115.
11. Beard et al., 1998, x.
12. Rasmussen 2013, 20.
13. Bailey 1963, 11.
14. Bailey 1963, 9.
15. Bailey 1963, 10.
16. Bailey 1963, 11.
17. Bailey 1963, 13.
18. Bailey 1963, 13-14.
19. Bailey 1963, 15-16.
20. Westenholz 2004, 15.
21. Westenholz 2004, 17.
22. Goodenough 1953, 87.
23. Goodenough 1953, 79-80.
24. Goodenough 1953, 71.
25. Goodenough 1953, 71. I would like to thank Noam and Steve Adler for their permission to reproduce these photographs originally published in *Oil Lamps of the Holy Land: The Adler Collection*. These photographs and other information can also be found at [www.steve-](http://www.steve-adler.com)

- adler.com
26. Goodenough 1953, 80.
  27. Goodenough 1953, 77.
  28. Goodenough 1953, 80.
  29. Goodenough 1953, 81.
  30. Goodenough 1953, 73.
  31. Goodenough 1953, 73.
  32. Joseph., BJ. 5.217
  33. Westenholz 2004, 44.
  34. Goodenough 1953, 85.
  35. Goodenough 1953, 86.
  36. Goodenough 1953, 143.
  37. Goodenough 1953, 86.
  38. Goodenough 1953, 143.
  39. Danielou 1961, 6.
  40. Goodenough 1953, 86.
  41. Goodenough 1953, 87.
  42. Joseph., AJ 13.372.
  43. Plut., Quaest. Conv. 4.6.2.
  44. Goodenough 1953, 170.
  45. Goodenough 1953, 167.
  46. Goodenough 1953, 188.
  47. Goodenough 1953, 171-172.
  48. Goodenough 1953, 91.
  49. Goodenough 1953, 91.
  50. Goodenough 1953, 106.
  51. Goodenough 1953, 107.
  52. Goodenough 1953, 124.
  53. Goodenough 1953, 124-126.
  54. Goodenough 1953, 124.
  55. Goodenough, 83-85
  56. Goodenough, 143
  57. Goodenough, 170
  58. Stewart 2003, 201.
  59. Stewart 2003, 205.
  60. Urman and Flesher 1995, 325.
  61. Gutmann 1981, 4.
  62. Urman and Flesher 1995, 320.
  63. Urman and Flesher 1995, 330.

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