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**A semiotic analysis of menorah from the period of nascent  
Israel to the construction of the first Chanukah menorah in  
third-century Alexandria**

A Senior Thesis Submitted to  
The Faculty of the Department of History  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts

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Asheville, North Carolina  
22 November 2004

Karl Jung once wrote: “The collective unconscious appears to consist of mythological motifs or primordial images, for which reason the myths of all nations are its real exponents.”<sup>1</sup>

Taken at face value, these words of the eminent psychologist seem to suggest is that it is information which is the primary substance of all human experience. This information, he posited, accreted and manifested itself in symbols. Symbols become a two-way avenue of historical investigation: how did a given people react to a symbol, and how did that symbol change in response to those people?

This paper proposes to chart the gradual eddies of change which have affected the primary symbol of Hebrew culture: the menorah. The menorah of Chanukah bears only a tangential relationship to the menorah as it first appears in history. Our oldest definitive record of a menorah dates in the area of 3000 BCE (fig. 1). It first appears in the context of nascent Israelite fertility worship, and it is found in both artistic depiction (fig. 2) and as an actual lampstand (fig. 1).

Previous research on the menorah has tended to focus overwhelmingly on the Chanukah menorah and the miracle associated with it. A number of popular reads have been published in this area, with Maida Silverman’s “The Story of Chanukah” being one of the most popular. Other publications, such as Susan Braunstein’s “Luminal Art: Chanukah Menorahs of the Jewish Museum”, are little more than art books, photographs of various Chanukah menorahs.

Research which focuses on the pre-Chanukah menorah is spotty and incomplete. Gordon Gray offered a paper at the 1914 convocation of the British & American Archaeological Society which provided a running commentary of the physical tabernacle

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Jung, *Man and His Symbols*. (New York: Dell Publishing Co, 1997), xi.

menorah, but little else. Dr. Carol Meyers offering to the body of menorah scholarship, “The Tabernacle Menorah”, is a master’s thesis which focuses on the culture of nascent Israel and greater Mesopotamia to the construction of the menorah, as both physical object and symbol.<sup>2</sup> While her scholarship and erudition are extensive, she confines herself solely to the tabernacle menorah. This is a consistent failing of menorah scholarship to the present day – a focus on a certain area or date to the exclusion to the bigger picture of its semiotic development. Providing context between these important markers in menorah history, as well as reinterpreting the existing body of research based on new evidence, are the primary virtues of this paper.

Frank Cogliano’s research offered a variety of insight as to the shaping of Israelite culture under Solomon, when the single menorah was ignored for a time in favor of ten new golden menorahs placed in the Temple. After repeated Babylonian raids these menorah were lost and the original seven-branched menorah regained its prominence.<sup>3</sup> This menorah would reside in the First Temple of Jerusalem for years until carried off by Nebuchadnezzar in the First Destruction of 586 BCE.<sup>4</sup>

This was the first transition of menorah as a concrete symbol – that is, of actually existing physically - to that of menorah as an abstract symbol. During the period of the Babylonian exile the menorah was seen to represent not only a constant reminder of what has been lost in the exile, but the eventual promise of a return to and restoration of the Temple at Jerusalem.

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<sup>2</sup> Carol L. Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah*. Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press.

<sup>3</sup> Sperber, D. "The History of the Menorah." *Journal for Jewish Studies* 16 (1965): 135-59.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Cogliano, “The First Reclamation: A People’s History,” *Cambridge Historical Review* 118, no. 476 (2003): 609.

This restoration, led by Jewish general Judas Maccabaeus, would lead to the event which would come to define the menorah of today, though none of the participants could have been aware of this at the time.<sup>5</sup> The menorah of Chanukah legend, fashioned by an unnamed priest out of broken Syrian pikes, is seen here as an agent of restoration. Not is the physical menorah in this instance restored to its rightful place in the Temple, but the Light of Yahweh which it has come to represent again shines for Yahweh's chosen people.<sup>6</sup>

The menorah again contracted to a single vessel, in the period of the Second Temple. At this point, however, the menorah underwent a subtle but crucial semiotic change. While the original menorah was a passive purifying symbol, this new menorah is an active purifying influence. All kings of Israel prayed before it, and to the menorah was given a notion of aural invincibility; so long as the menorah was lit, the light of Yahweh's grace upon the Israelites could never be withdrawn.

This notion was proven false, however, during the Second Destruction and subsequent Diaspora of 70 CE.<sup>7</sup> The menorah again passed into the realm of abstract symbol of which there are many, rather than the concrete symbol of which there is only one. Through realization by the rabbis that the tradition of the menorah ought not be lost, even if its original symbolism could not be relied upon, the nine-branched menorah used in Chanukah celebrations was invented (fig. 26).

For purposes of space the time period to be considered will be that of nascent Israel to the period immediately following the Second Destruction. It is the purpose of this study to trace the development of the menorah from its earliest stages to its eventual

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<sup>5</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom In Israel*. (New York: Trinity Print Int'l, 1993), 24.

<sup>6</sup> David Biale, *Cultures of the Jews*. (New York: Schocken, 2002), 84.

<sup>7</sup> D. Sperber. "The History of the Menorah." *Journal for Jewish Studies* 16 (1965) 135-59

incarnation as the Chanukah artifact. Making use of extensive archaeological and etymological evidence, this paper will demonstrate that though its representation, both concretely and abstractly, have changed dramatically, the semiotic core of the menorah has remained intact – a symbolic representation of Yahweh’s eternal devotion to his chosen people.

### **Use of Language**

In dealing with a mutating symbol over a long historical period, precise terminology and definitions are required for purposes of academic clarity. In the context of this paper, the word **menorah** will only be used in discussing objects or impressions which fit the following criteria: a central shaft surrounded by either six or eight branches (distinction being made before and after the Second Destruction of the Temple in 70 CE), ornamentation in accord with the instructions given in Exodus, and use as an agent of perpetual devotion.

The word **menoraic** will be used in the context of symbol evidence which either predates the first physical tabernacle menorah, or which allows for certain deviant aspects, such as the menorah as used in temple mound worship and so not an agent of perpetual devotion.

### **Archaeological Considerations**

Although the origin of the menorah is a recent topic of research, evaluations and interpretations have taken place for thousands of years. As varied as those who interpret it, these provide a wealth of information for the diligent historian.

The menorah, in its initial stylization and design, was largely influenced by the notion of a sacred tree. When speaking of nascent Israelite views on the matter, it is important to note that pre-Yahwistic worship centered around the almond tree. The almond tree was the first tree of spring in the Near East, sometimes blossoming as early as mid-December and so a ready candidate for a fertility symbol.<sup>8</sup>

Tree worship was the primary focus of religion in nascent Israel. It is no coincidence, then, that the One God of the Jews first manifests Himself to His people as a burning bush.<sup>9</sup> For a people still steeped in the sacred lore of tree-worship, this would seem the natural dwelling place of a deity. The language, furthermore, is of interest here.<sup>10</sup> The burning bush which confronts Moses is given the Hebrew label *seneh*, one of only two times this word is used in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>11</sup> This does not conform to the other Hebrew words which describe a bush, tree, or other form of plant life. The word ‘seneh’ might be a deliberate punning reference to Mount Sinai, the dwelling place of Yahweh.<sup>12</sup> This explicates another important facet of nascent Israelite thought: that sacredness was not inherent in any one place (Hebrew word: *kadosh*), but only made so through the presence of a deity. The menorah as a stylized bush then demonstrates an appropriate correspondence here, as with the addition of candles it becomes a burning bush. There is further evidence of the almond tree’s significance in nascent Israelite

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<sup>8</sup> Z. Ameisenowa, ‘The Tree of Life in Jewish Iconography’, *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, II (1938/9), pp. 326 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 3:2-3

<sup>10</sup> Biblical translations come from the *Biblia Hebraica*. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 3:2-3, Deuteronomy 33:16

<sup>12</sup> David Biale, *Cultures of the Jews*. (New York: Schocken, 2002), 84.

culture in Exodus, when Aaron (brother to Moses, and chief priest) holds aloft a master scepter, described as a branch of almond.<sup>13</sup>

Tree-worship was very common throughout Mesopotamia and Egypt. The Tree of Life is a repeating motif with numerous manifestations, perhaps most familiar to modern scholars in the epic tale “Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living,” a story whose origin ethnologists date in the third millennium BCE.<sup>14</sup> The motif of a tree which grants eternal life was elaborated upon in Mesopotamia by supposing that the divine tree grew in the mythical Paradise (Dilmun, Eridu), where it was guarded by the deity’s chosen. In Judeo-Christian lore, this guardian is known as Adam. This elevation from a common tree (the almond tree) to a more cosmic sense of tree-worship is shown in Ezekiel as well as Daniel.<sup>15</sup>

The Tree of Life’s etymology shines light on other aspects in the development of the symbol of menorah. The Tree of Life’s archaic Semitic name is *amygdale*, which carries over into its modern botanical name (*Amygdalus communis*), and translates literally to Great Mother (גַּרְלַת אֵם).<sup>16</sup> This Great Mother is likely an earlier manifestation of the Asherah fertility goddess that later, *inter alia*, is identified in the city of Phrygia with the fertility goddess Cybele, and known at Rome, where the cult was adopted in 204 BCE, as *Mater Magna*.<sup>17</sup>

The tree’s next given name is Luz, which is still used in Arabic and Ethiopian, and was originally synonymous with the Canaanite “City of Almond.”<sup>18</sup> This is a sacred

<sup>13</sup> Numbers 8:17. Similarly some rods of Jacob (Genesis 30:37).

<sup>14</sup> N.K. Sanders (trans.), *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Sacramento: Penguin Books, 1972), 21.

<sup>15</sup> Ezekiel 17-19, Daniel 4:10

<sup>16</sup> W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, Wiesbaden, 1965 ff.

<sup>17</sup> David Biale, *Cultures of the Jews*. (New York: Schocken, 2002), 84.

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 30:31

place where Yahweh revealed himself to Jacob in the ladder dream.<sup>19</sup> According to the Bible, Luz is later a city in the land of the Hittites, founded by an immigrant from Bethel, in the rabbinic legend a Paradise city where entry was made through a hole in an almond tree, and where “the angel of death has no power.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, it serves as a symbol of life and immortality, something which also explains the word’s continued use in Aramaic, where Luz does duty both for the almond and the os coccyx, the hardest bone in the spinal column.

The almond tree’s second and definitive biblical name is shaqed, which translates to either ‘watcher’ or ‘hastener’, demonstrating clear compatibility with its blossoming in nature. It also has certain theistic associations as shown in the vision of Jeremiah, as it becomes a symbol of Yahweh himself watching.<sup>21</sup>

The word used for the bulbs of the menorah is given as כביע, or כביעים in the plural, is important in this instance as it comes from the root שקד, which translates to ‘made like almonds’. Here is an archaic linguistic representation of what was intended to be depicted (in this case, depicting the almond tree in menorah form) carrying over even after its original archaic root has been forgotten or cast aside.<sup>22</sup>

During the period preceding the construction of Solomon's Temple (ca. 960 BCE), it may be that the tree’s blossoms were stylized, perhaps in response to the rather crude asherah worship in the temple mounds.<sup>23</sup> This stylization took the form of cups (perianths), each “with capital (*calyx*) and flower (*petals*),” while its fruit was

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<sup>19</sup> Genesis 28:19

<sup>20</sup> *Midrash Rabbah*, Leviticus 18:1.

<sup>21</sup> Jeremiah 1 & 2

<sup>22</sup> R.J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*. Vol. 3. 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 80.

<sup>23</sup> The asherah was often a small votive symbol of wood, seen as the dwelling place of Asherah, a Mesopotamian fertility goddess

transformed into symbolic firelights at the end of the branches, “the whole of it” – to mark its organic unity – being made in “one piece” 18 handbreadths high.<sup>24</sup> This number is perhaps not accidental, as the numerical value of the letters correspond to the Hebrew concept of Living(חי), and which are two interchangeable concepts.<sup>25</sup> When the branches were curved to arrive at a common point of horizon, Josephus reports that this flattening of the menorah helped to distinguish it from other stylized candlesticks, apparently even those which resembled a tree (fig. 3).<sup>26</sup>

In light of this pre-existing tree worship, it is difficult to definitely assign the label of menorah to some of the oldest finds. Most of these have been found engraved on cylinder seals or in relief on vases and bowls. One such early representation is found on a Mesopotamian stone vase from Khafaje, dated before 3000 BCE (fig. 4). Another example, again from Mesopotamia, is a seal, now at the British museum, known as the Cylinder of Temptation, and depicts the symbol (which is seven-branched, the significance of which is discussed further on), flanked by an idealized man and woman, with a snake in the background (fig. 5).<sup>27</sup>

Two other significant finds include an antique Greek vase painting, with clear references to the Near-Eastern tradition, and a bituminous stone bowl found in Susa, circa 2300 BCE. On the Greek vase painting a seven-branched palm is shown beside an altar (fig. 7). According to Pausanias, there was a sacred tree, the olive tree of Athena, near

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>25</sup> The concept of ‘Living’ in Hebrew referred to those who lived in accordance with Yahweh’s will and so were ‘living’. It was possible to be biologically ‘alive’ but spiritually ‘dead’.

<sup>26</sup> Flavius Josephus. *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*. New York: Hendrickson Publishers, 1980, 53.

<sup>27</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeological Guide from Earliest Times to 1700* (Oxford: Oxford Archaeological Guides, 1994), 402.

Erechtheion on the Acropolis at Athens.<sup>28</sup> On the second, the bituminous bowl, cherubs guard identical seven-branched trees, their resemblance to the Temple menorah so pronounced that this easily qualifies as an intermediary symbol (fig. 8).

Here, on archaeological grounds alone, is a telling argument against the notion that the menorah existed only after the Babylonian exile (586 BCE).<sup>29</sup> Varied representations are found, such as the one on a pitcher from Lachish (Tel el-Duweir) as early as the thirteenth century BCE (fig. 9), on clay altars from Taanak near Megiddo circa the tenth century BCE (fig. 10), and on seals of various kinds, all from pre-exilic periods (figs. 11, 12). Rather, it is difficult “not to assume a very old artistic tradition in Israel, developed under the influence of a Mesopotamian pattern... For how are we then to explain the perfect coincidence between the Sumerian representation (fig. 7) and the Jewish candle-stick? A Mesopotamian influence is easy to assume in remote periods but not in post-exilic times.”<sup>30</sup>

Continuing on the notion that the menorah is, in its earliest and intermediary stages, a stylized tree, the nature of this stylization is important. In particular, the choice of the number seven for the branches is of note for the semiotic historian. While stylized sacred trees are found all over the world, as far east as Japan (fig. 13), the choice and standardization of this number is telling. The oldest consistent identification with the number seven that has wide scholarly acceptance is found in Ancient Greece, and the goddess Athena.<sup>31</sup> That this stylization is found at the same period in which nascent

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<sup>28</sup> Pausanias, *Guide to Greece* (Boston: Penguin Classics, 1984), 1:27

<sup>29</sup> Anderson Seavey, *The Tradition of Masoretic Thought* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1988), 140.

<sup>30</sup> Gordon Gray. *The History of the seven-branched Candlestick: paper read before the British and American Archaeological Society in Rome on Tuesday, February 11, 1914. Rome: G. Bertero, 1914.*

<sup>31</sup> Isaac Asimov. *Asimov's Guide to the Bible*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1975, 409.

Israelites were coming into contact with the Ancient Greeks is appropriate, and the absorption of this trait of Athena likely fit well with the fertility notions associated with Asherah at this time.

The asherah is an interesting symbol in light of this posited understanding of pre-exilic menorah. Arguably the second-most important symbol to nascent Israelite religion, the asherah was a fertility symbol often found in conjunction with the temple mounds which abounded in pre-Solomonic times. At times, ancient menorahs are found but a few feet from their asherah. Given the notion of *kadosh* (that no place is inherently sacred but only made so by the divinity's presence), good faith inferences must be made; that both were cult symbols associated with different aspects of pre-exilic thought. It is here that a clear line of symbolic demarcation is presented. If the menorah or asherah were significant in and of themselves as fertility symbols, there would be no need for the other. As the menorah becomes more stylized throughout its development there is the gradual displacement of the asherah, until it became a heretical symbol in Hebrew thought. The asherah was a holdover from the ancient matriarchal cults many anthropologists posit to exist in the prehistorical times, and that the menorah represents a patriarchal influence which simultaneously supplants the asherah as fertility symbol and then discards that same symbolism for a stronger focus on hierarchy and enlightenment.<sup>32</sup> What the archaeological evidence suggests is perhaps yet another instance of male-dominated theology in conflict with female-dominated theology.<sup>33</sup>

What is certain, however, is that the menorah succeeded as a fertility symbol, even if the asherah would continue to be found in nascent Israelite worship. Moreover, it

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<sup>32</sup> This is my own supposition based on the evidence at hand. I have found no research examining the potential interplay between these two symbols and their effect on each other in nascent Israel.

<sup>33</sup> Isaac Asimov. *Asimov's Guide to the Bible*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1975, 241.

is significant for the sheer prevalence of the symbol. Certainly some of its supposed aspects - the planetary and mathematical associations in particular – were known only to a distinct scribal or priestly class. Despite this, the menorah is a symbol of paramount importance even to the commoners. It is depicted on posts and scratched by sons on the tombs of their fathers (figs. 14, 15). The universality of the menorah symbol is interesting at this period because it is likely the symbol meant two very different things, depending on one's education and social standing. What the historian encounters here are two viable interpretations of the same symbol.

There is an excellent description, found originally in the temple of the Mandaeans, a Gnostic pre-Christian sect displaying similarities with Judaism, which may demonstrate the holdover of the menorah as a fertility symbol even after its being stripped of many of its fertility aspects and becoming a symbol of the state under Solomon. In *Ginza* (Treasure), published circa 600 AD, the following passage is translated:

Winds, winds took away Shitil [the Saviour], the son of Adam, storms, storms led him away, made him ascend and placed him near the watch-house of Shilmai [priestly title], the man, the treasurer, who is holding the pins of splendour by his hand and the keys of Kushta [the true Belief] on his two arms. They opened for him the gate of the treasure house, lifted up for him the great curtain of Truth, brought him in and showed him that vine whose inner part is splendour, whose sides are light, whose heels are water, and whose branches Uthras [heavenly beings], whose leaves are lanterns of light, and whose seed is the great root of souls.<sup>34</sup>

From this it is only a small step to true menorah, a development which can be charted through its pictorial representation, particularly on cylinder seals. The leaves and fruit of the tree are gradually replaced by dots or balls, now only at the ends of the

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<sup>34</sup> M. Lidzbarski, *Ginza: Der Schatz oder Das grosse Buch der Mandaer*, Göttingen-Leipzig, 1925, p. 429, lines 3-11. English translation as in Widengren, *Mesopotamian Elements*, pp. 151 f.

branches, and the whole begins to resemble “a combination of altar, tree, . . . and candelabrum” (figs. 16-18).<sup>35</sup>

The cosmic notions which would come to influence the symbolism of the menorah are not surprising, considering the strong influence astronomy tends to have on religious development. In Zechariah’s fifth vision, there are seven menorah lamps which are said to symbolize the seven “eyes of the Lord, which range through the whole earth.”<sup>36</sup> This is an allegory which seems to point towards an understanding of the seven classical spheres. Indeed, at this stage the bulbs of flame on the menorah can be seen as the eyes of Yahweh.

Characteristically, there are also two olive trees in the vision, one on each side of the menorah, giving it oil (their life energy), fitting nicely with early notions of the menorah as a Life image.<sup>37</sup> Added to this cosmic and life imagery is a third one, more Messianic in tone, with the menorah symbolizing, as it would come to do as well after, Israel’s freedom and the two attendant trees, “the two anointed who stand by the Lord of the whole earth.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore a sort of double Messiah, a temporal and religious one – a Prince (Zerubbabel) and a High Priest (Joshua) – who will now, after the return from Babylon, rebuild Jerusalem.

### **Etymology as Symbolism**

Instructions concerning the proper construction of a menorah are offered in the Book of Exodus. It is important to return to the original Hebrew in which the instructions

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<sup>35</sup> *Pes. Rabbathia* VIII, p. 29.

<sup>36</sup> Zechariah 4:10. The phrase as such also appears in 2 Chronicles 16:9.

<sup>37</sup> H. H. Wright, *Zechariah and his Prophecies*, London, 1879, pp 81.

<sup>38</sup> *Pes. Rabbathia* VIII, p. 29.

were written to gain a complete appreciation for the suggestive semantics of the menorah's pieces. Symbols are after all the most primitive form of language, and so the use of language in the perception of these symbols by the Israelites is critical. The word for lampstand in the Biblia Hebraica is מְנוֹרָה, a nominal form from the common root , נִיר , (נוג) = nyr (nur). This word originally meant "to flame." This compares to Ugaritic *nyr* and Akkadian *nuru*, both of which have this same association.<sup>39</sup> The lampstand is then that which flames.

The menorah's structural parts, the branches and the shaft, are indicated by the Semitic word קִנֵּה (reed). It is a generic term for reed and is seen in reference to the *arundo donax*, or Persian reed. This reed is actually a grass in Mesopotamia whose height varies between eight and eighteen feet. It is used as a measuring rod in Ezekiel 40, 41, and 42. It also served other functions, such as a staff, spear, or arrow shaft.<sup>40</sup>

Taken in the context of defining the component parts of a stylized tree, the choice of קִנֵּה (reed) is appropriate. It gives the impression of a reed; indeed, some suggest this may even reflect non-metallic proto-menorahs made of actual reeds.<sup>41</sup> A link between the Persian reed and the menorah can be found in Isaiah referring to the Servant of the Lord: "A bruised reed (קִנֵּה רְצוּץ) he will not break/ and a dimly burning wick he will not quench."<sup>42</sup>

It is certain that קִנֵּה (reed) refers to the six side branches of the menorah. It is not certain, however, that it refers to the central shaft of the menorah. In Exodus 25:31 and 37:17, the central part of the menorah is described separately, as its own object with its

<sup>39</sup> Carol L. Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah*. Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press 21.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>41</sup> P.R. Callaway, "RBYH in the Temple Scroll XXIV,8." *RevQ 12* (1986) 269-70

<sup>42</sup> Isaiah 42:3

own distinguishing characteristics. The branches and their characteristics are given afterwards.

In light of the phrase וקנה ירכה, used as reference to what the shaft is made of rather than what the menorah itself is made of, the matter becomes even less clear. The Hebrew refers to single items, one קנה (reed) and one ירך, which are part of the menorah. קנה in this instance cannot then represent “branch”, but is more appropriately taken to mean “stem”. The Samaritan Pentateuch offers this phrase in plural, וקניה ירכית.<sup>43</sup> The Septuagint provides clear demarcation between its singular version of ירך and its plural version of קכת.<sup>44</sup>

ירך is in itself an ambiguous term. If קכת means “stem,” then it is unlikely ירך could refer to a “shaft,” which is what both the Greek and the Latin translations suppose.<sup>45</sup> There is perhaps a partial explanation elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, where ירך is used as an anatomical reference to the thigh.<sup>46</sup> It is perhaps no great logical leap to associate the thigh, the thickest and strongest part of the leg, with the notion of another strong support structure. Anthropomorphizing objects by giving them names which correspond to body parts is certainly nothing new, whether in archaic or modern languages.

פרח (lily) is also a word with strong botanical roots. It is used to describe the component pieces of the menorah. In this context it is used to describe the portion of the menorah immediately beneath the wicks/cups/bulbs, the ornamented receptacle.

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<sup>43</sup> Carol L. Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah*. Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press 41.

<sup>44</sup> Isaiah 42:4

<sup>45</sup> *Biblia Vulgata*. Matriti: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1965.

<sup>46</sup> Leviticus 14:2, 2 Kings 11:16.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible it is used to mean “lily”.<sup>47</sup> The Samaritan Pentateuch translates this to mean “flower” in general, but this does not defeat the inherent symbolism this paper intends to demonstrate. In either context it shows clear botanical associations with the pieces of the menorah. This reference is shown in the phrase describing the menorah as “from its base to its lily.”<sup>48</sup>

It is important to note here then that the lamps themselves, נרתיה, have a singular feminine suffix, of which מנורה is the antecedent. It is unfortunately ambiguous as the reader cannot know whether it refers to all seven lamps as a collective lampstand or refers merely to the central flame, of which the surrounding six are in context unimportant. Whether the lamps are distributed over the six branches or found in the bowl of the central stand is unclear, particularly as the Zechariah menorah gives weight to the latter.<sup>49</sup>

There is also contradiction concerning the lighting of one wick as opposed to seven. Exodus 27:20 and Leviticus 24:2 both order the use of pure olive oil, that a lamp (תמיד, given here in the singular sense) may burn continuously. Elsewhere, the elders write that the lamps (here in the plural sense), should be set before the lampstand to give it light.<sup>50</sup>

The remainder of menorah passages in Exodus are concerned with their design. In essence, this combination is of three elements – cup, knob, and flower – which is repeated three times on each of the branches and four times on the main stand. Scholars are fortunate in having a sufficient body of knowledge to arrive at satisfactory

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<sup>47</sup> 1 Kings 7:19, Song of Solomon 2:1, Hosea 14:5

<sup>48</sup> Numbers 8:4

<sup>49</sup> Zechariah 4:2

<sup>50</sup> Exodus 8:21

interpretations of the terms טהור זהב ('pure gold') and כלה מקשה אהת ('the whole of it one piece of hammered work.')

<sup>51</sup> The word טהור is an adjective whose roots are found in טהר, meaning "to be pure." The word has a number of telling connotations in Hebrew, from the notion of brightness (physical purity) to that of divine constituents (ritual purity). The menorah itself is not only important, but its pieces had to be worthy of the symbol. The use of fire symbolism to scourge impurities is another motif appropriately applied here.

Concerning the specific technicalities of menorah construction, the passage from Malachi below explicates the nature of materials used:

**3:2b** כיה הוא כאש מצרף  
 וכברית מכבסים  
**3:3** וישב מצרף ומטהר כסף  
 וטהר את-בכי-לוי  
 וזקק אתם כזהב וכסף  
 והיו ליהוה מכישי מנחה בצרקה

In 3:2 reference is made to a "smelter's fire," which suggest a process of further refinement of the metal used in the menorah. The parallel phrase "fuller's soap," referring here to lye or alum, demonstrates a washing process. In 3:3, the two processes are referenced again. The person who performs the refinement is then referred to as מצרף, while the cleaner is given as מטהר. The sense of purity then is linked clearly with the notion of ritual purity; as the priests cleansed the menorah, so too did the menorah cleanse the Israelites.<sup>52</sup>

### Historical Semiotic Morphology

<sup>51</sup> Ernst Wurthwein. *The Text of the Old Testament*. New Haven: William B. Eardman's Publishing Co., 1995.

<sup>52</sup> B.A. Levine, "The descriptive Tabernacle texts of the Pentateuch." *JAOS* 85 (1965) 307-18

The etymological roots of menorah demonstrate the dramatic shift from a stylized tree to an abstract religious symbol. The menorah has made the progression from a symbol characteristic of many temple mounds and other places of nascent Israelite worship to the incarnation of a single pure menorah.<sup>53</sup>

Solomon's temple provided a brief but significant change in the menorah symbology, as the menorah changes both its design and meaning. Unfortunately, very little is given in the way of physical detail regarding the Solomonic menorah. 1 Kings 7:49 states that Solomon made "the lampstands (בְּנֹרֹת) of pure gold (וְהֵב סָגוּר), five on the south side and five on the north, before the inner sanctum: the flowers and the lamps, and the tongs, of gold."<sup>54</sup> Here then the original Temple menorah has vanished from use, and been supplanted by these ten menorahs. Comparison between the original tabernacle menorah and these ten is difficult, as there is no reason to assume the construction of Solomon's menorahs were similar to the original tabernacle menorah.

The writer here appeared to appreciate this discrepancy between the lampstand of Yahweh's dwelling and those of Solomon's Temple. In 2 Chronicles 4:7 and 4:20, he gave us details concerning the construction of the Solomonic menorahs. However, in 2 Chronicles 13:11, Abijah, in describing the religious service, directly referred to the menorah of the tabernacle: "(the priests) care for the golden lampstand that its lamps may burn every evening." The Pentateuchal tradition continues despite the physical supplanting of the original tabernacle menorah. Later rabbis would also struggle with this dichotomy of semiotics, and the Mosaic tradition is placed in the middle as a mediating

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<sup>53</sup> Ira Katznelson. "In The Image of God," *Jewish Historical Review* 112 (2001): 16.

<sup>54</sup> 1 Kings 7:49.

influence: “You must therefore say that [candlestick] of Moses stood in the middle with [five] candlesticks to the right of it and five to the left of it.”<sup>55</sup>

The original tabernacle menorah as a physical object disappears at this point in history. Clearly its importance and symbolic meaning were not lost, but the actual physical object vanishes. Any number of explanations can be advanced: that it was stolen, that continued use wore it into such a state that Solomon replaced it as a matter of housekeeping, that it was given to an Assyrian king as tribute, or, perhaps the most likely, that it was melted down to provide the base metal for the great amount of gold found in Solomon’s temple.

The significance of these ten menorah must then be evaluated from a symbolic sense, as the previous symbology of the tabernacle menorah is no longer appropriate. Here is perhaps the most telling influence of Phoenician thought, as it was largely Phoenicians who were consulted and employed to build Solomon’s temple.<sup>56</sup> The significance of the number seven is abandoned and replaced with the number ten. The Phoenicians, significant in their mathematical achievements (which is likely a partial reason for their renown as builders), invested a great deal of practical and ritual importance in the number ten. This investment is apparent even today in the modern base-ten counting system. Solomon may have adopted that significance and chose to reflect it in his menorah.<sup>57</sup>

That there were ten distinct menorah, five to the south and five to the north, is also of interest from a symbolic point of view. Jerusalem, acting as the center of Israel,

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<sup>55</sup> *The Talmud*: Soncino Press, 1948.

<sup>56</sup> Ian Armit, “Prehistory,” in *The New Penguin History of Judaism: From Earliest Times to Present Day*, ed. R.A. Houston and W.W.J. Knox (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 26.

<sup>57</sup> R.J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology. Vol. 3. 2nd ed.* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 80.

served at the time as common ground between the often-conflicting North and South portions of the nation. Even united under the banner of David there were still hostilities brewing.<sup>58</sup> By dividing the menorahs between the northern and southern directions, Solomon indicates that Yahweh's favor and presence shelters the two halves equally. Further, the ten menorah, five in each direction, offered a distinct menorah as evidence of Yahweh's favor for each of the ten tribes of Israel. By according a menorah to each tribe and then unifying those ten within the context of his temple, Solomon advances not only earthly but divine unity as well. Each tribe may have a distinct vessel, but the symbol was intended by Yahweh for all.<sup>59</sup>

When the First Temple fell to the invading armies of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, most of the vessels, including these ten golden menorah, were likely stolen and set up in Babylon.<sup>60</sup> However, although the events of that time are described in the Bible in various passages, the removal of the menorahs is referred to only once, namely in the last chapter of Jeremiah.<sup>61</sup> Still more remarkable is that among the Temple treasures restored by Cyrus of Persia in 538 BCE, the menorah is not mentioned at all. Considering the menorah sat at the center of the Holiest of Holies, this is a glaring omission. These and other obscure points have given rise to very interesting conclusions for the purposes of this paper. Various legends arose that the menorah and the Ark of the Covenant (written as residing in the Temple, though none of the texts describing the Temple ever mention it) had been concealed by the priests. This is interesting in the emphasis on the artifacts of Yahweh not just removed from the Temple, but hidden. In

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>60</sup> Frank Cogliano. "The First Reclamation: A People's History," *Cambridge Historical Review* 118, no. 476 (2003): 450.

<sup>61</sup> Jeremiah 52.

contrast to the widespread belief of the Israelites that Yahweh had gone into exile with them, these legends suppose that Jerusalem, and in particular the symbols of Yahweh, awaited them upon their return to their sacred lands. In this manner the menorah acts not as a symbol of what has been lost, as it would do following the Second Destruction, but of a great restoration yet to be.<sup>62</sup> That these legends took this shape demonstrates that the menorah at the time was almost shorthand for the notion of the eventual restoration of Jerusalem.

That restoration would come under the banner of Judas Maccabaeus, who tradition holds fielded an army of ten thousand Hebrews against an army of fifty thousand pikemen under the command of King Antiochus of Syria in 164 BCE.<sup>63</sup> Upon reaching the Temple, the *kohen* (an unnamed priest) found it desecrated from decades of Syrian rule.<sup>64</sup> Although scholars cannot discern how the *kohen* determined this, apparently soldiers made it a point to have sex on the temple steps with their concubines, and pigs were kept in the central chamber, the Holiest of Holies. Worse, the menorah had disappeared. It was necessary, in the mind of the *kohen*, that the menorah be used here as a purifying agent, as well as a beacon to the Israel people and their god that the Temple had been retaken.<sup>65</sup> So he fashioned a makeshift menorah from broken pikes.<sup>66</sup>

It is here that perhaps one of the great symbolic inversions in all of Jewish religious lore took place. Again, according to legend, this nameless *kohen* required oil to

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<sup>62</sup> Frank Cogliano. "The First Reclamation: A People's History," *Cambridge Historical Review* 118, no. 476 (2003): 211.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

<sup>64</sup> Like King David, Judas Maacabaeus chose to use the seven-branched menorah as an official state symbol. It is no great surprise that this unnamed priest then viewed the restoration of the menorah as of primary importance.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid* 114.

<sup>66</sup> It is important to note that the menorah the *kohen* supposedly fashioned bore the standard seven branches, rather than the nine which would result from the subsequent miracle.

light the menorah. Not just oil, but pure virgin olive oil, oil worthy of the menorah.

Searching desperately within the Temple, he found beneath the dirt a single *cruz* of oil, half a log, roughly eight ounces. As the popular story goes, this oil, only enough for one day's burning, lasted for eight.<sup>67</sup>

The true miracle of this, however, according to contemporary and proceeding Jewish writings, is not that oil lasted for eight days, but that the *kohen* found oil he knew to be unspoiled. How did he know this? The *cruz* bore the seal of the *kohen gedol*, the chief priest. What is miraculous is that within the very strict tradition of the Temple priests, such a task, little more than housekeeping, would never have been assigned to the *kohen gedol*. That this anomalous *cruz* of oil might be found, after decades of Syrian despoiling of the Temple, sealed by a priest whom the task would never have fallen to, indeed in defiance of all tradition and logic, was perceived as the true miracle.<sup>68</sup>

In relation to our semiotic analysis of the menorah, this is a very telling event. The menorah was used here as a definite agent of purification. This is in contrast with the earlier notion of purity as something the menorah maintained, rather than caused to come about. Returning to the Hebrew notion of *kodesh*, the menorah was used to symbolize the return of Yahweh to His Temple. The Temple under Syrian domination was not the Temple, but merely a building, because the presence of Yahweh had departed. Hence, the Temple the Syrians defiled was just a building.<sup>69</sup> Purification in this instance means that the building must be made worthy for Yahweh, or the menorah seen as a symbol of a fresh beginning. In a spiritual sense, although they are the same structure, the Temple

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<sup>67</sup> Frank Cogliano. "The First Reclamation: A People's History," *Cambridge Historical Review* 118, no. 476 (2003): 215.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 218.

<sup>69</sup> *The Talmud*: Soncino Press, 1948.

which was lost to the Syrians and the Temple which was reclaimed by Judas Maccabaeus were two entirely different buildings.

Despite later proliferation of Chanukah menorah, references from Ben Sira, מאיר על מנורת קורש נר, and the Zechariah vision of the sole lampstand indicate that the Second Temple, as inaugurated by Judas Maccabaeus, bore within it a single menorah. There is no assurance, however, that the same menorah was used for the entire duration of the Second Temple. It is almost certain that enemy raids, coupled with repeated refurbishings by the Hasmoneans and Herod, resulted in the replacement of the menorah on a number of occasions.<sup>70</sup>

It is fortunate for the purpose of impartial historicity that scholars have the writings of Josephus upon his visitation of the Temple.<sup>71</sup> Josephus indicates the clear cosmic focus of the tabernacle and menorah in particular in the text, adding elsewhere that the tripartition of the menorah (base and two flanking halves) was a parallel to the Universe as described by Plato in *Timaeus*.<sup>72</sup> He notes, for instance, that the seventy ornaments on the menorah correspond to the sum of the ten-degree fields or decans ascribed to each of the seven planets.<sup>73</sup>

Similar interpretations are offered by Philo of Alexandria (c. 30 BCE – 50 AD), who says in one passage that “everyone knows about the planetary symbolism of the menorah.”<sup>74</sup> In his more popular passages on the menorah, which are appropriately almost identical to his writings on the symbol of the Tree of Life, Philo asserts that the

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<sup>70</sup> Frank Cogliano. “The First Reclamation: A People’s History,” *Cambridge Historical Review* 118, no. 476 (2003): 450.

<sup>71</sup> Flavius Josephus. *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*. New York: Hendrickson Publishers, 1980, 80.

<sup>72</sup> Plato. *Timaeus*. New York: Focus Publishing, 2001, 32.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

<sup>74</sup> Philo, trans. C.D. Young. *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*. New York: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001, 402.

menorah is a model of the planetary system. This explains, he goes on to say, why the dimensions of the menorah are not stated in the Torah, but only its weight, since the Heavens are likewise unbounded and “immeasurable.”<sup>75</sup> This is also why it is necessary for the menorah to be made in one piece, so that like the Heavens it constitutes an entity, and of pure gold, since the Heavens too consist of a single substance (the quintessence/ether). Further, the branches of the menorah project “obliquely” from the shaft to resemble the Zodiac, which is the path of the planets, and its central lamp gives light to the other lamps just as the sun does the planets.<sup>76</sup> Finally, says Philo, the menorah stood at the southern wall of the sanctuary because the planets move within the southern part of the celestial hemisphere.<sup>77</sup>

While it is impossible to ascertain how advanced the astronomy of the nascent Israelites was, it is safe to assume that it lacked this decidedly advanced Greek character. This, however, does not explain the rather marked astronomical parallels Philo found in the menorah. Talmudic scripture tells us that the reasoning behind the menorah facing from the southern wall towards the direction of the north was that Yahweh resided in the north, and so it shone towards him in “humble obeisance.”<sup>78</sup> Further, they contend the light of the menorah itself is like Sarah (in contrast to Sarai), a sort of spiritualized Virgin Mother of nations, embodying the feminine principle.<sup>79</sup> It is above all Yahweh’s power and wisdom.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 403.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 404.

<sup>78</sup> *The Talmud*: Soncino Press, 1948.

<sup>79</sup> Anderson Seavey, *The Tradition of Masoretic Thought* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1988), 133.

In the “Midrashim” (a portion of the Talmud), it is written that the menorah is the Light of Yahweh and the Torah, often with the emphasis on the latter.<sup>80</sup> Its seven lamps correspond to the seven planets which were seen as the eyes of Yahweh, as they ranged about the whole earth.<sup>81</sup>

The earthly menorah, however, continues one commentary, is inferior to its heavenly pattern, for Yahweh’s Light is mightier than that of the heavenly bodies, which after all only reflect the former. “But just as a king invited to a subject uses the host’s tableware and not his own, so is Yahweh’s Light among the mortals – only a hundredth part of the original – constrained to dwell in a lamp.”<sup>82</sup>

In the “Zohar” at this time the menorah takes on a very esoteric embodiment.<sup>83</sup> While the light of the menorah remains the Light of Yahweh (here a primal cosmic force called the En-Sof), and thereby of the Law, “whoever takes hold of this achieves life in this world and in the world to come.”<sup>84</sup> But also, significantly for our purposes, it is an inverted cosmic tree, a “Tree of Life which extends from above downward,” and a “Sun which illumines all, like a bridegroom shedding light on his bride.” Thus, concludes the text, the lighting of the menorah is symbolic of the death of ignorance of the Israelites once they received the Torah.

The Second Destruction of the Temple was the result of an unsuccessful Jewish uprising against Roman rule. This is a crucial point in consideration of the menorah, as its perhaps most famous depiction comes into play here. The Arch of Titus commemorates Rome’s final victory over Jerusalem in 70 CE, and on it is depicted a menorah which has

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<sup>80</sup> *The Talmud*: Soncino Press, 1948.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> The Zohar is a compilation of Jewish mystical thought.

<sup>84</sup> Willis Barnstone, *The Other Bible*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1984, 380.

given pause to many archaeologists and religious scholars (figs. 19, 20). The matter of the base is of particular importance. On the Arch of Titus, the menorah seized from the Second Temple features a thick shaft upon a stepped pedestal, whereas subsequent renditions of this artifact, done for purposes of inventorying Rome's many treasures, all depict the base as having three-legged supports in a tripodal arrangement (figs. 21, 22).<sup>85</sup>

This contrariness is important for the purposes of this study. Within these inventories, it is given that the object is a seven-branched candlestick. This is quite a departure from the menorah as depicted on the Arch of Titus, which is a six-branched candlestick with a central base. Further, none of the depictions propose a common height to all of the sticks, while the Arch of Titus clearly does. Two different physical artifacts are given as the same. In that the Arch of Titus is based on an eyewitness rendition, such glaring mistakes as the shape of the base would seem very unlikely to have been made, particularly as these inventories agree with it as to the appearance of other looted treasures. However, these treasury inventories show that our last confirmed sighting of the menorah is in the triumphal parade depicted on the Arch of Titus. In the context of later Jewish thought this is essential; many believe Yahweh took his menorah up into the heavens.<sup>86</sup>

The loss of the Second Temple, and the menorah in particular, were crushing blows to the symbology of the menorah up to this point. Seen as the central unifying influence, the physical menorah metamorphosed into pure symbol. This deprived Jewish culture of a vital and deep-rooted historical symbol. Simply casting a new seven-branched menorah was out of the question: where would it be placed, and who would

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<sup>85</sup> D. Sperber. "The History of the Menorah." *JJS* 16 (1965) 104.

<sup>86</sup> Anderson Seavey, *The Tradition of Masoretic Thought* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1988), 60.

tend it?<sup>87</sup> A new, more universal menorah was needed, and first of the modern menorahs appeared in Alexandria, circa 220 CE (fig. 23). Notice the martial character as denoted by the small statue of Judas Maccabaeus on the top of the central shaft. Bearing eight branches and a central shaft, this menorah they used to celebrate the miracle of the Chanukah.<sup>88</sup>

The menorah was relegated to a secondary role, celebrating a specific past victory of the Jews, but its core meaning remains. The miracle of Chanukah is seen as a specific instance where Yahweh gave the light of the menorah to the Jews, rather than the suppositions of the menorah given at some undetermined point and location to the nascent Israelites. By tying the menorah inextricably to what was arguably the greatest military victory of the Jews in modern history, a victory which reclaimed for them their homeland, the lighting of the menorah not only recalls that great event but presages a similar event to come – the much longed-for eventual re-conquest of Jerusalem.

Even then, as if to complete the symbolic circle, this beautiful Talmudic passage, a loving description of the Second Temple menorah is given:<sup>89</sup>

ונביעים למה הן דומיו כמין כוסות אלכסנדריים  
 כפתורים למה הן דומין כמין תפוחי הכרתיים  
 פרחים למה הן דומין כמין פרחי תעמודין

“The cups were like Alexandrian goblets; the knobs like Cretan apples, and the flowers like the blossoms around the capitals of columns.”

From the many vessels as fertility emblems to the badge of state religion and unity, returning then back to a symbol of the everlasting fertility Yahweh had given the

<sup>87</sup> Anderson Seavey, *The Tradition of Masoretic Thought* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1988), 133.

<sup>88</sup> Leon Yarden, *The Tree of Light* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1971), 34.

<sup>89</sup> *The Talmud*: Soncino Press, 1948.

Jewish spirit, the menorah can then be seen in the context of this passage as an ever-evolving but ultimately concrete symbol: that of a divine Light which is cultivated by faith in their god, which in its blossoming will fulfill that god's promises to his chosen people.

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<sup>90</sup> Further primary source material is given in the Descriptive List of Primary Source Figures, pp. 28-29.

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### Descriptive List of Primary Source Figures

**Note: The author has made extensive use of pictorial and symbolic primary source material. When these images are provided by a third party proper citation is given. When the images are obtained *in situ* the location is given.**

- 1) Design on wall plaster, fragment found beneath Jewish Quarter, Old City, Jerusalem (*Jer. Post*, Dec. 5, 1969).
- 2) Carving on synagogue pillar, Gaza, Palestine. Mosque Djami el-Kebir, Gaza.
- 3) Tree-shaped lampstand, found in Etruria, seventh century BCE. Tarquinia Museum (R. Bloch, *The Etruscans*, London, 1969, p. 31, fig. 17).
- 4) Design on stone vase, Khafaje, Mesopotamia, Jemdet Nasr period, before 3000 BCE. (N. Perrot, *Babyloniaca*, [1937], pl. 1, no. 3).
- 5) Cylinder seal from Mesopotamia, Post-Akkadian period, c. 2200-2000 BCE. British Museum.
- 6) Detail from stone bowl, Susa, Elam, about 2300 BCE. Louvre, Paris (Ch. Zervos, *L'Art de la Mesopotamie*, Paris, 1935, p. 226).
- 7) Design on Greek vase. Formerly in Prince of Canino Collection.
- 8) Tabernacle, illuminated Bible, presumably from Reims, 870-75. San Paolo fuori le mura, Rome.
- 9) Pitcher fragment from Lachish, Palestine (J. L. Starkey, *Palestinian Exploration Fund, Quarterly Statement*, 1934, p. 166).
- 10) Design on clay altar from Taanak, Palestine (Sellin, *Tell Ta'annek*, Vienna, 1904, p. 77, fig. 105).
- 11) Impression of stamp seal, Assyrian contract from Gezer, Palestine, 651 BCE.
- 12) Babylonian cylinder seal from Tell Judeideh, Palestine (J. Bliss & R.A.S. Macalister, *Excavations in Palestine, 1898-1900*, London, 1902, fig. 4).
- 13) Design on Tamamushi altar, Nara near Kyoto, seventh century.
- 14) Stone, perhaps from catacomb, Alexandria. Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria.
- 15) Tombstone, Alexandria. Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria.
- 16) Impression of cylinder seal from Kirkuk, Iraq, Mitannian style, 1700-1200 BCE.

- 17) Assyrian cylinder seal, 750-650 BCE. Earl of Southesk Collection.
- 18) Assyrian cylinder seal. Earl of Southesk Collection.
- 19) Bas-Relief of the Triumph, Arch of Titus (Photo Alinari, no. 5840).
- 20) Menorah, detail from relief of the Triumph (Photo Anderson, no. 6204).
- 21) Page from Petrus of Poitiers, *Compendium historiae in genealogia Christi*, 1167. Last reported at Statliche Museen, Berlin.
- 22) Miniature, illuminated Bible from Spain, fourteenth century. Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, MS. Hebreu no. 1314-15 (Photo B.N.).
- 23) Chanukah lamp from Alexandria, 240 BCE. Musee Cluny, Paris (Photo Musees Nationaux, 69-dn-6235).