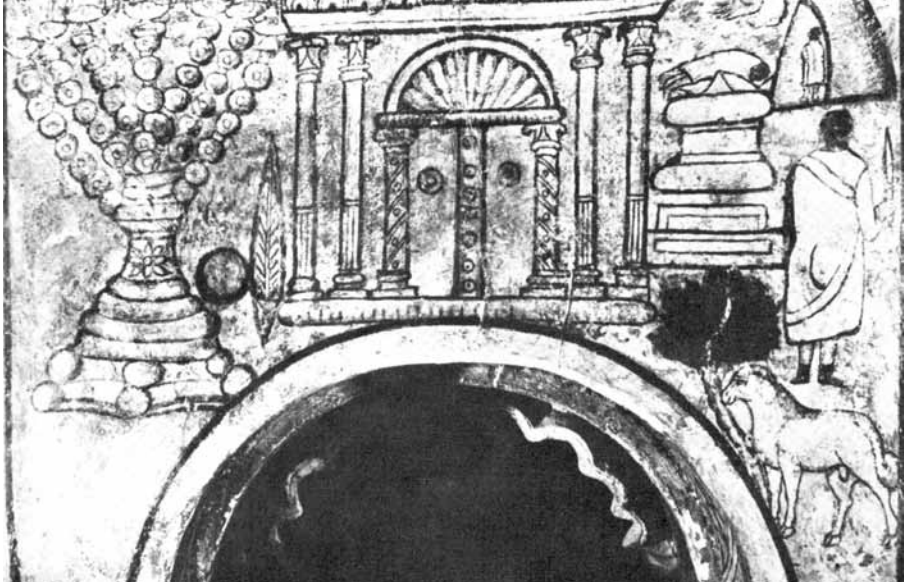

Torah Ark in the synagogue of Dura-Europos (Syria), 2nd–3rd centuries.

EARS TO HEAR, EYES TO SEE

Menorah and Cross in Late Antiquity:
The Dialogue of Images

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Translated by Vera Winn

Some time ago, a magazine asked for my comments on a certain project launched by an international network of tattoo salons, the goal of which was to restore the swastika's primordial solar meaning. Before submitting my analysis, I spent some time exploring the history of the symbol. I was struck by the deep iconic resonance of the swastika in a variety of different cultures, where it stood for well-being, light, and movement. But even more remarkable was the speed with which it acquired a new, vastly more sinister set of meanings during the 20th century. Among other novel interpretations, the Indian origin of the swastika was cited as the reason for its iconic representation of the "Aryan" race, and its circular movement was reimagined as a reference to the never-ending struggle between races. And, of course, its intimate identification with the monstrous Nazi state and its vast crimes against humanity transposed the swastika into a mark of unfathomable evil across much of the world. The story of the swastika demonstrates how a symbol's manifold meanings, accumulated over time, persist even while providing the ground for developing new ones. But after its most recent iteration as the symbol of Nazi Germany, the swastika cannot be simply restored as an image of heavenly realms.

Yet as horrible as this transformation of an ancient symbol of light into a modern mark of maleficence is, its journey is instructive in understanding our own cultural iconography. The cross, for example, has for centuries been the

iconic heart of Christian civilization, emerging into cultural prominence after the Roman embrace of Christianity. We take for granted that in the image of the cross, all aspects of Christian aspirations and longings are united. Over the years it has become, in most European countries, a prominent state symbol and, in one fashion or another, a source of governing legitimacy.

Before the common era, however, another symbol—the Menorah from the Temple in Jerusalem—emerged in the land where Christianity was soon born. First depicted on a coin minted by the last Hasmonean King of Judea, Antigonus II Mattathias (died 37 BC), the menorah soon began to appear on graves and in synagogues, and by the fourth century had come to be depicted in a wide variety of artifacts, both domestic and funerary, that have since been discovered in Palestine and throughout the ancient Mediterranean. It is clear from the archaeological and literary evidence that the menorah became a touchstone of Jewish national identity, appearing in Byzantine synagogues, medieval Jewish manuscripts, and, finally, as the seal of the modern state of Israel.

Late antiquity witnessed the transformation of the language of art from a concentration on visible realities to more intangible meanings derived from motifs inherent in the literature and culture undergirding various symbols. As a result, physical images became only the first layer of the multiple meanings that educated audiences could discern in a symbol. The menorah's evolution from a specific ritual object into a far more expansive sign of Jewish national identity paved the way for a similar development of the cross. Semantic analogues with ancient Jewish symbolism played an important role in the formation of the visual aspects of the cross during the period when the specifically Christian symbol was negotiating its relationship to the shameful and terrifying Roman cross. To identify the nexus of interaction between menorah and cross, we have to consider the stages of their historical existence.

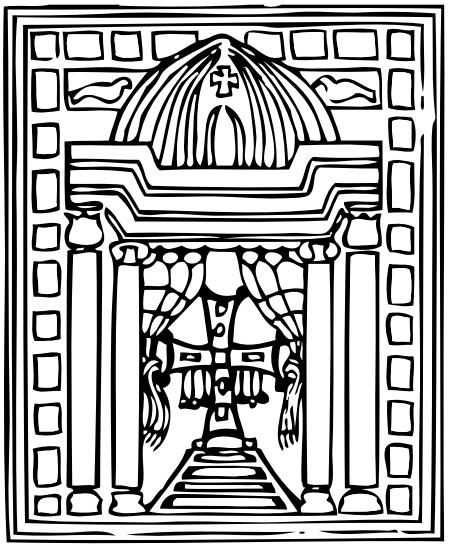
Let us first examine the ancient reported history of the Menorah itself.[1] In Exodus, God provides direction for its construction, stylizing it as a tree of gold adorned with almond blossoms, and thereby associating the lampstand of the Tabernacle with the notion of the tree of life (35:14). The almond tree provided wood for the rod of Aaron (Num. 17:8), leading to an association between the menorah, community authority, and divine protection.[2] Jeremiah also makes an association between the almond tree and God's watchfulness, using a Hebrew word play that builds on the almond tree's early seasonal blooming as a sign of the potential—but fragile—natural fertility of the land (Jer. 1:11–12). Although biblical accounts report that in Solomon's Temple there were ten other lampstands (1 Kgs. 7:49), Josephus claims that the Menorah was the only one lit in the rituals.[3] After the destruction of the First Temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, all temple supplies were carried to Babylon, from which there is no record of their return (Jer. 52:18–20).

The end of the Babylonian captivity in 520 BC, the return to Jerusalem, and the construction of the Second Temple marked a new epoch in Jewish life. For Zechariah, a critical symbol of God's presence in the renewed Jerusalem was the new lampstand, representing "the seven eyes of the Lord that range throughout the earth" (4:1–11). The building of the new Temple required not only physical human effort, but

[1] The Temple's Menorah is one of the most studied objects of the Jewish Temple. See Rachel Hachlili, *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-Armed Candelabrum: Origin, Form and Significance* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Carol L. Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah: A Synthetic Study of a Symbol from the Biblical Cult* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1976); *In the Light of the Menorah: Story of a Symbol*, ed. Yael Israeli (The Israel Museum, 1999).

[2] Leon Yarden, "Aaron, Bethel, and the Priestly Menorah," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 26 (1975): 39–47.

[3] Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 8:89–90.



The Golgotha cross behind the veil. The marble mosaic from Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, 6th century.

also cosmic intervention to remove the causes and consequences of the expulsion; therefore, the lampstand here was both the symbol of the Temple and the image of God's vision manifested as light. The symbolism of the tree of life was also further developed, as two olive trees were added on either side of the lampstand, representing the anointed civil and religious authorities of the restored nation. Through its association with divine anointing, the Menorah here became linked with certain messianic properties that were later to be transferred to Christ, as the tree of life would blossom with the branch of the Messiah (Zech. 3:8).

During the turbulent Hellenistic period, the Temple became identified as the singular locus of authority, both religious and political. In 168 BC, the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes pillaged the Temple, looted all the precious ritual objects, and "departed to his own land" (1 Macc. 1:21–24). As a result of the revolt and civil war occasioned by this defamation, the Hasmonean dynasty ultimately took control of Judea, cleansed the Temple, and reasserted Jewish religious practice. In the course of their ascent to power, the menorah became a symbol of the struggle against Hellenization, support for Jewish identity, and the restoration of a legitimate Jewish government—a new role encapsulated by the story of the eight-day rededication of the Temple in 164 BC, when the new golden Menorah was lighted. The Festival of Lights, or Hanukkah, has since been observed as a national celebration, and in time the menorah became not only the object of Temple rituals: a version of it also became a household object in the form of the Hanukkah lamp.

After the Maccabean uprising, the new Hasmonean dynasty constructed a new Menorah. The menorah became a symbol of the legitimacy of the Maccabees. The Hasmoneans who reconsecrated the Temple merged the ideas of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem as part of their state-building campaign. Despite their general aniconic policies, in certain cases they began using art, including depictions of the Menorah, as a support for their rule (a menorah relief has also been discovered in a synagogue at Migdal dating from the early Roman period). At a time of brutal confrontation with Rome's appointed Herod the Great, the menorah was an iconic affirmation of the Temple, an independent Judah, and the legitimacy of Hasmonean rule—a role manifested by its depiction on the coin of Mattathias Antigonus, the last king and high priest from the Hasmonean dynasty.

When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Herodian Temple in AD 70, the Menorah was removed to Rome with other trophies, as depicted on the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum. Several centuries later, according to Procopius of Caesarea, "the treasures of the Jews" were looted from Rome by the Vandals, who took them to Carthage. In 534, the Byzantine general Flavius Belisarius

[4] Philo of Alexandria, *On the Life of Moses*, 2:102–3; *Questions and Answers on Exodus*.

took them to Constantinople, where the Emperor Justinian, afraid that the Menorah would bring him misfortune, sent it back to Jerusalem, from which it subsequently vanished without record.

By the time the physical Menorah disappeared, its image had been fully incorporated into the art of late antiquity, finding new life as a mutating symbol open to a variety of associations and interpretations. In the first century BC, Philo of Alexandria had described it alternately as representing the sky, the celestial bodies, the zodiac and the seasons, and the heavens, where the flame in the center represented the sun while those on either side were the stars, with the branches being three months of each season.[4] According to Josephus, it represented the seven visible planets.[5] By the turn of the millennium, the menorah had already become such a meaningful semantic entity that even with the destruction of the Temple and its eclipse as a physical object, its icon and the ideas associated with it continued to expand. The graphic image of the Menorah in the synagogue at Dura-Europos belongs to the last phase of its semiotic development. By the time Christian culture began to influence Jewish civilization significantly in the fifth century, the menorah had already become not only an important symbol for the entire Eastern Mediterranean, but also a signifier of the civic matrix of Jewish communities.

The menorah has evolved into an image in which various semantic possibilities bleed into each other, permitting multivalent interpretations to stand alongside each other and to inform the self-identification of the variegated community that looks to it. Each successive interpretation of the menorah has added to, rather than annihilated, the previous ones. Based initially on the very precise description given to Moses in Exodus, the menorah has evolved into an image of the entire world, becoming a sacral divine tree of anointment, evidence for the restoration of Jewish statehood and the direct divine interference in that history, and then, in the visions of Philo and Josephus, a celestial archetype. Initially a simple textual image, the menorah ultimately became graphical, marking the final transformation of an object into a symbol.

[5] *Jewish Antiquities*, 6:7

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The cross has gone through a symbolic transformation similar to that of the menorah, with each step of its semantic development being the result of a new angle of theological understanding. Unlike the Menorah, the sacred design of which was purportedly revealed to Moses by God, the cross was a quotidian instrument of horrible punishment. At the time of Christ, crucifixion was the most painful, gruesome, and shameful method of public execution in Roman Empire. Yet several centuries later, the image of this instrument of capital punishment was seen everywhere. The cross was glori-

Coin of Antigonus II Mattathias of Judah (37 BC).

fied in liturgical poetry and its meaning expounded in various texts; by the fourth century it had become a symbol of religious identity for much of the population of the Mediterranean basin and the Near East.

The first generations of Christians reflected on the meaning of the crucifixion for the salvation of the world and avoided the details of its physical appearance; it was not the cross that stood for Christians, but Christ himself. New Testament authors stressed the cross as an instrument of the resurrection, and Jesus as "life" and "light." The most ancient visual manifestation of the cross was conveyed not through a literal graphic representation, but in the form of a Christogram, a monogram or combination of letters that forms an abbreviation or acronym for the name of Jesus Christ or one of his various titles. In Christian scribal practice, *nomina sacra* were abbreviated in order to highlight the name of God among other names, and the cross itself was frequently given prominence as one of these sacred words. These Christograms were often freighted with numerological significance, their symbolic meanings based partially on their numeric correspondence to important biblical sums (for example, the elect three hundred and eighteen horsemen of Abraham, where the numerical value of eighteen is represented by the *iota-eta*—the first two letters of Jesus's name in Greek—and the letter *tau* stands both for the number 300 and for the cross).[6] In Christian manuscripts of 175–200, the Staurogram, composed by letters *tau* and *rho*, was used to abbreviate the Greek words "cross" and "crucify." The focus of these texts was not on the image of the cross, but on the power of the sacred word; the abbreviated name of Jesus was more important than the cross.

[6] Epistle of Barnabas, 9:7.

[7] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 86.

[8] Ambrose, *On the Death of Theodosius*.

Justin Martyr followed another line of reasoning by interpreting the cross as a universal cosmological image. He conceived the wood itself in architectural terms; material used as a frame for torture was reconceptualized as essential scaffolding for the universe, forming the basis for the form and structure of human beings. Such concentration on the cross's physical elements also led naturally to the identification of the cross as a tree of life, a manifestation on earth of its antecedent in the garden of Genesis 2.[7] This interpretation extended the referential range of the cross by associating it with one of the most important biblical topoi related to the menorah.

As Christ is the "light of the world," so the cross was also understood as the source of light and comprehension of divine mysteries; this added to the similarities with the menorah, an actual lamp. The motif of light as applied to the cross would be appropriated and expanded by the Emperor Constantine as it became the sign of political triumph, inseparable from the new Christian state.

During the first centuries, Christians conceived the cross as the tree of life, the symbol of the atoning sacrifice, the image of the universe, and the bearer of

Menorah stone from the synagogue at Migdal (Galilee).

divine light, but confined themselves to concepts instead of images. Although gradually the cross became an essential feature of the Mediterranean semiosphere, even in the fourth century St. Ambrose said about St. Helena that she "adored not the wood, because this is an error of the Gentiles and the vanity of wicked. But she adored him who hung on the tree, whose name was inscribed on the title."[8]

Throughout this early period, the cross's function as a tool of Roman capital punishment was mostly ignored in writings and graphic depictions. The two earliest known pictorial references to the crucifixion emerged from non-Christian and non-Jewish milieux, one as a parody (the Alexamenos graffito, c. 300), and another as an engraved magical gemstone amulet of the late second or early third century. Only after early Christians began to perceive a greater variety of interpretational possibilities in the cross did they describe the crucifixion itself through imagery and artifacts, and in fact the earliest image of the event did not appear until the late fifth century.

The transmutation of the cross into a visual sign was also closely tied to its appropriation by the imperial household, beginning with Eusebius's report of Constantine's vision of the cross before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312. Eusebius reports: "Constantine said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, 'Conquer with this [τούτῳ νίκα].'" He claims that at first Constantine did not understand what the apparition meant, but that on the following night he had a dream in which Jesus "appeared with the same sign which he has seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign . . . and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies."[9] Constantine then created a standard overlaid by a golden wreath, with the christogram XP placed in its center.

Two aspects of this account are noteworthy. First is the continued prominence of the Christogram: the figure of the cross itself seems not to have been sufficient as an iconic representation, but required an additional literary designation. Second and more intriguing is the combination of the cross with solar imagery in Constantine's vision (in Russian Orthodox tradition, Constantine's *labarum* is also called "Shaped like the Sun" and is seen as a fulfillment of the prophecy

[9] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 28–29.

Bronze coin of Constantine with labarum, AD 327.

Apse mosaics of Santa Pudenziana in Rome, depicting the Golgotha cross, AD 400.

in Mal. 4:2–3). Constantine is known to have been a devotee of the solar cult, and this was not his first solar vision: *Panegyrici Latini* 6 describes how, after defeating Emperor Maximian in 310, Constantine experienced a shining heavenly vision of Apollo—Sol Invictus—in his temple. After the vision of the miraculous cross on the sun, Sol Invictus was replaced by Christus Victor. Constantine's military standard, rather than a simple graphic depiction of the cross, became the dominant symbol of the Roman Empire in his period and continued to have strong influence in Orthodox iconography and hymnography. The military and nationalist influence of Constantine's vision is still quite apparent in the hymnography for the Feast of the Cross; the cross assimilated the solar symbolism understood by the Emperor and was then parlayed into a trophy for the construction of a new Roman state ideology.

Some years after Constantine's initial visions, the prominence of the cross in the Empire was even further enhanced when his mother Helena reported the discovery of the True Cross in Jerusalem shortly after the Council of Nicea. Following the recovery of this object, Constantine built the Church of the Resurrection on the site of its discovery, and Christian tradition claims that he then erected a cross on Calvary. In the *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius describes him as a new Moses who had first crossed the sea and then, in the new Tabernacle, had erected the new Menorah, now transmogrified into the saving Sign of the Cross. Most probably the "new Menorah" was a life-sized jeweled cross resting on a three-stepped pedestal; depictions show it decorated with golden apples, and the sixth-century mosaic in Hagia Sophia portrayed it as located behind a curtain, similar to the setting of the Menorah in the Temple.[10] Jeweled cruces gemmatae ultimately became an important component of imperial donations; in the Holy Sepulcher, the earthly Jerusalem and Christian concepts of the New Jerusalem were

[10] André Grabar, *L'Empereur dans l'art Byzantin* (Paris, 1936).

united. According to the travel diary of the nun Egeria, after venerating the relics of the true cross, pilgrims were shown relics of the ring of Solomon and the horn from which the kings were anointed. Imperially sanctioned solar imagery continued to be a major feature of cross visions, highlighted especially by the appearances (*stauro-phaneiai*) of crosses of light in the sky above Jerusalem, as recorded by Cyril of Jerusalem in 351.

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During the Second Temple period, the menorah gradually became a profound symbol significant in the entire Mediterranean area. It became a sign of anointing, a symbolic manifestation of God's presence and—due to the Maccabees and the account of the miracle of light—a symbol of statehood. At the same time, within the Hellenistic culture sphere, the menorah symbolized a celestial system. Yet the materiality of the menorah always remained at the heart of this sign.

Conversely, early Christians started realizing the metaphysical and allegorical significance of the cross before it became a physical object of worship and a symbol of Christianity. In contrast to subsequent theological reflection, early Christians barely acknowledged the "physical" reality of the cross as a tool for the murder of Jesus Christ. Semantic overlaps with ancient Jewish

Reliquary cross of Justin II (Constantinople, 568–74).

symbolism played a significant role in overcoming the fear of the terrifying Roman cross. The concentration on the iconography of the cross began only after Constantine had seen it in the form of letters and the cross acquired its meaning as a symbol of the state, of the intervention of higher powers, of the heavenly army, of heavenly light. Yet by the time Helena discovered the true cross, the menorah had already long been associated in Judaism with these same ideas. ❋

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