

ERWIN R. GOODENOUGH

JEWISH SYMBOLS

in the

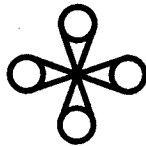
Greco-Roman Period

VOLUME TEN

SYMBOLISM IN THE DURA SYNAGOGUE

(The second of three volumes)

TEXT, *ii*



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the Speaker is first, the Logos second, third the Creative Power, fourth the Ruling, and then the Benefactor subtended below the Creative; sixth the Punisher under the Royal, and seventh the world of forms.⁹⁰

Philo has indeed labored his point, and even so I have quoted only a small part of his long and repetitious exposition.⁹¹ He describes the Ark in almost exactly the same terms in quite another treatise,⁹² or alludes to it.⁹³ He can speak of the Powers more generally, and actually calls them in one passage "many-named."⁹⁴ But the material I have quoted is no passing allegory or momentary *jeu d'esprit*. Hidden within the Holy of Holies, he tediously explains, the Jews had the true symbol of God's nature. We must recall again that Philo definitely warned against conceiving of these as anything but aspects of God's unity. In all this Philo shows himself clearly in the intellectual tradition of Neoplatonism which made Plotinus hotly oppose the Gnostics. Teachers in both schools insisted that the supreme God or Reality has a nature which can have no immediate relation with the material world, or with man as a part of that world. Man turns to look above and beyond, but sees only manifestations of God, not God himself. In contrast to the more popular schools, however, Philo, like Plotinus, regarded these as powers or manifestations, in no sense personalities or a pantheon of gods.

Accordingly, even though the Ark in the synagogue painting has lost the Cherubim and become the Ark of the synagogue, and though the jewels of that Ark are not arranged in the order of Philo's description as in text figure 18 (page 90), it seems much more than a chance occurrence that in this particular setting the seven jewels are arranged in groups of three, and that only here do the three rosettes appear at the top of the Ark. Philo himself had no invariable arrangement for the Powers or names for them,⁹⁵ even though he usually thought of the same three or seven, and I should not remotely suggest that the artist was working from Philo's text. I do suggest very strongly, however, that the sort of associations Philo had with the Ark as the supreme symbol of Judaism, especially expressed in terms of the three and the seven, have more relation to the Ark as here presented than does any other interpretation of the Ark I have been able to find.

C. THE THREE MEN

IMPORTANT AS PHILO has made the structure of the seven Powers with the Ark, he actually speaks more often of the three than the seven in this connection.⁹⁶ He many times brings in the three as a revelation of God.⁹⁷ But he especially found the three in the "three

90. Ibid.

91. See *QE* II, 51-68.

92. *Fug.* 100 f. This is an interruption in another long allegory in which the six cities of refuge are the Powers, and the High Priest is the Logos, *Fug.* 93-118.

93. *Heres* 166.

94. *Som.* II, 254. The number is vague, but the function identical, in *Conf.* 171 f.

95. I quote a number of these in my *By Light, Light*, 28-30, out of one of which comes a totally different diagram.

96. For example, *Mos.* II, 96-100.

97. The Logos is the flaming sword between the two Cherubim—Powers of Eden in *Cher.* 21, 27-31; God and the two Powers are symbolized by the tetragram on the turban of the High Priest, *Mos.* II, 131 f.; it was the Powers who buried Moses, *Mos.* II, 291.

men" who appeared to Abraham.⁹⁸ In one treatise⁹⁹ he says that Abraham's vision of the three typified all lifting of the eye of the mind, especially as done by the prophets; that is, it is the metaphysical vision. Of the three men whom Abraham saw, the one in the middle is called Being, Philo says, which is a term not a name, for he has no name; it is a description of his type of existence. The men on either side represent one the Creative Power "God," the other the Royal Power, "Lord."

Philo bases one of his most extended allegories on Abraham's vision of three men.¹⁰⁰ It and its parallels would require a monograph for proper discussion. Here I can say only that from the oak of Mamre, under which Abraham saw the men, to the mystic meal they shared, and their final departure, Philo makes every detail reveal what seems to me the very core of his religion. In describing these three men as a revelation of God, Philo says that Scripture presents

most natural things to those who are able to see, [namely] that it is reasonable for one to be three and for three to be one, for they were one by a higher principle. But when counted with the chief Powers, the Creative and Kingly, he makes the appearance of three to the human mind. For this cannot be so keen of sight that it can see him who is above the Powers that belong to him, [namely] God, distinct from anything else. For as soon as one sets eyes upon God, there also appear, together with his being, the ministering Powers, so that in place of one he makes the appearance of a triad. . . . He cannot be seen in his oneness without something [else], the chief Powers that exist immediately with him, [namely] the Creative, which is called "God," and the Kingly, which is called "Lord." . . . [Abraham] begins to see the sovereign, holy, and divine vision in such a way that the single appearance appears as a triad, and the triad as a unity.¹⁰¹

Marcus notes that of the three adjectives used here for the vision, sovereign, holy, and divine, the first and last correspond to the "Lord" and "God," so that the Holy One at the center would be God (or the Logos), in which they were united.

The great Abraham did not stop with the vision of the three, for Philo interprets Genesis XVIII, 3, to mean that Abraham's mind

clearly forms an impression with more open eyes and more lucid vision, not roaming about nor wandering off with the triad, and being attracted thereto by quantity and plurality, but running toward the One. And he manifested himself without the Powers that belong to him, so that he saw his oneness directly before him, as he had known it earlier in the likeness of a triad.¹⁰² But it is something great that he asks, [namely] that God shall not pass by or remove to a distance and leave his soul desolate and empty. For

98. Gen. XVIII, 2; cf. *Abr.* 119-132, 142-146.

99. *Deo* 2-12. This highly important treatise, which also was given the title "On the Three Men Who Appeared to Abraham," survives only in the Armenian, published by J. B. Aucher, *Philonis Judaei Paralipomena Armena*, 1826, 613-619. Aucher's Latin translation was reprinted in the edition of Philo by M. C. E. Richter, 1828-30, VII, 409-414. For its relation to the Philonic corpus see

M. Adler, "Das philonische Fragment De Deo," *MGWJ*, LXXX (1936), 165-170. Adler reviewed earlier suggestions. None of them, including Adler's, seem convincing to me, but that the little fragment is genuine I see no reason to doubt at all. See above, IX, 85-87.

100. *QG* IV, 1-22; cf. *Abr.* 107-132; *Post.* 27.

101. *QG* IV, 2.

102. Cf. *Abr.* 131 f.

the limit of happiness is the presence of God, which completely fills the whole soul with his whole incorporeal and eternal light.¹⁰³

After considerable other comment Philo returns to the essential meaning of the three:

So that truly and properly speaking, God alone is the measure of all things, both intelligible and sense-perceptible, and he in his oneness is likened to a triad because of the weakness of the beholders. For the eye of the soul, which is very lucid and bright, is dimmed before it falls upon and gazes at him who is in his oneness without anyone else at all being seen. For just as the eyes of the body when they are weak, often come upon a double appearance from a single lamp, so also in the case of the soul's vision, it is not able to attain to the One as one, but finds it natural to receive an impression of the triad in accordance with the appearances that attend the One like ministers, [namely] the chief Powers.¹⁰⁴

Lebreton,¹⁰⁵ a Catholic writer on the origins of the doctrine of the Trinity, was aware of these passages from the *Questions* in which the three are said to be one, but thought that their phraseology could so easily have been given a Christian coloring by the Armenian or Latin translators that he needed to mention them only in a footnote. But the same conception of the three who are one appears in Philo's other books.¹⁰⁶ These three, not only here but throughout Philo's writings, basically symbolize Philo's single Deity, and are at the heart of his most reserved mystic teaching. "The sacred mystic account concerning the Uncreated and his Powers must be kept secret," he says,¹⁰⁷ "since it is not for everyone to protect the deposit of divine rites," and he thereby directly tells us that it is the *hieros logos* of his mystery, its deepest secret, and suggests that in some way it was connected with "rites." He could not have underscored its importance more vividly.

In another discussion of the three men of Abraham, Philo goes on specifically to identify the Deity they represent with the Deity manifested by the Mercy Seat and Cherubim of the Ark: "In terms of these three men the divine oracle seems to me," says Philo, "to be explained when it pronounces: 'I will speak with thee from above from the Mercy Seat between the two Cherubim.'" ¹⁰⁸ After this identification Philo proceeds to give the same description of the One with the Powers which the Ark always suggested to him. We cannot doubt that to Philo the two symbols, the Ark and the men, belonged together. Hardly a treatise of Philo lacks at least a reference to God and the two Powers, whether with or without the Logos.¹⁰⁹ He steadily visualized God in this way, and he even

103. *QG* IV, 4.

104. *Ibid.*, 8.

105. J. Lebreton, *Histoire du dogme de la Trinité*, 8th ed., 1927, I, 207 (Bibliothèque de théologie historique).

106. *Abr.* 119-132, 143-146.

107. *Sacr.* 59 f. The text I have translated is corrupt: see Cohn's note in the edition of L. Cohn and P. Wendland, 1896-1930, I, ad loc. Apparently Philo is saying that only a *mustēs* should be en-

trusted with the *hieros logos* of the rites (*orgia*) connected with the Uncreated and his Powers. Cohn reprints the text as quoted by both Clement of Alexandria and Ambrose.

108. *Deo* 5 (ed. M. Richter, VII, 411).

109. He expands the functions of the Powers very well in *Plant.* 50, 85-92; *Immut.* 3, 77-86, 109 f.; *Post.* 14-20, 167-169; *Gig.* 46 f.; *Conf.* 136 f., 175; *Cher.* 106; *Mut.* 15-24; *Mos.* II, 238; *Abr.* 59; *Spec.* I, 45-49, 209, 307.

represents the Jews as worshiping such a Deity when he writes, for pagan Roman readers, the defense of his embassy to Gaius.¹¹⁰ Indeed it is just because Philo, and apparently the group he represents, consistently thought of God in these terms that his very monotheism seemed in danger, and he had to insist that God is still the One while represented in the Powers. His form of defense is extraordinary for its premonition of the Christian solution of a kindred problem.

I need hardly say that for the origins of the Trinity all this material deserves more than a footnote. When the early Church first talked of this experience of Abraham, if we may trust Justin Martyr,¹¹¹ the three consisted of God and two angels, and this "God" was a second God, or, to follow his general argument, it was the Logos, which now, in Christian hands, has become Christ. The interpretation that the three of this vision are one was continued by Augustine,¹¹² but of course by his time the special dignity of the one at the Center had to be specifically denied in order to harmonize the tradition with the Christian Trinity:

"The Lord appeared unto Abraham." Not one, or two, but three men appeared to him, no one of whom is said to have stood prominently above the others, no one more than the others to have shone with greater glory, or to have acted more authoritatively.¹¹³

Augustine obviously is refuting people who still used the verse in the way Philo and Justin Martyr did.

The older tradition of Justin Martyr and hellenized Judaism, however, by which the central one of the three men was superior to the other two, appears in the Santa Maria Maggiore mosaic of the incident,¹¹⁴ where a mandorla sets off the central figure, although in the lower half of the same mosaic he is like the other two. They all three wear the sacred robe, as, of course, does Abraham. As I said above,¹¹⁵ this mosaic, so completely Philonic in its conception of the Logos and two Powers, first suggested to me that a Jewish Old Testament art must lie behind the Christian, and that the Christians in using it were, like Justin, only reinterpreting the originally Jewish iconography.

The art tradition continued. Fig. 100¹¹⁶ has the three men waited upon by Abraham and Sarah at the left,¹¹⁷ as shown in the sixth-century mosaic in San Vitale at Ravenna. The men in this mosaic look much like those at Santa Maria Maggiore, and they obviously

110. *Legat.* 6.

111. *Dialogue*, 56; cf. my *Theology of Justin Martyr*, 1923, 142.

112. *Against Maximianus*, II, xxvi, 7; Migne, *PL*, XLII, 809.

113. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, II, xviii, 34; Migne, *PL*, XLII, 868.

114. See above, III, fig. 1. The earliest presentation of the incident, if, as I agree, Ferrua's dating is correct, appears in the new catacomb Via Latina, Rome. See Ferrua, *Via Latina*, 50, plate xxiv, 2. Here the central figure is distinguished by being slightly smaller than the other two. They

all, of course, wear the full Greek dress.

115. I, 23-27.

116. Cf. M. von Berchem and E. Clouzot, *Mosaïques chrétiennes*, 151 f., fig. 191; G. Bovini, *Chiese di Ravenna*, 1957, 122-124 (Musei e monumenti).

117. Sarah in her tent recalls the figures in the tents in the Dura painting of the Well of the Wilderness, fig. 331, and the person over the niche, fig. 66. This mosaic shows Abraham not yet in mystic garb, but wearing it at last at the Akedah. At Santa Maria Maggiore he clearly had it.

belong to the same tradition. Comparing them, however, we see that the central figure in both mosaics sits well in front of the other two. The tradition persisted in Christian biblical illustrations, which have such importance for us that we must see at least a few of them. Fig. 264¹¹⁸ shows Abraham falling at the feet of the men, with the middle one emphasized. In fig. 265¹¹⁹ they are again at the table, now winged angels, with the central one exalted, a meaning made specific in fig. 266,¹²⁰ where the central figure alone wears the cruciform nimbus, and so unmistakably carries on the tradition we find in Justin Martyr against which Augustine protested. An allegory of the scene and the men, much like Philo's, clearly lies behind both the art and the early writers of Christianity, and must be taken by moderns as seriously as it was by the ancients for the origins of the Christian Trinity.¹²¹ Indeed, so much had the "God of the three men" become itself a special description of God that in one passage of Philo God tells Moses to say to the Israelites:

First tell them that I am "He-who-is," that they may learn the difference between what is and what is not, and also the further lesson that no name at all can properly be used of me, to whom alone existence belongs. And if, in their natural weakness, they seek some title to use, tell them not only that I am God, but also the God of the three men whose names express their virtue, each of them the exemplar of the wisdom they have gained—Abraham by teaching, Isaac by nature, Jacob by practice.¹²²

The important thing for Philo is that the God who is purely Existent manifests himself as "three men," though which group of three men illustrate this makes relatively little difference to him as an allegorist.

We still have no Jewish pictorial representation of Abraham and the three men, but the three men beside the Ark in the Dura painting strikingly recall the three at Santa Maria Maggiore, and indeed in all the art tradition. The resemblance became more striking when I examined closely Gute's copy of the Dura painting, and discovered that while the two outer men wear exactly the same shade of pink, the dress of the man in the center is definitely lighter. The three are generally alike, but the one at the center is marked off.

The central rosette on the round top of the Ark's face with an identical but smaller rosette on either side seems to announce similarly the conception of the three whose central member dominates; and the seven jewels on the Ark now seem quite appropriate if the God of the seven who manifested himself in the ancient Ark was thought still to be the God of the ark of the Law in the synagogue. For the artist, as for Philo, the Ark and the three men belonged together. The most reasonable assumption seems to be that the three men

118. Courtesy Vatican Museum, Rome. It is cod. vat. gr. 747, fol. 39. Cf. Wilpert, *Mosaiken und Malereien*, I, fig. 147, p. 428.

119. From the *Const. Octateuch*, plate xiv, 46.

120. Courtesy Vatican Museum, Rome; cod. vat. gr. 747, fol. 39. Cf. Wilpert, *Mosaiken und Malereien*, I, fig. 148, p. 428.

121. By the twelfth century orthodoxy has taken

over entirely, and on the mosaic of Monreale nothing distinguishes the central angel at the table except that the two others look toward him. Abraham serves them a pig! See O. Demus, *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily*, 1949, plate 103.

122. *Mos.* I, 75 f.; cf. *Mut.* 11-15, where "He-who-is" again is broken down to mean the three Patriarchs.

who walk beside the Ark were originally those of Abraham's encounter with God, as well as the three great Patriarchs, the three in which the Existent manifests himself. That they should thus walk beside the Ark makes little sense in historical or biblical terms, but is completely appropriate in symbolic terms. The three cannot be the five Philistine lords. We have repeatedly found it the most natural assumption from the use of such a robe on figures which thus intrude themselves into the paintings that they represent divine intervention in the events or, when worn by biblical heroes themselves, represent human beings who have special divine power at least for this occasion. Their pointed fingers may well mean that collectively they represent deity intervening to direct the oxen back to Bethshemesh.

D. CONCLUSION

THE PAINTING we are considering elaborately presents the divine intervention that manifested itself in the miraculous power of the Ark to destroy the pagan idols, and identifies its potency as that of God and his Powers, the seven, or even more, the three, who are one. The sense of victorious power is intensified by the three laurel garlands across the face of the Ark.

Not divided into two incidents, or two halves, the picture has a unified design, all of whose details center in the Ark itself. Its power, or the power of the God of the Jews which concentrated in it, at once demolishes the pretenses of paganism and reveals itself as the mystic potency of the seven and the three. Its symbolism goes with that of the Closed Temple, for while that temple presents the mystic seven by the convention of the walls, it announces a God and a Judaism of the seven and ten which had no relation to the physical world but was a mystic and metaphysical reality. Judaism, as Philo explains it, used the seven in two ways. One was for the cosmic ascent through the seven planets, whose total exposition was in the visible cultus of the Aaronic priesthood and whose supreme symbol was the seven-branched candlestick. In contrast there was metaphysical, immaterial Judaism, whose seven were God and the Powers, but whose highest revelation was of the three who are one. The chief symbols of this were the Ark, invisible in the inner sanctuary, and the vision of God given to Abraham when the three visited him. All this leads to the completely perfect ten, as contrasted with the five, the ten being the metaphysical, immaterial world, the five the physical world of the five senses.¹²³ The three men guide the Ark away from the shambles of false religion to the mystic temple closed to ordinary men:

For to the construct of wisdom as a whole belongs the perfect number ten, and Wisdom is the court and palace of him who rules over all as the sole really autonomous King. This dwelling house is a conceptual (*noētos*) one.¹²⁴

The King, Philo has just said,¹²⁵ is he who is "Tenth and alone and eternal." Properly, above these two paintings in the synagogue is the scene of the Exodus, whose meaning we shall find summarized in Philo's terms:

123. For the five see *Abr.* 147-166.

125. *Ibid.* 105; cf. 103.

124. *Cong.* 116.

We find this "ten" properly called the Passover of the soul (*to psuchikon Pascha*), the crossing from every passion and the whole realm of sense to the Tenth, which is conceptual (*noētos*) and divine (*theios*).¹²⁶

Philo has one passage in which he contrasts the ascent through matter with the true ascent into the immaterial world. He does this in terms of the Powers, and of gates and walls, in a way that could well have suggested our two temples:

But this world that we can point out and see, the one discerned by sense, is, as I now know, nothing but a house of "God," in the sense of one of the Powers of the Existent, the Power which expresses his goodness. The world which he named a "house," he also described as "gate of" the real "heaven." Now what is this? The world which only intellect can perceive, framed from the eternal forms in him who was appointed in accordance with divine bounties,¹²⁷ cannot be apprehended otherwise than by [our] passing on to it from this world which we see and perceive by our senses. For, indeed, it is impossible to get an idea of another sort of existences, the incorporeals, except by making material objects our starting point. The conception of place was gained when they were at rest: that of time from their motion, and points and lines and superficies, in a word extremities (*perata*), from the robe-like exterior which covers them. Correspondingly, then, the conception of the intelligible world was gained from the one which our senses perceive: it is therefore a kind of gate into the former. For as those who desire to see our cities go in through gates, so all who wish to apprehend the unseen world are introduced to it by receiving the impression of the visible world. The world whose substance is discernible only by intellect apart from any sight whatever of shapes or figures, but only by means of the archetypal eternal form present in the world which was fashioned in accordance with the image beheld by him with no intervening shadow¹²⁸ . . . he [or it] shall be summoned when all its walls and every gate has been removed and men may not catch sight of it from some outside point, but behold the unchanging beauty, as it actually is, and that sight no words can tell or express.¹²⁹

Here is a city with walls and gates, and to penetrate the inner part is to achieve not the apocalyptic but the mystic vision. It was this, I believe, which the two paintings, of the Ark vs. paganism and of the Closed Temple, together represented.

¹²⁶. Ibid. 106.

¹²⁷. Literally, "benefactions for support of a chorus" (*chorēgias*). I suspect that a Greek would have understood that God was the founder of the chorus, the choral rhythm of Reality, one over which the Logos presides.

¹²⁸. The text is probably corrupt. See Colson's emendations in his note to the passage, pp. 602 f.

¹²⁹. *Som.* 1, 185-188. The text is extremely difficult, but not so as to obscure the point of Philo's imagery for our purpose here. See Colson's note, V, 601-603. I quote substantially his translation as given with the text. The mystic approach through walls and gates made P. Wendland suspect that this was a Christian insertion from the Apocalypse. But I agree with Colson in seeing no such intrusion. Cf. *Fug.* 183.