



Facing the Holy Ark, in Words and in Images

Steven D. Fraade

Aedicula from Umm el-Qanatir. Photograph courtesy of the Restoration of Ancient Technology Center.

The ark of the covenant was central to the plan of the Jerusalem Temple and the wilderness tabernacle before it, as the vessel was located in the structures' holiest, innermost domain. Despite its importance, the ark of the covenant was invisible to virtually all Israelites.¹ Even while the ark was being assembled, disassembled, and transported in the wilderness, the Levitical Kohathites were instructed to shield it from view, including their own (Num 4:5–20). One of the chief obligations of Aaron and his descendants was to deny access to anyone else, including the Levites, to the Holy of Holies, which housed the ark alone, or risk death (Num 18:1–7, 22–23).

Josephus similarly stresses that the wilderness tabernacle's sacred precinct was "invisible to the eyes of any," while its next less sacred area was "assigned to the priests alone" (*Ant* 3.122, 123, 125). See also Josephus's later account of Herod's efforts to keep (Roman) "aliens" (*alophuloi*) from seeing the "holy contents of the sanctuary," "objects not open to public view," or "things forbidden to men's eyes" (*JW* 1.354–355; *Ant* 14.482–483). Similarly, 1 Kgs 8:8 notes that the ark's poles projected so that its ends "were visible in the sanctuary in front of the shrine, but they could not be seen outside; and there they remain to this day" (NJPS). Thus, across biblical and First Temple times, the ark, foremost among the sancta, was virtually invisible to anyone

other than those few priests who ministered to it in the Holy of Holies. In Second Temple times it was absent altogether.

Even so, the scriptural record leaves some ambiguities. Did the ark, representing God's presence in the midst of the people, go out to war with the fighters, protecting them from harm and leading them to victory, or remain safe and secure in the midst of the camp (Num 2:17; 10:33; 14:44; Deut 20:4; 1 Sam 4:3; 2 Sam 6:2)? What exactly was placed in the ark: the two whole tablets inscribed with the Decalogue, the pieces of the broken ones, and/or a Torah scroll (as later rabbinically imagined; Exod 24:12; 25:16, 21; Deut 10:1–5; 31:26; 1 Kgs 8:9; cf. Heb 9:3–5)? Note in particular the ambiguity of Deut 10:2, "and you shall deposit them": Did "them" refer to the whole tablets and the broken pieces or just the former? Likewise, did "to the side of the ark" in Deut 31:26 mean the inside or the outside? Deut 31:9 could also be construed to suggest that Moses's Teaching/Torah was carried by the Levitical priests alongside (or within) the ark of the covenant. One solution to these seeming contradictions and ambiguities, adopted by ancient and modern interpreters alike, is to harmonize them by positing the existence of *two* arks, one with just the tablets (whole and broken) and another with the Torah scroll; one that went out to war and another that remained in the camp. Later rabbinic interpreters, as we shall see, preoccupied themselves with these questions, relying on various scriptural prooftexts to buttress their arguments. While these questions no longer had practical consequences for the late antique rabbis,

they had theological and polemical significance.

With the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE and the building of the Second Temple in 515 BCE, the ark of the covenant was either captured, destroyed, hidden, or lost. It became doubly invisible, as the Holy of Holies was now vacant of the physical manifestation of the divine presence and would not be restored, except messianically. This was noted by Jews and non-Jews alike, whether in admiration or ridicule.² To some pagans, it was as if Jews worshipped nothing. Hecataeus of Abdera (ca. 300 BCE) writes that in the innermost sacred part of the Jerusalem Temple, “there is not a single statue [of the deity] or votive offering, no trace of a plant, in the form of a sacred grove or the like.”³ While Josephus mentions sacred scriptures deposited in the Temple (archive?; *Ant* 3.38; 4.303; 5:61; *JW* 7.162), nowhere does he or any other pre-rabbinic source explicitly suggest that the scriptural scrolls were stored in an ark in the Holy of Holies, as later rabbinic texts would imagine.

Unlike the menorah and showbread table, for which we have some visual representations from the first centuries BCE and CE (Fraade 2009: 237–65; 2011: 523–54), we have no depictions of the ark, whether it be the ark of the covenant or the ark of scrolls, until much later. With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, we might say that the ark became triply rendered invisible: The ark is shrouded, the holy of holies is empty, and the temple is destroyed.

The Proliferation of Torah Shrines and Arks of the Scrolls (Representations)

What a difference a few centuries can make! Beginning in the third century CE, the number and variety of representations of Torah shrines and arks of the scrolls, whether in mosaics, paintings, etchings, carvings, or inscriptions, both in the land of Israel and in the diaspora, increase dramatically, especially in synagogues and funerary locations.⁴ All of these ritual objects (including the *shofar*, *etrog*, *lulav*, and incense shovel) are associated with the now-gone Jerusalem Temple. For the most part, however, these consist of artistic representations, rather than the objects themselves. That is, whether in floor mosaics, wall paintings, funerary plaques, oil lamp decorations, or graffiti, the vast bulk are two-dimensional, rather than three-dimensional (although some are sculpted reliefs), as fragments of actual *aediculae* (literally mini-shrines, here meaning Torah shrines) are rare (Levine 2005: 354). Likewise,



Figure 1. Synagogue floor mosaic at Hammat Tiberias. Photograph by Steven Fraade.

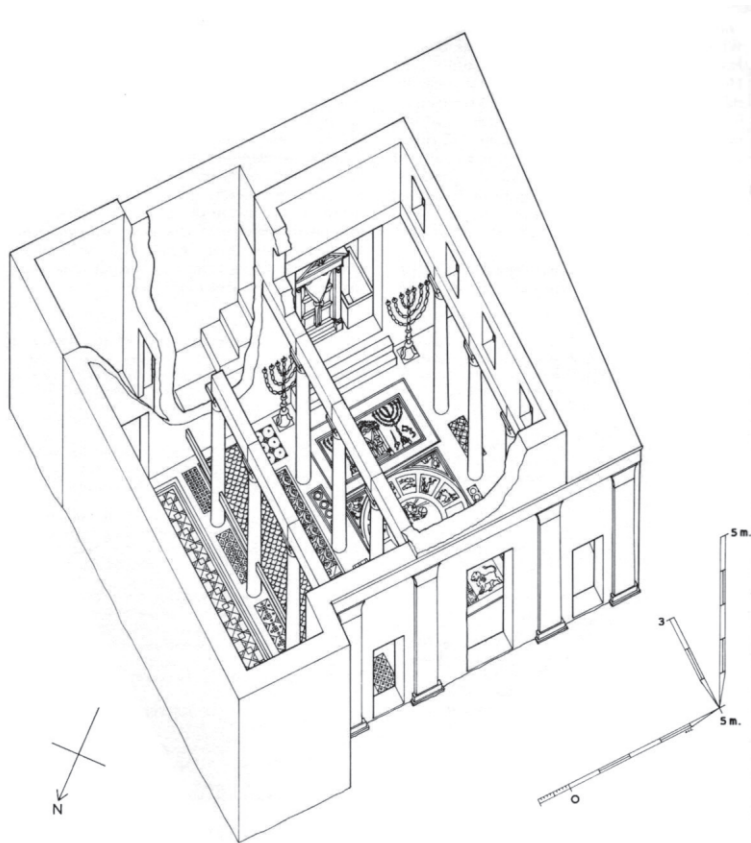


Figure 2. Reconstructed drawing of the synagogue at Hammat Tiberias B. Courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society.

diaspora synagogues have ample *artistic representations* of the ark of the scrolls, but few physical remains or direct visible evidence of actual *aediculae*, whose locations and forms are often deduced from other sources (Hachlili 1988: 366). In light of the dearth of remains, many scholars simply assume that the depiction of the Torah shrine represents the now-missing shrine or ark that would have stood before it (e.g., Fine 2016: 124). For example, scholars presume that an actual Torah shrine stood before the mosaic depiction of a shrine at the synagogue of Hammat Tiberias (fig. 1). That is, standing at (if not on) the artistic mosaic panel, a worshiper would have seen at his (her?) feet a two-dimensional version of the three-dimensional real object that he would have been facing when praying toward Jerusalem. This three-fold circular presumption⁵ would seem to underlie the graphic reconstruction of the synagogue at Hammat Tiberias that appears in figure 2, where what is on the floor before the *bema* is identical, at least with respect to the menorahs and Torah shrine, to what appears above the *bema*.

If we look at the Torah niche in the middle of the western wall of the synagogue at Dura Europos (fig. 3), no one would confuse the form of the doorless Torah niche with that of the closed-door entrance to the temple or holy of holies immediately above it. Yet, they are iconographically linked to one another by the shared architectural motif of a conch shell. The architectural façade directly above the Torah niche at Dura bears striking similarity to the temple's façade on Bar Kokhba coins (fig. 4), the latter bearing striking resemblance to contemporary Roman coins that depict a temple entrance in the center of which is displayed the cult image that resides within (van Opstall 2018: 88, fig. 11.2). It likewise shares important visual elements (minus the cult image) with the depictions of what are presumed to be entrances to Torah shrines. A similar visual ambiguity inheres in the image from a north-facing frieze from the synagogue at Capernaum (fig. 5) that is identified by some as a portable Torah shrine (or ark of the covenant), and by others as a portable temple or sanctuary of Roman style. Similarly, compare the images of a Torah shrine (or temple entry?) from a Samaritan synagogue in Khirbet Samara (fig. 6) and a catacomb relief from Bet She'arim (fig. 7; see also Fine 1996: 110). From a contemporary Christian setting, consider a chancel screen (church at Mt. Nebo), positioned before the altar, that seems to depict the entrance (or successive entrances) to the Jerusalem temple, into which the worshipers might peer, but without any relation to a Torah ark (fig. 8; Branham 1992; 2012). Its architectural elements should by now be familiar. Notwithstanding significant differences of detail, all of these images suggest that worshipers face what I would call portals of sacred liminality, which both beckon to enter yet obstruct entrance, for example, a drawn curtain revealing a closed



Figure 3. Torah niche on western wall of synagogue at Dura Europos. Photograph courtesy of the Yale University Art Gallery, Dura-Europos Collection.



Figure 4. Architectural face on a Bar Kokhba coin. Photograph courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.

door, or in the Roman coins, an entryway blocked by a cult statue.

As yet another example, from the Jericho synagogue mosaic (fig. 9), demonstrates, we cannot assume that the mosaic depiction of an ark of the law (Baramki and Avi-Yonah 1936: pl. XIX), if that is what it is, represents a three-dimensional counterpart or even its location in the synagogue; rather, as Werlin (2015: 82), who comes to similar conclusions as mine, writes:

While comparanda and literary evidence suggest that an *actual* wood repository for the Torah Scroll(s) stood in the hall during its use as a synagogue, there is no reason to assume that the symbol here was meant to depict its three-dimensional counterpart within the synagogue at Jericho. Instead, it should be understood as a symbolic representation that refers to more than a simple piece of furniture. Additionally, it is very unlikely that this representation indicates the location of the hall's Torah shrine.”

Likewise, the Susiya synagogue's (figs. 10 and 11) mosaic images of Torah shrines do not necessarily depict the building's furniture, but are symbolic, much like the depictions of the rams (Werlin 2015: 158): “While we can be reasonably certain that a Torah shrine of some sort did exist in the Susiya synagogue, it would not be wise to seek details in the mosaic depictions.” Artistic representations should be interpreted in their own rights (and contexts), instead of as two-dimensional furniture inventories of proximate three-dimensional objects which have, for the most part, not survived. Otherwise, they would have been redundant to worshipers (see similarly Weiss 2005: 235).



Figure 5. From the synagogue at Capernaum. Photograph courtesy of Todd Bolen, BiblePlaces.com.



Figure 6. From a Samaritan synagogue in Khirbet Samara. Photograph courtesy of Todd Bolen, BiblePlaces.com.



Figure 7. Relief of a Torah shrine from catacomb 4 at Beth She'arim. Photograph courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society.



Figure 8. From Theotokos Chapel, Memorial Moses Church at Mt. Nebo, early seventh century. After Saller 1941: frontispiece; by permission of Franciscan Press.



Figure 9. Jericho synagogue mosaic floor. Photograph courtesy of Zev Radovan, BibleLandPictures.

Arks of the Scrolls in Particular

Representations of “arks of the scrolls,” installations whose open doors (unlike the closed doors of the temple façades as represented in synagogue art) reveal several (usually six or nine) scrolls lying horizontally on shelves within, are generally found in the diaspora and in nonsynagogue (mainly funerary) contexts (fig. 12).⁶ We have no physical remains of such actual structures,

whether in the land of Israel or the diaspora (Hachlili 1988: 272–80; 1998: 366–70). Hachlili (1988: 275; 1998: 366) argues that the ark of the scrolls consisted of a wooden chest that was placed within the immobile Torah shrine, allowing it to retain the portability of Scripture’s ark of the covenant and rabbinic literature’s synagogue *teva*: “[on a fast day] they remove the ark (*teva*) [with its scrolls] into the open space of the town,” (m. Ta’anit 2:1; t. Megillah 3:21).

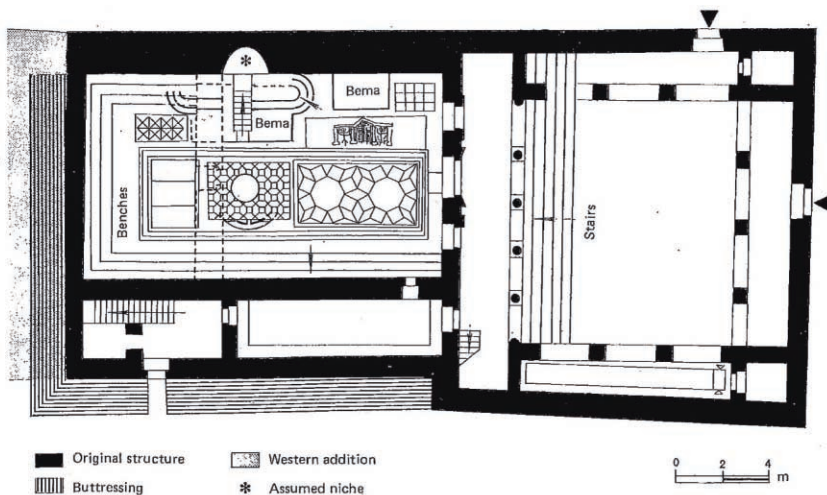


Figure 10. Susiya synagogue plan. Courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society.



Figure 11. Susiya synagogue mosaic of Torah ark/Temple entrance. Courtesy of the Israel Exploration Society.



Figure 12. From a wall painting in the Villa Torlonia Catacomb Rome, fourth century. Courtesy of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities – National Roman Museum.

How are we to explain the striking absence of such images in ancient synagogues? If, as I have argued, the purpose of artistic representations of ritual objects was *not* to duplicate actual ritual objects that were in plain view of the synagogue audiences, then they would have been unnecessary there, where the actual open doors of the ark and the contained scrolls would have been apparent. Conversely, this would explain their presence mainly in funerary contexts where actual arks and scrolls would not have been present.

Before turning to some textual representations, both Christian and Jewish, it should be noted that inscriptions from diasporan synagogues include terms—whether in Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic—for the ark: *bet 'arona* at Dura, *kibōtos* at Ostia, and *nomophylakion* at Sardis.

John Chrysostom's Polemic against the Synagogue Ark

In fourth-century Antioch, the Church Father John Chrysostom delivered polemical sermons against Judaism to dissuade his listeners from attending local synagogues. He focuses at one point on the ark in the synagogue and its scrolls (*Adv. Jud.* 6.6–7; PG 48, cols. 913–14). His first point of contention is that the synagogue should not be considered holy by virtue of the books of the Law and the Prophets that are kept and read therein. To him, the fact that the Jews read in the synagogue the books of the Prophets but ignore their teachings (as understood by Christians to anticipate and validate Jesus's mission), renders those scrolls' holiness-bestowing power ineffectual. But he launches another denial of the sanctity of the ark and synagogue by arguing that it contains none of the sacred implements or personnel that defined the long-gone ark of the covenant: "What sort of ark (*kibōtos*, as at Ostia) is it that the Jews now have, where we find no propitiatory, no tables of the law, no holy of holies, no veil, no high priest, no incense, no holocaust, no sacrifice, none of the other things that made the ark of old solemn and august?" (6.7.2; trans. Harkins 1979: 172–73). He argues that holiness resided in the former, but not the latter, due to their dissimilar contents and accompaniments. However, it is precisely this association that is implied both by the multivalent, visually ambiguous iconography of temple façade and Torah ark, as well as by the semantic overlaps between *'aron*, *'arona*, *teva*, and *kibōtos* (Meyers 1999: 221 n. 26). As Steven Fine (1996: 43, 45) puts

it, both Palestinian and diasporan Jews could “plead guilty” as charged by John Chrysostom’s accusation of their having falsely (and intentionally) conflated the two arks (as well as their containing structures), as if they shared in holiness via their shared contents and architectural elements.

Early Rabbinic Traditions of Torah Scroll(s) in the Ark of the Covenant

There is, however, an indirect rabbinic verbal response to such polemics: not only did Jews import the Torah scroll(s) from the Second Temple into the synagogue, but they innovatively retrojected the Torah scrolls from the synagogue ark all the way back to the wilderness ark of the covenant. The two arks (and presumably those in between) now shared the Torah scrolls that made each holy:

(1) In t. Sotah 7:18, it is said, in the name of Rabbi Judah ben Laqish, that there were two arks of the covenant in the wilderness. One contained the Torah scroll and went out to war (Num 10:33), while the other contained the whole and broken tablets and remained in the Tent of Meeting (Num 14:44). However, y. Sotah 8:3, 22b–c (see also y. Sheqalim 6:1, 49c) has a similar tradition and adds: “Our masters say, there was (only) one (ark), and it once went out in the days of Eli and was captured.” Further arguments for both sides are made, though the text does not clarify whether the single ark contained both the tablets and the Torah scroll, or only one or the other. In any case, the possibility of a Torah scroll residing in the biblical ark of the covenant is here explicitly entertained for the first time, deriving perhaps from the ambiguous language of Deut 31:26 (“to the side of the ark”).

(2) A related debate between Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Judah (bar Ilai), is preserved in b. Bava Batra 14a–b and y. Sotah 8:3, 22d. Rabbi Meir says that the Torah scroll (or as much as would fit) was kept inside the ark, but to the side of the tablets (see Exod 25:21; 1 Kgs 8:9), whereas R. Judah says that the Torah scroll was kept alongside the ark (Deut 31:26), on an attached external shelf or in an attached external box (see 1 Sam 6:8; Tg. Ps.–J. Deut 31:26; Rashi Deut 31:26; Tigay 1996: 297 n. to v. 26). A major part of the discussion addresses the dimensions of the ark, the tablets (whole and broken), and a Torah scroll, to see what could fit. The detailed measuring that informs the dispute is itself a way of visualizing the ark and its contents.

(3) In commenting on Exod 13:19, “And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph,” the Mekilta of Rabbi Ishmael imagines two very different types of *’aron* (“chest”) traveling through the wilderness alongside one another:

And the nations would say to the Israelites: What is so special about these two chests? And the Israelites would say to them: The one is the ark (*’aron*) of the Eternal Life and the other is the coffin (*’aron*) of a dead person. And the nations would say to them: What is so special about this coffin of a dead person that it should go alongside the ark of the Eternal Life? They said to them: The one lying in this coffin has fulfilled what is written on

what lies in that ark (Mekilta; Beshallah 1; trans. adapted from Lauterbach 1933, 1: 178–81).

The two chests (*’aron*) represent the opposites of eternal life and worldly death (immortality and mortality), and by implication, holy and profane, pure and impure, which are normally kept separate to protect the former from contracting contagion by the latter. But in this exceptional case, they complement one another through Joseph’s practice of the commandments contained in the holy ark. The midrash progressively demonstrates that each of the ten “commandments” (more properly, “utterances”) in the scriptural sequence of Exod 20:2–14 (and Deut 5:6–18) is obeyed by Joseph, in most cases with the midrash marshalling an appropriate proof-text from the book of Genesis. However, after the ten “commandments,” three more (similarly moral and universal) are provided from Leviticus (19:17, 19:18, 25:36), without any signal that they differ in rank or material (presumably written on parchment) from the first ten (inscribed in stone). Even if Lauterbach (1933, 1: 181 n. 16) overstates the case for the ark’s housing a full Torah scroll, the ark contains the tablets that include the Decalogue as well as a scroll containing at least parts of Leviticus.

Ambiguous Portals to the Sacred

We have seen in both images and words, visually and aurally, how the arks of the covenant, the temple, and the synagogue have been not only juxtaposed, but deeply linked and mutually interconnected. For the early rabbinic sages, this nexus was achieved by claiming that the Torah scroll(s) inhabited, and thereby fused, all three into one. Weiss (2005: 72) states, “they express a similar idea relating to the tabernacle, to the temple that was, or to one to be built in the future.” This is likely to have been one reason for retaining the scroll, rather than adopting the codex, as the physical form and format of the liturgical Torah.

The liminal portals of the tabernacle, the temple, the synagogue, and the ark opened not just to Israel’s glorious past, but to its redemptive future as the line connecting them ran through the ark and its scrolls, both as visually viewed and verbally performed. While the ark had once been invisible to most, and then absent for all, it could now be seen as objects of art, through the sequential portals of the synagogue, from outermost to innermost, often with shared architectural and ritual elements and with doors being ambiguously open at times and closed at others.⁷

Notes

1. I have benefited from the comments of Steven Fine and Steven Werlin, whom I hereby acknowledge and thank.
2. E.g., Jer 3:16; 2 Macc 2:4–8; Eupolemus in Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 9.39; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.9.1; Josephus, *JW* 5.219; m. Yoma 5:2; m. Sheqalim 6:1–2; t. Soṭah 13:1.
3. Josephus, *AgAp* 2.73–78, 190–92; Hecataeus in Diodorus 40.3.4; Hecataeus of Abdera in Josephus, *AgAp* 1.194–99; M. Stern 1974–84, 1: 36–39.

4. E.g., Fine 1996, 1997, 2016; Hachlili 1988, 1998; Levine 2005; Meyers 1999; D. Stern 2017; Werlin 2015.
5. An actual Torah shrine would have stood on or to the rear of the *bema*; the mosaic would have featured a “life-like” portrayal of that Torah shrine; the actual Torah shrine must have looked like that in the mosaic.
6. Bet She‘arim (land of Israel; Hachlili 1988: 247) and the Sardis synagogue (diaspora; Fine 1996: 66 fig. 3.15) are exceptions.
7. For such liminality and ambiguity more generally in late antique sanctuary doors, see van Opstall 2018.

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Steven D. Fraade is the Mark Taper Professor of the History of Judaism in the Department of Religious Studies at Yale University. His research interests include Judaism in Second Temple and early rabbinic times; Jewish and Christian biblical translation and exegesis; rhetoric in ancient Jewish law; the Dead Sea Scrolls; literary-rhetorical analysis of rabbinic texts; attitudes towards ascetic piety; and multilingualism. His numerous publications include *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (1991; National Jewish Book Award winner); and *Legal Fictions: Law and Narrative in the Discursive Worlds of Ancient Jewish Sectarians and Sages* (2011). He is currently completing an annotated translation and commentary on the Damascus Document for the Oxford Commentary on the Dead Sea Scrolls.