

Chapter 15

“When I Went to Rome... There I Saw the Menorah...” The Jerusalem Temple Implements during the Second Century C.E.

by Steven Fine

The interests of Eric M. Meyers stretch from the Bronze Age through the early Islamic period, from ancient Israel to the diaspora communities of late antique Italy, from literary to archaeological sources to the State of Israel and contemporary Jewish life in America. In celebration of Eric Meyers’ interests and contributions, I offer this study of the menorah — which spans all of these sources, periods and locales.

From the earliest literary depictions of the Tabernacle and its implements in the Pentateuch to most recent times, concern for the Temple implements has a central place in Jewish thought.¹ This is true of the implements described in Exodus 25 and 37, and, to a lesser extent, of the implements of the Second Temple. A poignantly contemporary example of this concern was reported on page one of the *Jerusalem Post* on January 18, 1996. The newspaper reports a personal meeting between then Israel minister of Religious Affairs Shimon

Shetreet and Pope John Paul II. After the meeting, Sheetret reported that:

...he had asked for Vatican cooperation in locating the 60-kg gold menorah from the Second Temple that was brought to Rome by Titus 70 C.E. Shetreet claimed that recent research at the University of Florence indicated the menorah might be among the hidden treasures in the Vatican’s catacombs.² “I don’t say it’s there for sure,” he said, “but I asked the Pope to help in the search as a goodwill gesture in recognition of the improved relations between Catholics and Jews (Palmieri-Billig 1996: 1).

The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* discussed the responses to the incident in an article in May 1996. Witnesses to this conversation, reports *Haaretz*, “tell that a tense silence hovered over the room after Shetreet’s request was heard” (Bergman 1996:

18–20, 22). Shetreet's request, and others that have followed,³ are a fascinating extension of the Zionist hope that the Menorah taken by Titus be returned "home" by the Zionist movement (Mishory 2000: 165–99). This is expressed in literary and visual sources, most officially in the Israel Independence Day 1955 commemorative postage stamp showing the Arch of Titus menorah ablaze within the seal of the State of Israel (Mishory 2000; see Litzman 1978: 76).

The legends of the menorah at the Vatican have considerable currency among American Jews. I have heard it from Jews who are members of all synagogue movements, clergy and laity, many of whom take it to be a historical fact. I have heard three versions, though many others surely exist. According to the first, a certain American Orthodox rabbi entered the Vatican and saw the menorah.⁴ According to a second, told to me by an Israeli Moroccan rabbi resident in the United States, it was a Moroccan rabbi known as "Rabbi Pinto." An American resident in Jerusalem recently told me a version that bears a distinctly Anglo-Israeli loading. This story recently embellishes the famous rescue mission of former chief Rabbi of Israel Isaac Herzog to rescue Jewish children in Europe, during which he visited with the Pope at the Vatican.⁵ According to this embellishment, the Pope showed Rabbi Herzog the menorah and refused to return it! Father Leonard Boyle, former director of the Vatican Libraries, tells of Orthodox Jewish tourists from the United States entering the library during their visits to the Vatican and with all naiveté telling Father Boyle that their rabbi teachers had instructed them to go find the menorah during their visits (Bergman 1996). In this way, the most holy pilgrimage complex in Western Christendom is turned into a Jewish pilgrimage site (or at least a religiously amenable option for Jews uncomfortable with visiting Christian sites)! The folklore of the Vatican menorah is well deserving of a broader treatment.

Folklorist Dov Noy tells me that the myth of the menorah at the Vatican is not a part of traditional Jewish folklore, and was not recorded by the researchers of the Israel Folklore Archive. I would not be surprised if this is a distinctly American-Jewish urban myth, blending American anti-Papism with

traditional Jewish fear and distrust of Christians (particularly Catholics). I mention elements that I have encountered causally over the last few years only to illustrate the contemporary interest and passion that the Temple menorah, plundered and taken to Rome by Titus, continues to engender.

Rabbinic literature is, of course, vitally interested in the Tabernacle/Temple vessels. Among the most fascinating evidence for this Rabbinic concern is a group of sources that suggest that the Sages actually visited Rome and there "saw" the menorah and other vessels of the Temple. The earliest appears in Tannaitic sources and the latest in Byzantine-period *midrashim* (Strack and Stemmerger 1992: 119–244, 254–393). My purpose in this context is to assess the historicity of these sources, first against the background of Rabbinic literature and what we know about the whereabouts of the these vessels, especially the menorah, during the latter first and second century C.E. Parallel sources for this inquiry — from Josephus and the archaeology of Rome and Palestine — allow for the contextualization of these traditions: something rare for Rabbinic evidentiary traditions. The sources under discussion are as follows:

1. *Tosefta Kippurim* 2:16⁶ —
The Temple Veil (*parokhet*)

He took the blood from the one who was stirring it.

He entered the place into which he had entered [earlier] and stood in the place where he had stood, and sprinkled some of it on the Mercy Seat (*kapporet*)⁷ toward the two cloths of the ark,

One [sprinkle] upwards and seven downwards. But he did not intentionally sprinkle upwards or downwards. But he did it like one who swings a whip.

And thus did he count: "One, one and one, one and two, one and three, one and four, one and five, one and six, one and seven." Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rabbi Lazer: "Thus did he count: 'One and one and one, two and one, three and one, four and one, five and one, six and one, seven and one.'"

He went to his left, along the veil (*parokhet*).
And he did not touch the veil.
But if he touched it, he touched it.
Said Rabbi Lazer son of Rabbi Jose, “I saw it in Rome and there were drops of blood on it.
And they told me:⁸ “These are from the drops of blood of the Day of Atonement.”

2. *Sifre Zutta, Baalotekha* to Numbers 8:2⁹
— The Menorah

...And whence do I know that each lamp was pointed toward the middle lamp? Scripture says: “toward the lampstand (*menorah*)” (Num 8:2).
And thus it says: “and he dwells turned toward me” (*memuli*; Num 22:5).
Said Rabbi Simeon: When I went to Rome there I saw the menorah. All of the lamps were pointed toward the middle lamp.

3. *Jerusalem Talmud, Yoma* 4:1, 41c¹⁰
— The Priestly Frontispiece (*tsits*)

The priestly frontispiece, on it was written: “Holy to the Lord.”
“Holy” was written below, and “to the Lord” was written above.
This is like a king who sits on his throne.
And similarly [for lots for the scapegoat].
Said Rabbi Eleazar son of Rabbi Jose: I saw it in Rome, and the name was written on it in a single line, “Holy to the Lord.”

4. *Genesis Rabba* 10, 7 (Venice, 1545)¹¹
— The Mosquito that Ate Titus’ Brain

The wicked Titus entered the Holy of Holies, his sword drawn in his hand, slashed the two veils. He brought two harlots and performed sex on them on the altar, and his sword came out full of blood.
There are those who say that it was from the blood of the sacrifices, and there are others who say that it was from the blood of the he-goat of Yom Kippur.
He cursed and blasphemed and took all the Temple vessels and made them like a

single net and began to curse and blaspheme Heaven, saying: “One who makes war with a king in the desert and vanquishes him cannot be compared with one who makes war against a king in his own palace and vanquishes him.”

He then embarked on a ship. As soon as he had embarked a storm smote the sea.

Said he: “It appears that the power of the God of this nation is only on the sea. He punished the Generation of Enosh by water. He only exacted retribution from the generation of Enosh through water. He only exacted retribution from the generation of the Flood through water. He exacted retribution from Pharoah and his army through water. When I was in His house and His own domain He could not stand against me, but now I am beginning to think that he will kill me with water.”

The Holy One, blessed be He said to him: “Villain! By your life, I will inflict punishment upon this villain using the most insignificant creature that I created during the six days of creation.”

Immediately the Holy One, blessed be He, beckoned to his guardian angel of the sea and he ceased from his fury.

When he reached Rome all the dignitaries of Rome came out and lauded him.

When he arrived in Rome he entered to the bath house, and when he left they brought him a vial of spiced wine to drink.

A mosquito entered his nose and gnawed his brain until it became as big as a two pound dove. He screamed, saying: “Let them (the doctors) split open the brain of that man (that is, his own brain).”

Immediately the doctors were called.

They split his brain and removed it, being the size of a two pound dove.

Rabbi Eleazar son of Rabbi Jose said: I saw it in Rome (ברומי אגא חמיתיה). There were two pounds on one side [of the scale] and the dove on the other, and the one weighed exactly the same as the other.

They took it [the pigeon] and placed it in one bowl. As the bird changed so did he [Titus] change, and when the mosquito fled, the soul of the wicked Titus fled.

5. *Esther Rabba* 1, 12¹² — The Throne of Solomon

...It has been taught: Asa and all the kings of Judah sat upon it, and when Nebuchadnezzar came up and sacked Jerusalem he carried it off to Babylon.

From Babylon it was taken to Media and from Media to Greece and from Greece to Edom.

Rabbi Eleazar son of Rabbi Jose said: I saw its fragments in Rome.

Our sources in *Tosefta Sukkah*, *Sifre Zuta* and *Yerushalmi Yoma* have a reasonable chance at historicity, while the *Genesis Rabba* and *Esther Rabba* sources are wholly literary. In *Genesis Rabba* this literary convention is used to add veracity to the physical evidence of Titus' punishment. *Esther Rabba* reworks the "I saw" type in response to the travels of Solomon's throne. After passing through Babylonia, Media and Greece, the throne arrives in Rome by force of Daniel's vision of the four kingdoms. Another Byzantine-period collection, *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*, is aware of both Tabernacle artifacts that were "hidden away" and Second Temple artifacts taken to Rome. The objects taken to Rome include "the mortar of the house of Avtimas, the table, the menorah, the veil of the ark and the vestments of the anointed priest." This tradition assembles the artifacts that sources suggest Sages "saw" in Rome, adding to these "the mortar of the house of Avtimas."¹³

The traditions preserved in *Tosefta Yoma*, *Sifre Zutta* and *Yerushalmi Yoma* are, however, of another order. Each of the items described in these traditions, the *parokhet*, the menorah, and perhaps the priestly frontispiece, could well have been viewed in Rome by the second-century rabbis mentioned: Rabbi Simeon son of Yohai and the son of his Ushan compatriot Rabbi Eleazar son of Rabbi Jose.¹⁴ This evidence parallels the first-person Rabbinic verifications of the Temple service and structure that appear throughout Tannaitic literature. To cite

just one example: In *Mishnah Middot* 1:2 we find the wonderfully piquant comment "Rabbi Eleazar son of Jacob says: Once they found the brother of my mother sleeping, and they burned his robe!" The Rome comments are the continuation of this sort of personal verification. In the sources under discussion, direct evidence of having "seen" these Temple vessels and other "historical" artifacts is taken at face value. It is privileged testimony that serves to conclude theoretical discussions of the vessels within the various pericopae.

Our evidence for the disposition of the Temple vessels after the destruction of the Temple comes from two complimentary sources: Josephus' *Jewish War* (completed ca. 75 C.E.) and the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum, completed ca. 90 C.E. Josephus Flavius reports that the table for showbread, menorah, the Temple veil, and a Torah scroll from the Jerusalem Temple were among the booty brought to Rome in triumph by Titus and paraded through the streets of Rome (*War* 7:5, 132–61). This event was immortalized approximately a decade later in relief panels within in the Arch of Titus.¹⁵

Josephus describes in detail the manner in which many of the Temple vessels were turned over to the Romans. In *War* 6, 387–91 Josephus describes how a certain priest handed over to them "some of the sacred treasures," including

two lamp stands similar to those deposited in the sanctuary, along with tables, bowls, and platters, all of solid gold and very massive; he further delivered up veils, the high-priests' vestments, including the precious stones, and many other articles for public worship. Furthermore, the treasurer of the temple, by the name of Phineas, being taken prisoner, disclosed the tunics and girdles worn by the priests, an abundance of purple and scarlet kept for necessary repairs to the veil of the temple, along with a mass of cinnamon and cassia and a multitude of other spices, which they mixed and burned daily as incense to God. Many other treasures also were delivered up by him, with numerous sacred ornaments; those services procuring for him, although a prisoner of war, the pardon accorded to the refugees.¹⁶

In Chapter 7, lines 148–52 of *The Jewish War*, Josephus Flavius describes Titus’ triumphal return to Rome from his successful campaign in Judaea in great detail. His descriptions of the Temple vessels are relevant to our discussion:

The spoils in general were borne in promiscuous heaps; but conspicuous above all stood those captured in the temple at Jerusalem. These consisted of a golden table, many talents in weight, and a lamp stand, likewise made of gold, but constructed on a different pattern than those which we use in ordinary life. Affixed to a pedestal was a central shaft, from which there extended slender branches, arranged trident-fashion, a wrought lamp being attached to the extremity of each branch, of these there were seven, indicating the honor paid to that number among the Jews. After these, and last of all the spoils, was carried a copy of the Jewish Law. They followed a large party carrying images of victory, all made of ivory and gold. Behind them drove Vespasian, followed by Titus; while Domitian rode beside them, in magnificent apparel and mounted on a steed that was in itself a sight.

Josephus continues in lines 158–62:

The triumphal ceremonies being concluded and the empire of the Romans established on the firmest foundation, Vespasian decided to erect a Temple of Peace. This was very speedily completed and in a style surpassing all human conception. For, besides having prodigious resources of wealth on which to draw he also embellished it with ancient masterpieces of painting and sculpture; indeed, into that shrine were accumulated and stored all objects for the sight of which men had once wandered over the whole world, eager to see them severally while they lay in various countries. Here, too, he laid up the vessels of gold from the temple of the Jews, on which he prided himself; but their Law and the purple hangings of the sanctuary he ordered to be deposited and kept in the palace.

The descriptions of vessels taken to Rome fits well with the “inventory” provided by our Rabbinic traditions. The description of the golden table of the showbread and of the menorah parallels the prominent place afforded these objects on the Arch of Titus. This pairing of the menorah and the showbread table is based not just upon their proximity in the Temple, but also upon both their physical impressiveness and the large quantities of gold of which each was manufactured. The fact that Josephus felt obliged to describe the menorah as being “arranged trident-fashion” is indicative of the uniqueness of this object, which adds to its visual effectiveness. The artist of the Arch of Titus panel realized this, thus emphasizing the menorah in his bas-relief. The menorah and table were paired earlier on a *lepton* of Mattathias Antigonus, minted in 39 B.C.E. as an apparent propaganda tool to ward off the Roman-backed usurper Herod (Meshorer 1982: 94). The issue of proximity, which one would imagine would not have impressed the Roman artists, accounts for the apparent juxtaposition of the table and the menorah on a plaster fragment discovered in the Jewish Quarter excavations in Jerusalem (Avigad 1975: 47–49).

Many of the Temple vessels were eventually deposited, according to Josephus, in Vespasian’s Temple of Peace. This temple was built to commemorate the Flavian defeat of Judaea. The *Templum Pacis* was begun in 71, completed in 75 C.E., and later rebuilt by Domitian. It was constructed on the southern side of the Argiletum, a road that connected the Subura to the Forum (Anderson 1982: 101–10; Richardson 1992: 286–87; Ward-Perkins 1954). Pliny the Elder includes the Temple of Peace among Rome’s “noble buildings,” listing it among “the most beautiful [buildings] the world has ever seen.”¹⁷ The square was surrounded by porticoes, which enclosed a pleasure garden. It also contained a library. The temple was integrated into the east portico. As described by Josephus (*War* 7, 158; quoted above), the Temple of Peace contained quite a collection of artifacts from throughout the Empire.

As Paul Zanker aptly suggests, “the opulence and variety of the furnishings stood as a symbol for Rome as the center of the world” (Zanker 1997: 187).

The Rabbinic viewing of the menorah and the veil would have taken place in this temple. One might suspect that many Jews, both natives of Rome and visitors, might have come to the Temple of Peace to view the Temple items — as Jews to this day still flock to the Arch of Titus.

Josephus has it that the Temple veil and the scroll of the Torah were placed in Vespasian's palace. The imperial palace was a partially public space, as the White House is in the modern United States. As Vitruvius suggests, in homes of the powerful "the common rooms are those into which, though, uninvited, persons of the people can come by right, such as vestibules, courtyards, peristyles and other apartments of similar uses."¹⁸ Referring to the Palatine, Pliny notes that "Imperial mansions were often filled with excellent statues" (*NH* 39.4.38). Little is known of the Domus Vespasianus, where the Temple vessels were apparently displayed. It was probably the same building as the Domus Titus Flavius Vespasianus, later rebuilt by Domitian as the *Templum Gentis Flaviae* (Richardson 1992: 137–38, 140). Important artifacts were displayed in the Domus Titus. Pliny suggests the Laocoon was exhibited there, as well as Polykleitos of Sikyon's "...Two Boys Playing Dice, likewise in the nude, known by the Greek name of *Astragalizontes* and now standing in the atrium of the Emperor Titus (*Titi imperatorius atrio*)." Pliny adds that "this is considered the most perfect work of art in existence" (*NH* 34.19.55). Of the Laocoon Pliny writes: "...the Laocoon, [is] in the palace of General Titus, a work superior to any painting and any bronze. Laocoon, his children and the wonderful clasping coils of the snakes were carved of a single block" (*NH* 39.4.37). It is not inconceivable (though certainly beyond proof, owing to the sparseness of the evidence) that the Temple veil and the Torah scroll were part of the same public/private collection, displayed in the same palace. The Laocoon was discovered on that site January 14, 1506, and significantly impacted Renaissance and later art (Richardson 1992: 137–38; Bieber 1942: 1). The Temple vessels, of course, are lost.

Babylonian Talmud, Meilah 17b, places the *parokhet* in the personal and very private "treasury of the Emperor," though this text says more about

late Babylonian Rabbinic storytelling than about the historical *parokhet*. The enigmatic statement in *Tosefta Yoma* that someone told Rabbi Eleazar, son of Rabbi Jose, that "these are from the blood of the Day of Atonement," suggests that many had seen the veil and that there was some sort of local tradition that existed before Rabbi Eleazar raised his question. One can almost imagine Rabbi Eleazar going to see the *parokhet*, perhaps in the *Templum Gentis Flaviae*, and discussing the spots with local Jews.¹⁹ Whatever the context, what is certain from Josephus is that the sacred vessels were deposited and on view within Vespasian's palace during the later first century.

The Torah scroll that Josephus describes as having been deposited in Vespasian's palace finds an intriguing parallel in a tradition preserved in an 11th-century collection, *Bereshit Rabbati*.²⁰ According to this tradition, a scroll from the Temple was brought from Jerusalem and eventually deposited in a Rome synagogue:

This is one of the words which were written in the scroll that was captured in Jerusalem and was brought to Rome and was stored in the synagogue of Severos.

The description of this scroll as using what later came to be called the medial *mem* and the final *mem* indiscriminately fits well with first century Jerusalemite orthographic practice, as scholars have long noted (Lieberman 1940: 23–24; 1933: 292–93). The disposition of Temple booty within a local synagogue is known from Seleucid times, when vessels of the Jerusalem Temple were placed in an Antioch synagogue by Antiochus IV. Such a dispersal of Jewish sacred artifacts is, thus, not beyond the imaginations of Roman Jews. In *War* 7, 44–45, Josephus writes that²¹

For, although Antiochus surnamed Epiphanes sacked Jerusalem and plundered the Temple, his successors on the throne restored to the Jews of Antioch all such votive offerings that were made of brass (*chalka*), to be laid up in the synagogue (*tan sunagogan*) and, moreover, granted them citizenship rights on equality with

the Greeks. Continuing to receive similar treatment from later monarchs, the Jewish colony grew in numbers, and their richly designed and costly offerings formed a costly ornament to the temple (*to hieron*; Zeitlin 1964: 236; cf. McKay 1994: 81–82).

What is significant is that a Jewish community in Rome perceived itself as possessing such a relic of the Temple, transferred apparently by the Romans themselves to the Jewish community. Some scholars have associated the Synagogue of Severos with the second-century emperor Alexander Severus (Momigliano 1934: 151–53; Leon 1960: 162–65). The Severan dynasty is presented in Rabbinic thought as having been particularly friendly toward the Jews, and a temple was even dedicated “to fulfill a vow of the Jews” to Marcus Aurelius at Qasion on the border of the Upper Galilee and Phoenicia.²² If there is, indeed, an association between the synagogue of Severos and Alexander Severos, the transfer of a Torah scroll taken from Jerusalem for storage there would be all the more significant.

Let us return for a moment to *Sifre Zutta’s* description of the Temple menorah. There we read that “all of the lamps were inclined toward the central lamp.” This purportedly eyewitness-evidence concludes an anonymous academic discussion of the Temple menorah’s lamp arrangement and is the ultimate support for accepting the position that “all of the lamps were inclined toward the central flame...” interpreting Numbers 8:2–3:

Speak to Aaron and say to him: When you raise up the lamps, opposite  face of the menorah (מול-אל פני המנורה) shall the seven lamps shine. And Aaron did thus opposite the face of the menorah he raised up its lamps just as Moses had commanded.

The attempt to focus all of the lamps toward the central one, as my somewhat stilted translation of (מול-אל פני המנורה) suggests, is well-known also outside the Rabbinic corpus, perhaps as early as the Jerusalem graffito from before 70 and certainly from late antique archaeological contexts. We see this, for example, in the Hammath Tiberias B synagogue mosaic (Dothan 1983: 37–38) and the

Beth Shean small “synagogue” (more likely a study house) mosaic (Bahat 1981: 82–85; Fine 1987: 100–101). At some level, it is a natural way to arrange the lamps such that the menorah (or images of the menorah) would be a self-contained and self-referential image. If this text merely reflects the Palestinian context, it supplies the “missing link” between these two pieces of visual evidence.

What, though, if Rabbi Simeon (or some other Sage) really did see the menorah, and its lamps were, in fact, directed toward the central lamp? In that case, then the visual *midrash* at Hammath Tiberias may reflect actual knowledge of the Temple menorah that goes beyond Rabbinic speculation. Significantly, images of the menorah from the Roman catacombs, which date to the fourth century, often depict the lamps atop the menorah’s branches inclined toward the central stalk. We see this, for example, in wall paintings from the Villa Torlonia catacomb.²³ Is this based upon a Palestinian or even local interpretation of Num 8:2, or is this imagery drawn from actual observation of the Temple menorah? In addition, the shape of most menorah depictions from Rome is different from both the graffito and most later Palestinian depictions. In these depictions, the ratio of the height of the branches to the width of the branches approximates the depiction on the arch of Titus. The inspiration for these branches could well be the arch, if not the menorah itself. Significantly, the base of the Arch of Titus menorah is nowhere to be found on later depictions. It is depicted as a tripod (as in Palestinian synagogue images). Our *Sifre Zutta* passage raises serious questions regarding the presence of the menorah in Rome, what was actually seen there, and Palestinian relations with the Jews of Rome. No conclusive answers are possible, of course, but the issues are too important to leave unexplored.

What, then, may we say about the Temple vessels in Rome after 70? Josephus’ descriptions of the presence of the menorah and the showbread table are verified by the Arch of Titus reliefs. The presence of the menorah, the veil and a Temple Torah scroll is expressed in Rabbinic sources as well. Rabbinic sources describe Sages viewing these vessels, as well as the head plate of the high priest. This piece is not mentioned by Josephus, and thus

its presence in Rome is not confirmed beyond the Rabbinic corpus. While it would be easy to dismiss these Rabbinic sources as mere literary devices or as folklore, the external evidence, from Josephus, from the Arch of Titus, from the Jewish catacombs of Rome, and from Palestinian archaeology, do not facilitate a quick dismissal. The Sages clearly knew that the menorah and other vessels continued to exist in Rome long after the destruction of the Temple, and were on public view. For just this evidence regarding the century after Josephus, we should be grateful.

I should note that I am far from the first to ask how it is that the Sages could actually see the vessels. The Sages of the Babylonian Talmud, who were distant from the world of Roman palaces, pleasure gardens and fora, were also bothered by this question. Their solution assumes a less public and considerably more nefarious deposition of the *parokhet*. A tale told in Meilah 17a–b focuses upon the Jewish presence in Rome and quickly turns to allege a Roman decree that forbade the Jews from keeping the Sabbath, from circumcising their sons, and required them to have sexual intercourse with menstruant women. The remainder of the pericope deals with ways that the Jews worked to reverse the decree. A sub-text to our narrative grafts Rabbi Eleazar, son of Rabbi Jose, and his comments on seeing the *parokhet* pertain to the present context. Simeon, son of Yohai, our text tells us, was sent as the emissary to the Emperor's house. In route he met a demon named Ben Temalion. Intending to help Rabbi Simeon, and with his assent, Ben Temalion "advanced and entered into the Emperor's daughter." When Rabbi Simeon arrived there, he demonstrably carried out an exorcism, calling out:

"Ben Temalion leave her, Ben Temalion leave her!"

and as he said this, he left her.

He [the Emperor] said to them [to Rabbi Simeon and to Rabbi Eleazar son of Rabbi Jose]:

Request whatever you desire.

They were led into the treasure house (לגניזה) to take whatever they chose.

They found the decree (איגרא), took it and tore it up.

It was in reference to this that Rabbi Eleazar son of Rabbi Jose said:

"I saw it in the city of Rome and there were on it several drops of blood"

(Bacher 1897: 285–87; Bar-Ilan 1995: 17–31).

Benjamin of Tudela (second half of 12th century) describes the holy vessels of the Temple in Rome, using some similar terminology in his 11th-century travelogue. Benjamin suggests that medieval Romans had a tradition that the Temple vessels were in Christian hands:

In the church of St. John in the Lateran there are two copper columns that were in the Temple, the handiwork of King Solomon, peace be upon him. Upon each column is inscribed "Solomon son of David." The Jews of Rome said that each year on the Ninth of Av they found moisture running down them like water. There also is the cave where Titus the son of Vespasian hid away (שגנו) the Temple vessels which he brought from Jerusalem (Adler 1967: 7).

While the supposed columns of "Solomon son of David" were in full sight, the vessels of the Second Temple, brought by Titus to Rome, were thought to be hidden away. Benjamin uses the verb *ganaz*, to hide, to describe the dispersal of the vessels by Titus. This parallels our Meliah passage, where the *parokhet* was hidden away with the decree against the Jews in the king's treasure house, his *genizah*. One wonders, therefore, whether Benjamin's account draws upon our tradition, or whether the linguistic parallel is accidental. In any event, Benjamin of Tudela provides important evidence that medieval Roman Jews did indeed believe that vessels of the Second Temple were in Rome, under Christian auspices. By the 13th century Christians agreed. An apse mosaic laid in Saint John in the Lateran in 1291 proclaims the presence of not only the Ark of the Covenant but the menorah and columns: "...Titus and Vespasian had this ark and the candelabrum and...the four columns here present taken from the Jews in Jerusalem and brought to

Rome.” By the end of the 13th century, then, the Lateran was claiming to have the Temple booty of the Solomonic Temple, taken, anachronistically by “Titus and Vespasian,” on display (or in a reliquary).²⁴ This is the same church where in modern times relics from the Jewish catacombs of Rome, especially inscriptions and images of menorahs, were displayed. According to other Christian sources — which do not appear to be any more reliable — the menorah was taken away to North Africa by the Visigoths, who sacked Rome in the 5th century, and from there to Constantinople, and perhaps back to Jerusalem after that.²⁵

Benjamin of Tudela “knew” that the Temple vessels had been brought to Rome. He also knew that he could not see them, for they had been “hidden” — just as tractate Meliah said they had. The holy objects were present and not-present. They were visible in the Arch of Titus, yet invisible in a cave where Vespasian himself had placed them — under a church no less. When contemporary Jews go to Rome the Menorah is no less present, yet non-present. They know that their holy vessels were brought to Rome, as commemorated in that open sore known as the Arch of Titus. They can also see the menorah in the remains of the Jewish catacombs of Rome, most of which are safely stored and displayed in the Vatican, and that until relatively recent times the

Church had actively acquired Jewish books and artifacts — often in improper ways. As long as the menorah is in Rome, awaiting return to Jerusalem, the hope of restoration is not yet lost — whether in a religious sense, or in its secularized Zionist form. The modern Rabbis whom I have mentioned — the American Orthodox rabbi, “Rabbi Pinto” and even Rabbi Herzog, whom some contemporary Jews earnestly believe entered the Vatican in search of the menorah — give life to this myth, to Jewish longing for the return of the Temple vessels, to lingering Jewish distrust of Christians, and to American anti-Papacism (as evidenced most vividly in the blockbuster popularity of Dan Brown’s best-seller, *The Da Vinci Code*; Brown 2003). Contemporary Jews, particularly Orthodox Jews, have been known to reenact this myth on their own searches of the Vatican for the menorah — providing a Jewish overlay for their own touristic (and often emotionally conflicted) forays into the holiest site of Roman Christendom.²⁶ As we have seen, even the Israeli Minister of Religious Affairs participated in this myth, merging it with traditional Zionist imagery of returning the menorah home thorough the Zionist enterprise. With Rabbi Simeon, all of these contemporary searchers (and to be candid, not a few academic scholars) would like nothing more than to be able to say “When I was in Rome...there I saw the menorah.”

NOTES

- 1 Meyers 1976, and the short essays collected by Yisraeli 2000.
- 2 No one at the University of Florence whom I have contacted has knowledge of this research.
- 3 I discuss additional examples in a forthcoming volume to be published by the Jewish Publications Society, tentatively titled “*When I was in Rome, There I Saw the Menorah*” and other *Encounters with Art and Judaism in the Ancient World*.
- 4 Many thanks to Lawrence Schiffman for this information.
- 5 “Herzog, Isaac,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), 422–25.
- 6 *The Tosefta*, ed. S. Lieberman, 2nd ed. (New York:

- Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992); *Tosefta Kifshutah*, ed. S. Lieberman (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1955–1988), *ad. loc.*, for parallels.
- 7 See Lieberman’s comment, *ibid.*
- 8 See *Midrash Tanhuma*, ed. S. Buber (Vilna: Romm, 1913), *Va-yakel* 10; Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshutah*. Compare Jacob Neusner’s translation, *The Tosefta* (New York: Ktav, 1981) 199.
- 9 *Sifre Zutta, Be-ha’alotkha* to Numbers 8:2, *Sifre D’Be Rab and Sifre Zutta on Numbers*, ed. H. S. Horowitz (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1966) = *Midrash ha-Gadol*, ed. Z. M. Rabinowitz (Jerusalem: Rav Kook Institute, 1967), *ad. loc.*
- 10 *Talmud Yerushalmi According to Ms. Or. 4720 (Scaql.*

- 3) of the Leiden University Library with Restorations and Corrections (Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 2001). See Sukkah 5a = B. Yoma 63b.
- 11 See the manuscript traditions and parallels cited in *Midrash Bereshit Rabba*, eds. J. Theodor and C. Albeck (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965), 1:84–85 and *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah*, ed. M. Margulies (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1993) 23:3.499–502.
- 12 Vilna edition.
- 13 Ed. S. Schechter (New York: Feldheim, 1967), version A, ch. 41, p. 67.
- 14 Strack and Stemberger 1992: 84–85. Attributions in Rabbinic literature are always difficult. See Strack and Stemberger 1992: 62–68; Green 1978; Kalmin 1992: 165–97, esp. 168–69.
- 15 On the Arch of Titus, in general, see Yarden 1991 and the bibliography cited there.
- 16 Translations of Josephus follow *Josephus Flavius, The Complete Works*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, R. Marcus, A. Wikgren and L. Feldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1961–1965).
- 17 Pliny, *NH* 36, 102, trans. D. E. Eichholz, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1962).
- 18 Vitruvius, *On Architecture* 6.5.1, trans. F. Granger, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1934).
- 19 The evidence is surveyed by Leon (1960: 46–74, 195–228, 263–346); Kraabel (1979: 497–500); Noy (1995); Rutgers (1995).
- 20 *Midrash Bereshith Rabbathi*, ed. C. Albeck (Jerusalem: Mekitse Nirdamim, 700, 1940). *Va-Yigash* 45:8, and Albeck's notes, pp. 210–11.
- 21 See. 
- 22 Roth-Gerson 1987: 125–29 and the bibliography cited there; Chiat 1982: 62–63; Ilan 1991: 57–59; Fine 1999: 226–30.
- 23 The illustrations are most conveniently arranged by Goodenough 1953: 3, nos. 769, 808, 810, 817, 973.
- 24 Many thanks to Prof. Dale Kinney, who brought this mosaic to my attention; Kinney 2005.
- 25 See Levy 1969: 255–58. Levy discusses Patristic sources for the disposition of the menorah through the eleventh century. See also Strauss 1960: 122–29; Sperber 1965: 154–55; Harrison 1994: 239–48.
- 26 A typical example of Jewish renarrativizing of Christian pilgrimage occurred on an eleven-day kosher tour of Italy that I co-led in 2001. Members of the group avidly discussed the permissibility and their personal comfort level in entering the Vatican and other Christian sites. A minority chose not to enter, while most did (including the wife of a deceased American ultra-orthodox rabbi). The Israeli guide and I narrated the visits to Christian sites in such a way as to highlight Jewish points of contact, providing a Jewish script for a distinctly Christian pilgrimage experience. At the Arch of Titus, this guide orchestrated a distinctly Jewish ritual event, singing with the group Psalm 126 to the tune of *Hatikvah*, the Israeli anthem (Note that this psalm is recited before festive meals on Sabbaths and festivals. The tune of *Hatikvah* is used with Psalm 126 in nationalistic Jewish religious contexts in Israel and abroad, particularly on Israel Independence Day).

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