

# Viewing Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology

*VeHinnei Rachel – Essays in Honor of Rachel Hachlili*

*Edited by*

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## The Open Torah Ark

*A Jewish Iconographic Type in Late Antique Rome and Sardis*

Steven Fine\*

Scholars have long noted that images of Torah Shrines are markedly different in the Land of Israel from those that appear in Jewish contexts in and around Rome (see Hachlili 1988, 166–87, 247–49, 270–80; 1998, 67–77, 363–73; 2000; 2013, 192–205 and references there). In Palestinian exempla—in mortuary contexts, reliefs, occasionally on a ritual object and especially on mosaic synagogue pavements—the doors of the cabinet are almost always closed. This is the case within both Jewish and Samaritan contexts (Meyers 1999; Magen 2008, 134–37; Hachlili 2013, 192–203; Figs. 6.1–6.3). Only one image of an ark containing scrolls has been discovered in Israel, a rather primitive graffito found in the Jewish catacombs at Beth She‘arim (Hachlili 1988, 247), a burial compound known for having served Jews from both Palestine and the nearby Diaspora communities (Rajak 2001).

By contrast, in Rome (Figs. 6.4–6.6), and in the Sardis synagogue in Lydia in Asia Minor (Fig. 6.7), the Torah Shrine is presented open, with scrolls exposed (Hachlili 1998, 362–67). Happily, Rachel Hachlili has handily collected and made available all of the extant evidence of Torah Shrines from both Israel and the Diaspora. Her corpora (1988; 1998) are now a touchstone for the study of this material, allowing all who have followed after her the luxury of a fully organized body of sources, and readily available. This alone is a major accomplishment, one that I am pleased to celebrate with this chapter. The fact that Jews so broadly dispersed in the Roman world, from the Land of Israel to Rome and Asia, all used the Torah Shrine as a visual symbol exemplifies the Jewish *koiné*, the “Common Judaism” of this period (see Fine 2013, 11–12). This shared iconography served to unite this far flung Diaspora, just as the more-common image of the menorah did. It is fascinating, then, that Jews in these geographically distant communities—and likely others whose artifacts are still undiscovered (or may never be), developed a nuance to their images of Torah Shrines

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FIGURE 6.1 *The Beth Alpha synagogue mosaic.*  
(AFTER SUKENIK 1932, PL. 8.)

that was different from those that appeared in the Jewish population centers in Palestine. My intention here is to contextualize the open Torah ark within its local Roman contexts, while others—including Hachlili—having focused upon the ties that bind the virtual Jewish community of the Roman Empire. Beginning with a brief discussion of the Palestinian context for contrast, I will focus upon parallels from “pagan” and Christian contexts, mainly in and near Rome that can help us to contextualize this iconography in local terms.

Numerous scholars have identified images of the shrine in Palestinian contexts as the image of the Ark of the Covenant (see the discussion in Hachlili 1988, 279). This identification apparently follows on images of the Ark from the Dura Europos synagogue, ca. 245/246, where the biblical Ark is in fact modeled on a Torah Shrine (positions are cited by Hachlili 1998, 370–73). This approach elides the fact that numerous architectural members of gabled Torah Shrines have been uncovered, the best example being an aedicula discovered in the Nabratein synagogue in the Upper Galilee (Fig. 6.8; Hachlili 1988, 170; Meyers 1999). My own sense is that a less binary approach is preferable, as a conceptual association does not necessarily require formal correspondence. The relationship between the Torah Shrine and the “ark” was basic to Jewish thought from the third century on, when both the Jews of Dura and the rabbis refer to the Torah cabinet, previously called a *teva*, a “chest,” as an *arona*, an “ark” (Fine 1997, 70–79; 2010, 195). This verbal transition was essential, in my view, to the broad conceptualization of the synagogue



FIGURE 6.2 *The mosaic from synagogue A at Beth Shean, which may be Samaritan.*

(PHOTO BY STEVEN FINE.)



FIGURE 6.3 *The El-Hirbe Samaritan synagogue mosaic.*  
(PHOTO BY STEVEN FINE.)

“ark” in terms of the “Ark of the Covenant.” This formulation was a piece of a larger process by which the synagogue was conceptually transformed from a “place of meeting” to a “holy place” by both the rabbis and by local communities—both in the homeland and in Diaspora communities (Fine 1997, *passim*). Seven branched menorahs and lamps dangling from the gable of the ark provided considerable light, serving as spot lights and increased its grandeur. In numerous Palestinian synagogue mosaics, images of the actual ark, its doors closed, appear before these grand liturgical constructions. These mosaics reflected the imagery of the Ark before which they were laid. It seems to me that open doors on the floor might have created a sort of visual clutter, the closed doors providing an image of the “holy place” that is somewhat idealized—just as the flames oriented toward the central branch of each menorah at Hammath Tiberias and elsewhere provide a kind of idealized and self-contained image of the menorah lamps. My sense is that the development of Christian iconography of the holy places during late antiquity was of no small significance to this process, as Jews (and Samaritans) built big buildings that could rival local Christian churches in the same architectural idiom as those churches and sought out imagery that could “stand up” beside the images of the Christian holy places that appeared on Christian mosaics and pilgrimage items.

In Rome, at the very center of the empire, a different conception developed—in example after example, in a wall painting from the Villa Torlonia catacomb, in lapidary inscriptions from Vigna Randanini and Villa Torlonia, on gold glasses found in the catacombs, and on oil lamps discovered in or near

the synagogue of Ostia, the port of Rome (Hachlili 1998, 293–99, pls. vi–15, 20, 21, 24, 25, catalogs all exempla). Full-sized Torah Shrines discovered in both the Ostia and Sardis synagogues (Fig. 6.9) prove that, as in Palestine, this iconography reflects an actual element of synagogue furnishing, thus showing great continuity with images on Jewish gold glasses and oil lamps from the area of Rome (Fine and Della Pergola 1994). While in Palestine the ark is shut closed, however, in Rome the ark doors are wide open. Similarly, at Sardis, a marble fragment of the molding found in the synagogue forecourt shows a shrine, three scrolls stacked within it (Fine 1996, 66, 160–61; Hachlili 1998, 365). This bas relief, which was almost certainly polychrome, is comparable to the two gabled shrines on the eastern wall of the synagogue. Before the discovery of this relief, it might have been assumed that this iconography was limited to Rome. The Sardis exemplar points to a much wider dispersion within Mediterranean Diaspora communities.

The illustration of cabinets containing shelves and either scrolls or codices is rather common in Roman and late antique art, as was fully demonstrated in a 2014 exhibition at the Colosseum in Rome (Meneghini and Rea 2014). Wall paintings from Pompeii show both scrolls on well-ordered shelves (Meneghini and Rea 2014, 54) and arranged generally within leather buckets known as *capsas* (Fig. 6.10; Meneghini and Rea 2014, 121); bas reliefs illustrate librarians neatly ordering scrolls in stacks (Meneghini and Rea 2014, 114); and those who are



FIGURE 6.4  
*A wall painting of a Torah Shrine  
 (detail) in the Villa Torlonia  
 Catacomb.*  
 (COURTESY OF LAWRENCE H.  
 SCHIFFMAN.)





FIGURE 6.5 *A burial plaque with an image of a Torah Shrine in the Vigna Randanini Catacomb in Rome.*

(PHOTO BY STEVEN FINE.)



FIGURE 6.6 *A Jewish gold glass from Rome.*

(AFTER SINGER 1901–1906, 2: 107.)



FIGURE 6.7 *A molding with the image of a Torah Shrine, Sardis synagogue.*  
(COURTESY OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF SARDIS, HARVARD UNIVERSITY.)

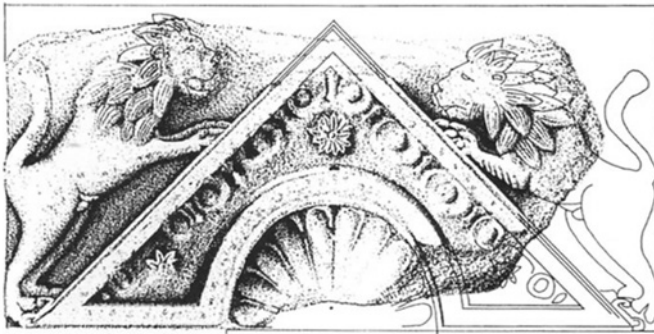


FIGURE 6.8 *An aedicula from the synagogue at Nabratein.* (COURTESY OF CAROL L. AND ERIC M. MEYERS.)

portrayed as literati, in the mode of philosophers, appear in sculpture and paintings holding or reading scrolls (Meneghini and Rea 2014, 131)—as Moses does in the Dura paintings, where an object that may well be a large *capsa* covered with a cloth stands to his left (see Goodenough 1954, 3: 597). Images of patricians sitting before book cabinets full of scrolls appear in Roman funerary contexts (Meneghini and Rea 2014, 205); the doors open to reveal the scrolls. A bas

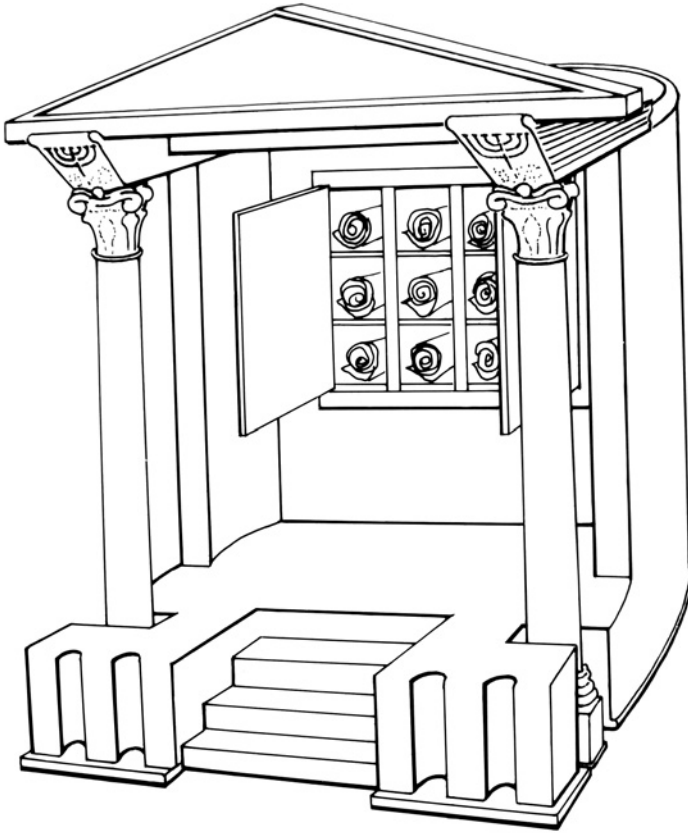


FIGURE 6.9 *A preliminary reconstruction drawing of the Torah Shrine in the synagogue at Ostia.*

(COURTESY OF STEVEN FINE.)

relief from Buzenol, Belgium, shows both scrolls and codices neatly stored (Fig. 6.11; Meneghini and Rea 2014, 186). This imagery is rather common in a number of media during late antiquity, appearing, for example, as an open cabinet containing two shelves, each bearing two codices, in the sixth-century mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna. The books there are labeled, lest their identity as holy books be forgotten, “Marcus, Lucas, Mattheus, Ioannes” (Meneghini and Rea 2014, 207). In the church of San Vitale, also in Ravenna, Moses appears with a scroll, Matthew and Luke hold codices. At the feet of the prophet Isaiah is a *capsa* full of scrolls (Bovini 1957, 14). Images of the Gospel writers seated before book cabinets full of codices were not far behind (Meneghini and Rea



FIGURE 6.10 *A sculpture of a capsa full of scrolls from the Baths of Diocletian.*  
(PHOTO BY STEVEN FINE.)



FIGURE 6.11 *A relief of a book case at Buzenol, Belgium.*  
(PHOTO BY STEVEN FINE.)



FIGURE 6.12 *St. Petronilla in the Cubicle of Veneranda of the Catacomb of Domitilla, Rome.*  
(AFTER TREAT 1907, 39.)



FIGURE 6.13 A wall painting of a scroll in the Villa Torlonia Catacomb, Rome.  
(PHOTO BY LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN.)

2014, 206). Significantly for our purposes, images of scrolls appear in Christian catacombs from Rome. We find both scroll and codex imagery in a depiction of St. Petronilla in the Cubicle of Veneranda of the Catacomb of Domitilla (after 356), for example (Fig. 6.12). Above the *capsa* is a “flying” codex, ungrounded within the composition (Fasola and Biolghini 1974, 41–43; Jensen 2000, 108). In all of these cases, book culture is a sign of education (*paideia*) and with it piety. The open cabinet or the *capsa* asserts the centrality of the book, carefully stored yet visible from outside. It is a sign of sophistication, culture, learning, and, for Christians, an object of divine revelation.

The same is true for Jews. Like their neighbors, Jews in Rome illustrated their books exposed within their cases. In fact, to have shown them closed would have been a choice outside of the local code. The open cabinet asserts the centrality of the scroll for the Jews. Among the epithets that occur in the catacombs are *philonomos*, “lover of the law” and *philentolos*, “lover of the Commandments” (Leon 1960, 128). A Latin inscription describes a woman as *iuste legem colenti*, as one “who scrupulously observed the [Jewish] Law” (Leon 1960, 132). These and numerous expressions of fidelity to the synagogue fit well with the decorative program of the catacombs (Leon 1960, 135–228). Where for others, book imagery was just a part of the decorative repertoire, for Jews the scroll was a central icon. The value of the ark as a repository for the book is underlined by the few images of scrolls as independent symbols in the catacombs and on gold glass. In the Villa Torlonia and on gold glass, scrolls appear as simple lozenges, rather indistinguishable and unimpressive—like

free floating test tubes or cigarettes (Fig. 6.13; Hachlili 1998, 280, 294–95). These parallel the “flying codex” of the Catacomb of Domitilla, and are just as unsuccessful. When placed within cabinets, however, the scroll image is set within a context, and the multiplication of scrolls makes this point even more strongly. The free-floating scroll failed as a symbol where the multiplicity of scrolls within an ark was successful.

An inscription from the Ostia synagogue describes a Torah Shrine as a *keibotos*, reminiscent of the Ark of the Covenant, most probably referring to a third century “ark” that predates the current Torah Shrine (Fine 1996, 158–59, no. 14; Hachlili 2013, 199). This association fits well with the Palestinian *arona*, which also resonates with the biblical ark. An inscription from Sardis, however, goes in a different direction. There we read:

And the same Memnonios, on account of his health, gave the marble inlay [*skoutlosis*] for me also, the place that protects the Law [*nomonphilakion*]. (Fine 1996, 160, no. 21; Kroll 40, no. 63)

This inscription makes the connection between the shrine and its contexts explicit in a way that the tannaitic *teva*, Aramaic *arona*, and the Greek *keibotos* do not. In Sardis, and likely elsewhere, the essential identity of this artifact derives from the scrolls within. Jews as far afield as Rome and Sardis, well known for the centrality of Scripture to their religious experience, turned the receptacle and the scrolls it contained into a broadly recognizable symbol, one with resonance across Roman visual culture—and beyond. In fact, the cabinet full of scrolls was such a successful symbol, that in Rome it even rivaled the menorah, the most successful and widespread Jewish branding icon in the ancient world.

This explanation of the Roman/Sardis case does not fully explain the reason for the difference in Palestine. One might imagine, however, that Palestinian Jews and Samaritans were far more independent culturally, and could assert their own iconographic choices in ways that Diaspora communities could not. Perhaps images of an open-doored cabinet were considered to be disrespectful, displaying the holy book on floor mosaics gratuitous (cf. Hachlili 2013, 204). We shall never know. Where in these Diaspora communities the communicative sense of this symbol dominated, in Palestine a kind of internally-focused numinosity was preferred. In Eretz Israel, after all, everyone knew what was in the “Ark.” The same might not have been as obvious to everyone in the west, where pagans and Christians illustrated their own book cabinets—Christians pointedly focusing on the codex form for their holy books, while Jews proudly presented their sacred libraries of scrolls.

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