"REASSESSING THE INTERPRETATION OF ANCIENT JEWISH SYMBOLS"

AAR/SBL Talk

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About nine years ago when I began my doctoral work, Wayne Meeks suggested to me that I might consider continuing and revising the work of Erwin Goodenough on Jewish symbols. Little did I know how long, arduous, and complex that task would be. When I began to go into some depth on the subject of symbols, it became immediately clear to me that the problem was not one of compilation of materials (Goodenough was a master at this type of organization), but a problem that was fundamentally interpretive and methodological. In addition, it was striking how little work since Goodenough had been done on the interpretation of Jewish symbols. Perhaps, the most important investigations are still Morton Smith's well-known essays [in Bulletin of the John Rylands Library,1958; in JBL, 1967]. One would think that such a breakthrough study would have engendered a wealth of scholarly literature. Various suggestions may be made regarding why this did not occur. For example, one might suggest that Goodenough's comprehensiveness simply made further study unnecessary. This has certainly never stopped scholars before, however, and it has been undoubtedly clear to almost everyone that Goodenough's interpretations needed to be revised. Also it has been said that Goodenough's psychoanalytical interpretations were so far out of the mainstream that no one paid any attention to him and hence, for all practical purposes, the work had not been written. Yet, as a collection the work is excellent, and one would have assumed that an alternative model of interpretation could have been proposed. Thus, I would suggest that the real reason for the lack of follow-through stems from a modern dilemma that has especially plagued the interpretation of visual and epigraphic materials. How can we interpret an image, or an epigraphic phrase, when we do not know to what extent we can use literary evidence and we do not know which literary evidence we can use? In our case, should we use rabbinic evidence? Should we use Philo and Josephus? Should we see the text or the image as primary? In the end, do we not construct our own subjective interpretation, which describes our own symbolic universe rather than that of another? These questions reflect the dilemma that

Immanuel Kant, in his critique of David Hume, proposed over two centuries ago. No one experiences the world with an empty mind, a tabula rasa, but all experience is determined by endemically human categories that to some extent determine our experience of the world before we ever experience it. As Ernst Gombrich paraphrases it, "the innocent eye is blind" [Art and Illusion, 1961], or, in more general terms, the absolutely objective mind is ignorant.

Therein lies the problem for the interpretation of Jewish symbols. For example, how can we determine the meaning of the menorah, if we have some idea of its meaning before we look at it? Scholarly interpreters of archaeological materials have generally fallen into two camps in their response to this methodological problem. Many, in particular those who interpret Pagan symbols, have simply rejected the possibility that visual symbols have meaning and have argued that symbols are simply decorative. Some of this group take an agnostic position, arguing that we simply cannot know what a symbol means. Often these latter persons move from that position to the position that symbols are solely decorative. Though in a modified form, Arthur Darby Nock takes a position similar to this. Others, in particular those who have interpreted Christian symbols, assume that it is perfectly possible to gain an entirely objective view of what a symbol means. This group tends to look at symbols as signs--that is, as a kind of shorthand code, where a symbol has a simple one-to-one correspondence to a referent. One might phrase such a view in the following manner: when you see a, it means that you are always meant to think of b. For example, as Theodor Klauser and André Grabar argue: when you see a good shepherd on an early Christian gravestone, you are always meant to think of philanthropy. Or, as some argue, when you see a menorah on a Jewish gravestone, you are always meant to think of the Jewish identity of the deceased. In his interpretation of Christian symbols, André Grabar places this relationship under the category of "image-sign". For Grabar, an "image-sign" is a visual image that stands as a shorthand code for something other than itself. Unlike narrative imagery, "image-signs" are character-

ized by brevity and simplicity. According to Grabar, the majority of early Christian "image-signs", such as Daniel, Lazarus, and Jonah, refer to salvation and the conquest of death. In contrast to the salvific emphasis of the majority of pre-Constantinian images, Grabar argues that a minority of pre-Constantinian "image-signs" stand as a code for Church dogma. Even if there is more than one referent, the pattern is always a strictly lineal one-to-one correspondence and the referents are not related to one another in an overall structure. The assumption that one can obtain an absolutely objective description of the meaning of a symbol demands a rigorously static and codifiable system, the very opposite of, for example, the way symbols in poetry function.

That Goodenough did not respond to the problem of objectivity in either of the above two ways is perhaps one of his greatest contributions to the study of ancient symbols and makes him a great scholar in this field. He was very much aware that it is impossible to understand a symbol without projecting one's own experience on to it, but he believed that intelligent projection could lead to a more precise understanding of the meanings of an object. He is often criticized for his intuitive and emotional interpretation and, indeed, it often seems that he reduces the meanings of symbols to his own preferred categories, usually immortality and primal eroticism. While his categories are far too reductionist, nevertheless, as the philosophers Suzanne Langer and Ernst Cassirer have pointed out, scientists need to be able to project in order to formulate hypotheses. It should also be pointed out that the decoration hypothesis mentioned above is itself a projection, in that it makes the modern common-sense assumption that symbols really do not have meaning (thus eliminating the possibility of meanings even if they had been there). Though this could be right in a modern context, which I do not believe, it would certainly seem unlikely among ancient Jews who saw meaning everywhere in the world around them. In addition, as Jack Goody points out, one should not confuse the assembly-line production of the modern industrial world, where images are mass pro-

duced, with the intentional and necessarily painstaking production of images in pre-industrial societies. It would be anachronistic to impose a modern concept of "mere decoration" on ancient persons. Even for such apparently decorative symbols, such as rosettes, it is probable that the artisans, who created them, intended them to mean something, though it may be very difficult, if not impossible, to determine their meaning precisely. Likewise, the one-to-one correspondence theory is a projection. In the Christian case, it is dependent on the assumption that symbols functioned as pictorial language for the teaching of abstract theological ideas. In both the Christian and Jewish cases, it assumes that people think univalently and in purely lineal fashion.

In one regard, despite his problematic dependence on certain aspects of psychoanalytic theory, Goodenough was more theoretically sophisticated than these other interpreters of symbols, since he recognized that the nature of religious symbolism was much more complex than the one-to-one correspondence theory and that symbols were multivalent in character. He also understood that referents of religious symbols are not easily amenable to precise delineation. Many symbols (such as religious symbols or artistic symbols) are what Langer calls presentational in character and can be perceived only as a whole unity of referents, whereas the referents of discursive symbols (such as scientific symbols) are more easily segregated into discrete units. When we see a presentational symbol, we perceive it without thinking of its parts. As historians, who must offer a discursive interpretation, however, we must initially segregate the various referents before we integrate them into a meaningful whole and then project them back into the symbol. For example, discursive analysis allows us to see that a menorah, as I will discuss below, refers to light, to the Temple, and to God. We see each of these as separately segregated entities, but, after observing the connections between them, we must put them together into a meaningful whole. Thus, we can see that the menorah is a symbol of God because it is associated with light and the Temple. All three

referents form a connected and inseparable whole. I am not suggesting that Goodenough was quite as sophisticated as these philosophers in his interpretive methodology, but his inchoate formulations point in this direction. For example, he often speaks of the imprecise nature of symbolic meaning.

I would like now to speak about the influence of depth psychology on Goodenough, since it furnishes so much of what makes his interpretive methodology simultaneously insightful and problematic. Of all theorists, Sigmund Freud is perhaps most famous for demonstrating the vast and complex meanings of apparently simple symbols. By analyzing a word or image in dreams, he could reconstruct the psychological history of a patient through vast chains of overlapping associations. One cannot read a case history of his without marveling at the extraordinary subtlety and literary quality of these complex descriptions of symbols. Yet, at the same time, he argued that all the symbols pointed to one thing, namely wish fulfillment, usually stemming from the desire to return to the primal womb. Thus, in Freud, we see both an understanding of the complexity of symbols, but, at the same time, the reduction of that complexity to a single explanation. Like Freud, Jung was well aware of the multivalent and ambiguous nature of symbolism. In fact, Freud borrowed Jung's word association method in his interpretation of dreams. Yet, like Freud, Jung reduced this complexity to a single explanation, namely that all symbols could be boiled down into a few archetypes in the collective unconscious. In general, Jung views these archetypes in mystical terms. He relegates the personal unconscious of Freud to a lower position than that of the archetypal collective unconscious. Thus, in the end, his view leads to the conclusion that the contextual influences (personal, historical, social, economic, etc.) are really accidental and can be peeled off in favor of the essential meaning of symbols. This tension between complexity and simplicity is also evident in Goodenough. For, at the same time he affirms complexity, he maintains that all ancient symbols (Jewish, Christian, and Pagan) have essentially the same value. Thus, for

example, though Jews are monotheistic and Pagans are polytheistic, their symbols all refer to immortality. This, of course, presupposes that immortality, when stripped of its "accidental", or concrete, characteristics, is really the same for all groups. I believe that we are here at the heart of one of the major problems in Goodenough. The complexity of symbols becomes so confusing that the very concrete features, which these authors in many passages use to describe symbols, they reject in other passages in order to make synthetic observations. In response to this problem, I would suggest three strategic moves. First, before, we synthesize, we should attempt to describe the meanings of symbols as fully as possible. Second, we should exclude any synthesis that eliminates the ambiguity of meaning we have already established in our descriptions of the symbols. Third, we should not, like Jung and Goodenough, be uneasy with the concrete and literal meaning of symbols. The mystical, or ultimate meaning of a symbol may well be dependent upon them. For example, the literal meaning of a menorah as a lamp may well form one of the foundation stones for its meaning as God's light. I believe that it is possible to synthesize, especially because symbols are not aggregations of disparate and unrelated elements, but rather are integrated structures in which elements gain their meaning in relation to one anther and in relation to the symbolic structure as a whole.

As an historian of religion, Goodenough, I believe, wanted to understand what ancient people saw when they looked at these symbols. It is certainly my goal when interpreting this material. While we cannot obtain an absolutely objective construction, it is certainly possible to obtain a provisionally objective construction. In order to do this, one must seek an interpretive point of view that conforms as closely as possible to the evidence at hand. It must also be sufficiently malleable that it does not lend itself to reductive conclusions and sufficiently inclusive that it contains room for new constructions of the same material. In this regard, I would suggest that the view of symbolism as found in the work of Ernst Cassirer and

Suzanne Langer is most helpful and can serve to help reformulate the methodology offered by Goodenough. It was the advance of Cassirer to propose that symbols are the basic tools which human beings have for any kind of thought beyond mere naming. Symbols are the instruments through which we construct ideas. For Cassirer, religion, language, science, art, and mathematics are all essentially activities of human symbolization. Further, as Langer puts it, symbols create a "semblance of life". Within a symbol, an individual can express ideas about personal feeling, daily life, social status, institutions, the beauty of nature, God, and whatever else constitutes the substance of human existence. In addition, symbols allow us, as Langer says, "to manipulate the concepts we have achieved". Thus, symbols never merely possess one referent; rather, they bear several referents. Many meanings simultaneously coexist in one symbol. In addition, as I mentioned above, Langer, influenced by Gestalt psychology, argues that the referents of symbols were parts of a larger whole. Instead of seeing them as discrete units, they need to be seen in relation to one another.

I believe that this working assumption provides the best alternative for the following reasons. First, it conforms most closely to the evidence, which in fact suggests that symbols were multivalent and gestalt-like in nature. For example, in Philo and in rabbinic literature, we find that, in the same passage, the menorah may refer to the seven planets and to God's light. Obviously, there is a relationship between the seven lights in the sky (the planets) and God's light. Second, I believe that depth psychology (both Freud and Jung) and Gestalt psychology have established that meanings, of which we are unconscious, influence and inform those meanings of which we are conscious. For example, a person who looks at the menorah may think of the Temple, but clearly it would be more probable than not to assume that the menorah as God's light informs in the background. Third, such a working assumption is less restrictive than others, since it includes as many meanings as are reasonably attested by the evidence. Fourth, its continuance does not depend upon a particular reconstruction.

The meaning complex of the menorah, which I discuss below, can be superseded by another meaning complex without the working assumption being harmed in any way. Fifth, which is a corollary of four, this assumption is most conducive to historical interpretation. For it presumes that different chronological, locative, and socio-economic contexts will change the emphases of, and relations between, the referents of various symbols and, thus, create different dynamic structures. Like a scientific paradigm, our working assumption is thus potentially applicable to a variety of phenomena.

Now I would like to examine one Jewish visual symbol, the menorah, as it is found in funerary contexts, especially inscriptions. I thought it might be helpful to include some examples, which are found in sheets 3-5. In this description, I am not claiming that all persons would have looked at the menorah in this way. Obviously, for example, the personal history of every individual, which we will never know, would change the emphases and relations, as would other contexts. Rather I am trying to describe one possible set of relations that would have been available to Jews in the diaspora during the period from 200-400 C.E. What I hope to begin to establish are the cultural parameters of meaning for the menorah. First, from a practical point of view, the menorah appears on so many Jewish inscriptions that it is clearly identifiable as the marker of the Jewishness of the deceased. In this case, it functions as a sign, but it only acquires that signitive value from other meanings which I will now explicate. For instance, the menorah is so clearly associated with the Jewish people that the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum depicts it as their most prominent symbol. By capturing it, the Romans felt that they had captured the Jewish God. For Jews, since the menorah has such a prominent place in the Biblical description of the Temple in Exodus, and because it was so important in the Macabbean restoration of the Temple, the menorah was an allusion to the Temple, also a symbol of God. This is confirmed in rabbinic literature. One gold glass (you can see it on sheet 5c) from Rome demonstrates this connection artistically by the placement

of the menorah near what could be the Temple. This building, in fact, is also called "house of peace" (oikos eirênês), which, in a funerary context, would seem to associate it with the common Jewish funerary formula, "in peace be your sleep" (en eirênê hê koimêsis sou). The frequent association of the menorah with the Temple in the context of death suggests, at a time when the Temple was destroyed and no longer in existence, the hope of the messianic world to come when the Temple would be restored. For the Romans, it was also evidently natural to associate the Temple with the menorah. For example, both the description of the Roman triumph in Josephus and its depiction in the Arch of Titus clearly show a conception of the menorah as a central part of the Temple plunder.

In addition, the menorah has most obvious associations with a lamp. The lamp implies light, both the light which physically illuminates (e.g. a dark catacomb or tomb) and the light of God which illuminates God's people. One inscription (sheet 3a), which designates the menorah with the phrase, "The One God" (Eis Theos), implies this connection between the menorah and God's light. Perhaps, this is related to the importance of the menorah in the Temple--the house of God. Evidently, this is also the case in another inscription (sheet 3B), either en orô theou ("in the precinct of God") or more probably enorôntos theou ("of the seeing God", as in "the menorah of the seeing God"). In either case, there is an association between the menorah, a lamp, and God: menorah as lamp and light——God as light. Light lights the tomb and God illuminates God's people. Of course, the lights in the sky, the seven planets of the solar system (found in Philo, Josephus, and in rabbinic literature) corresponding to the seven branches of the menorah, are of relevance here as well. Philo mentions that this interpretation, stemming from the passage in Zecchariah, is the most well-known of all. It would certainly have been easily understood by Pagans, who viewed the objects and events of their environment in a cosmic context, as evidenced by the importance of astrology.

As Morton Smith has argued (see above), the menorah is also associated very frequently by rabbinic interpreters with the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. It is indeed significant that

the menorah in funerary contexts is sometimes depicted in the form of a plant or tree. In rabbinic tradition, the tree of life is where the Shekinah (or presence) of God dwells and the tree of life is also the tree of immortality--thus, a connection between God and the immortality of the deceased in the world to come. Moreover, the tree is a symbol from nature. Its natural origin fits in well with the other natural symbols constantly found beside the menorah, namely the loulab or palm branch and the etrog or citron and, like Pagan funerary scenes, suggests the placement of the deceased in an ideal bucolic environment.

The menorah also has an apotropaic function: i.e. do not violate this sanctuary, this tomb, or else you will face the power and might of God. Such a function would correlate well with the frequent use of the menorah on magical inscriptions. Because the menorah is here too associated with the divine light, it has magical and apotropaic potency: it can do something for you. Finally, the menorah is very often clearly associated, on Greek and Latin funerary inscriptions especially from Rome, with the Hebrew word, shalom, "peace". Thus, combining symbolic image and symbolic word, one might suggest that there is peace in the menorah--peace in death, in God's light, in God's universe, in God's temple, and in God's protection.

This is only a small sample of the meanings that one should include. It does suggest, however, that Jewish symbols (like ancient symbols in general), rather than functioning decoratively, signitively or solely mystically, functioned instead as microcosmic expressions of an entire worldview, where a symbol bears many meanings, which reverberate and resonate with each other. I hope that this search for a new methodology will recommence the project that Goodenough initiated so brilliantly. Thank you very much.