A Harvard Student's Journey through the Jewish Catacombs of Rome[1]

Lecture delivered on October 20th, 2011 at Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, MA

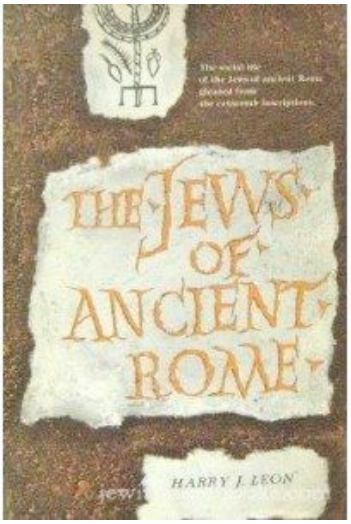

Figure 1. Cover of the original edition of Harry J. Leon's *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (Philadelphia, 1960).

In 1927, the Harvard classicist Harry Joshua Leon (1896-1967) successfully defended his doctoral dissertation, *De Judaeorum Antiquorum Sepulcretis Romae Repertis Quaestiones Selectae*, (naturally, for a Harvard Ph.D. at that time, written entirely in Latin), a collection of about 500 epitaphs from the Jewish catacombs of Rome, accompanied by a short introduction to scholarship on the subject later published in English as "The Jewish Catacombs and Inscriptions of Rome: an account of their discovery and subsequent history," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 5, 1928, pp. 299-314.

The collection of 494 Jewish inscriptions that Leon had prepared in Italy between 1920 and 1922 while on a Sheldon Prize Fellowship from Harvard University (granted earlier, but postponed until Italy was in a stable recovery after the first world war) remains in manuscript form in the Harvard University Archives (HU 90.1806). Although rarely consulted, it contains not only material of great epigraphic value but also information of much historical interest since the young American was of the first generation of scholars (and one of very few Jews) who could consider evidence from all six of the Jewish catacombs identified in Rome by 1920, two having been brought to light

[1] This paper was delivered at the Annual Joint Meeting of the Boston and Providence Patristics Groups on October 20th, 2011. I thank Prof. Annewies van den Hoek and the other members of the Patristica Bostoniensa for an engaging discussion following the delivery of this work.

just the year before.[2] No other cemetery properly defined as a "Jewish catacomb" has emerged in Rome since that time.[3] Precisely because the Jewish catacombs were still so little studied, and the historical record from previous generations almost exclusively limited to individual artifacts (such as epitaphs, sarcophagi, and clay lamps) whose exact provenance was too often unknown, Leon's approach for the next forty years of research on the Jewish catacombs of Rome - for the rest of his life, really - would be marked by caution and a strong awareness of the limitations of the material at hand.[4] That is, while Leon himself never excavated in any of these sites, he was always their close observer, and thus able to witness decades of progress (or lack thereof) in the study and preservation of the Jewish catacombs of Rome.

Missing from Leon's 1927 work is an account of what Leon saw in the Jewish catacombs in addition to funerary inscriptions: most notably, the layout of these underground burial sites and other key aspects of their appearance, including the presence of a number of wall paintings and other decorative features.

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[2] A number of galleries in the Villa Torlonia catacombs were not fully accessible to Leon in 1922 (Leon, 1928, p. 313). These were later excavated and studied by Fr. U. M. Fasola in 1973-1974: Fasola, "Le due catacombe ebraiche di Villa Torlonia," *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana* 52, 1-2 (1976), pp. 7-62. Quarrying on the southernmost slope of the Monteverde in 1919 had also unearthed previously undocumented areas of the Jewish cemetery first excavated by N. Muller in 1904-1906: R. Paribeni, "Iscrizioni del cimitero giudaico di Monteverde," *Notizie degli Scavi d' Antichita'* 46 (1919), pp. 60-70.

[3] Underground burial sites below St. Sebastian's on the via Appia and the modern church of the Regina Pacis on the Monteverde have been seen as "possibly Jewish" by some, largely because of their "anonymous" nature, the presence of tombs sealed with brick and/or rubble rather than tile, a proximity to known Jewish catacomb sites, and, in one instance, the discovery of a clay oil lamp decorated with Jewish emblems, the sort of item not infrequently found in Christian and pagan burials in Rome. Brief mention of the San Sebastiano hypogaeum in: A. M. Nieddu, *La Basilica Apostolorum sulla Via Appia e l'area cimiteriale circostante*, Monumenti di antichità cristiana 2.19, Vatican City, 2009, pp. 20-21, nn. 121-122: the Regina Pacis site is alluded to in J-B. Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum* 1, Vatican City, 1936, introduction, p. LXI. E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 2, New York, 1953, p. 73, also records a discussion that he had in the early1950's with Fr. Antonio Ferrua, S. J., then Secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology in Rome, on the presence of "Jewish" lamps in the Christian catacombs and vice versa. According to Ferrua, who found instances of this quite frequently, the presence of "intrusive" material was due to "carelessness in popular attitudes at the time." Leon might well have had a similar discussion with Fr. Ferrua before 1960. In *The Jews of Ancient Rome*, rev. ed. Peabody, MA, 1995, p. 225, he considers the presence of a lamp with the Christian monogram in the Villa Torlonia catacombs as a sign that the "Jews… were not always scrupulous about avoiding (lamps) with pagan or Christian themes." Prior to the 20th century, a number of Jewish artifacts in apparently "Christian" contexts were even thought to have a Christian significance, like the menorah, often viewed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the "simbolo di Cristio medesimo" (M. Boldetti, *Osservazioni sopra i Cimiteri de' SS. Martiri ed antichi Cristiani di Roma*, Rome, 1720, p. 525). It may well be that a number of the Jewish cemeteries were considered Christian or "Judeo-Christian" for centuries because of their proximity and resemblance to Christian sites.

[4] H. J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome*, rev. ed., Peabody, MA, 1995, p. 167.

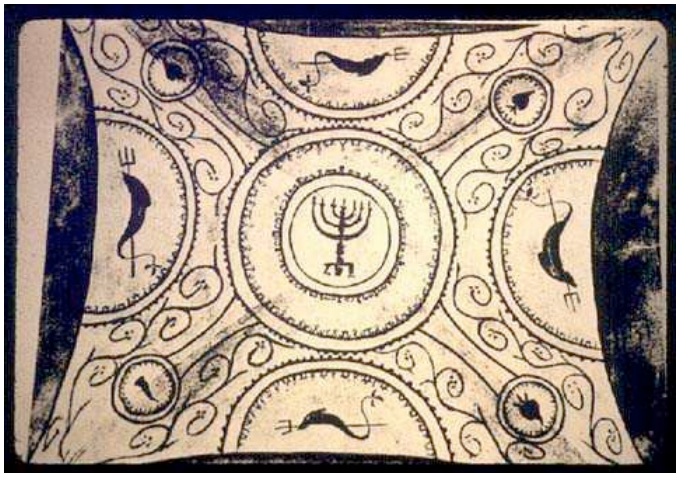

Figure 2. Villa Torlonia catacombs, cubiculum Aa (region A), from a watercolor image (ca. 1930) of paintings in the cross-vault.

These details were nonetheless of great relevance to a much larger project that the young scholar had in mind for "a partial reconstruction of certain aspects of the ancient (Jewish) community."[5] Taking leave of his position as Chair of the Classics Department of the University of Texas at Austin, Leon returned to Rome on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1950-1951 to revisit the Jewish sites in Italy he had seen decades before. In 1960, forty years of research on the Jewish catacombs were at last revealed in *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (Morris Loeb Series of the Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1960). Leon had had to wait a great while for this moment to come, but the work was an immediate success and even reissued in 1995 with a new introduction and bibliography by Carolyn Oziek.[6] The idea that these catacombs were "Jewish shadows" or appendices of the better-known Christian subterranean cemeteries in Rome, disappeared forever with the publication of his work.

In no way can our short presentation do justice to Leon's profound learning in Classical languages and literature, or comment at length on his observations – he himself would refrain from calling them "conclusions" – about the Jews in Ancient Rome. Instead, we discuss a number of Leon's approaches that we have found most useful in our own work on Jewish catacombs, notably in the assessment of their location, present condition, excavation history, and current whereabouts of artifacts from these sites.

Lesson One": "Sub Roma Romam quaerere."

Leon's arrival in Rome in the early 1920's came very shortly after the last two discoveries of Jewish catacombs within city limits. Both instances were immediately recorded by archaeologist Roberto Paribeni in the *Notizie degli Scavi d'Antichita'*.[7] That officials from the then-Royal Archaeological Superintendence were involved in these digs does not come across to us today as striking, given Italy's present role in maintaining

[5] Leon, 1928, pp. 313-314.
[6] C. Oziek summarizes critics' reactions to Leon's work in her introduction to Leon, 1995, pp. XIII-XIV.
[7] R. Paribeni, Iscrizioni del cimitero giudaico di Monteverde," *Notizie Degli Scavi di Antichità* 16 (1919), pp. 60-72 and "Catacomba giudaica sulla via Nomentana," *Notizie degli Scavi d'Antichita'* 17 (1920), p. 143-151.

ancient Jewish historical sites in collaboration with the country's Jews.[8] Yet this situation was anything but clear in 1920, as the city was in the full grips of a "fervore edilizio cittadino".[9] In the first instance, that on the Monteverde in 1919, Prof. Paribeni was making an inventory of artifacts from a site already torn apart by industrial explosives, and his study of the second site, that near the via Nomentana northeast of Rome, was only made possible by the generosity of the Roman prince Giovanni Torlonia, under whose property much of the Jewish cemetery had been found. All work in the Jewish catacombs up to this point had, in fact, been carried out very privately, in most cases with official government approval, but very little actual involvement – above all, financially - on the part of the Italian State. It was really left up to the landowners themselves to decide what, where, and when they would dig up on their land. Some did not care to investigate, and others soon learned that a Jewish catacomb was more of a liability than an asset to one's possessions. There is even some suggestion that the Jewish catacombs were kept secret for centuries, and simply ransacked for artifacts that could pass for relics or tokens from a Christian site (this concern, in fact, was already raised in the mid 17th century, at the time when the "pious sacking of the Roman cemeteries" was at its height).[10] Throughout the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries, however, it was the excavators of the Christian catacombs who paid the most attention to the ancient Jewish cemeteries just at that time coming to light, although the latter were officially outside of their area of jurisdiction.[11] While these men were clearly influenced by the desire to find the "genesis" of Christian burial practices in the Jewish sites, they are our only witnesses to Jewish artifacts discovered by chance in the Vigna Cimarra and Vigna Apolloni, and were frequently consulted by the Italian authorities on such finds. A number of influential Jewish leaders were also approached from time to time to finance the excavation and maintenance of the Jewish burial sites, yet the community itself was never able to raise enough funds to assume outright ownership of the catacombs containing Jewish tombs.[12] Tessa Rajak may not be too far off the mark in

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[8] Following the 1984 revision of the 1929 Lateran Treaty, in which the Vatican relinquished all control over the Jewish catacomb sites, and the ratification on March 8th, 1989, of an "Intesa tra la Repubblica Italiana e Unione delle Communita' Israelitiche Italiana," (art. 18.101), the Italian government must now collaborate with representatives of Italy's Jewish communities to determine the best practices for administering and conserving the Jewish catacombs in Rome.

[9] G. De Angelis d'Ossat, *La Geologia delle Catacombe Romane 1: Via Portuense ed Ostiense*, Roma Sotteranea Cristiana 3, Vatican City, 1938, p. 9.

[10] As in the case of many other catacombs, the locations of those used by the Jews are not explicitly named in the ancient sources that identify many of the Christian burial sites in Rome. References to a "mons Judaeorum" (via Nomentana) and "monte d'oro delle Hebrei" (Vigna Apolloni) only start to appear during the Middle Ages.

[11] On July 21st, 1859, Cardinal Costantino Patrizi Naro, President of the Commission for Sacred Archaeology, informed Rome's Ministry of Public Works that the Jewish catacomb recently discovered in a vineyard on the Appian Way did not "pertain" to the interests of the Commission: ASR, Min. LL. PP. Section 5, tit. 1, art. 5c, b. 420/29, fasc. 6814 (July 26th, 1859). This statement reflected the Vatican Commission's official position on the Jewish catacombs until 1929.

[12] Leon, 1928, p. 327, n. 47, is certainly aware of this situation at the time of his doctoral research in Rome. We also have a letter of January 31st, 1910 from archaeolgist R. Pasqui describing attempts to "interest" the Jewish community of Rome "moralmente e materialmente" in the exploration of the Monteverde cemetery, in a heavily damaged state from continued quarrying on the site: ASR, Min. Publ. Istr. AA. BB.AA., IVth vers., div. 1, b. 1. A number of Jews, however, continued to question the exclusively Jewish nature of the catacombs in Rome, with specific reference to the Vigna Randanini site, as it was seen to contain material

calling the Jewish catacombs "the poor relations in Christian archaeology," but is important to stress that before 1929 the Jewish sites in Rome were not yet in the Vatican's control, and extremely susceptible to all types of vandals and thieves.[13]

Thus, as matters stood in 1922, Leon still had to apply directly to the property owners themselves to visit the Jewish catacombs, and did not obtain permission to examine three of the five known sites (Monteverde, Vigna Apolloni, and Vigna Cimarra), two of which he was only able to photograph from the roadside (Monteverde and Vigna Apolloni).[14] The situation must have been deeply frustrating. Leon, in fact, later writes that a "Jewish guide" to the city would have been most helpful at this time.[15]

The sites Leon could actually visit were also not well supervised or maintained. He writes in *The Jews in Ancient Rome* that the painted chambers in the Vigna Randanini catacomb were being destroyed not only by water infiltration but also by the ignorant scribbling of visitors on the ceilings and walls (access was through the wine cellars of a restaurant overhead). Leon reports as well on the steadily decreasing number of inscriptions in this catacomb between the time of his first visit in 1922 and those made much later, in 1951, after learning (no doubt from Ferrua) of the damage the site had sustained as a bomb shelter in 1943-1944.[16] Certain areas of the Villa Torlonia catacombs also seemed to Leon in imminent danger of collapse.[17] No doubt sensitive to his position as a foreigner and a Jew, Leon avoids sharper criticism of the state of the Jewish catacombs in modern times. Only once does he call our attention to the irony of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's denouncing of the Jews as "strangers in Italy" while living right above the Jewish catacombs of the Villa Torlonia in Rome![18]

Leon's lesson to us is to avoid "reading" these sites literally, just as they appear today, because they have been much altered from their original state. Even in his earliest student work, he emphasizes the negative consequences of their excavation, including the decreasing number of inscriptions and other artifacts conserved in their original locations (although Leon was indefatigable in tracking down "lost" inscriptions in Italy and abroad), the over-zealous and poorly-documented restoration of many key structural

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of a non-Jewish nature, including a wall painting in one chamber possibly representing the Good Shepard or Orpheus (but now in a very mutilated condition): on this note, see G. Levi, "Cronaca mensile italiana," *L'educatore israelita*, 21 (1873), p. 116.

[13] T. Rajak, "Inscriptions and Context: Reading the Jewish catacombs of Rome," *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome: Studies in Cultural and Social Interaction*, Leiden, 2002, p. 433.

[14] Given the lack of primary sources on these sites, the Jewish catacombs are named after the 19th and 20th century properties below which they had been found: hence, we have the Jewish catacombs of the (1) Monteverde (2) Vigna Randanini (3) Vigna Cimarra (4) Vigna Apolloni (via Labicana) and (5) Villa Torlonia. Leon always remained cautious about accepting the Jewish identity of a sixth site, that found on the via Appia Pignatelli in 1885 (Leon 1995, pp. 52-53).

[15] Leon review of E. Loevinson's *Roma Israelitica. Wanderungen eines Juden durch die Kunststätten Roms*, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* n.s. 24.2 (Oct., 1933), pp. 159-160.

[16] Leon, 1928, p. 311, acknowledges that the owner of the Vigna Randanini, the Marquis del Gallo di Roccagiovine, had allowed him access to catacomb areas that were not open to the public. But in Leon, 1995, p. 51 and pp. 70-71, he takes note of the decreased number of inscriptions in the site in 1951, at the time of various restorations carried out by the PCAS (K-D. Dorsch & H. R. Seeliger, *Romische Katakombenmalerein im Spiegel des Photoarchivs Parker: Dokumentation von Zustand und Erhaltung 1864-1994*, Munster, 2000, p. 184, n. 8).

[17] Leon, 1928, p. 313.

[18] Leon, 1995, p. 47.

elements, and the constructed "show" of more macabre remains (the displays of skulls, bones, and objects of questionable authenticity, such as a piece of burnt paper being passed off as a fragment of a torah scroll).[19] Truly an American pioneer in this regard, Leon understood full well the extent to which these sites had been vandalized and left full of mud, trash, and other debris. Even clearing out this clutter did not guarantee a catacomb's survival. Leon's "before and after" photographs in *The Jews of Ancient Rome* record drastic changes to the topography of many of the sites, especially those on the Monteverde and the via Labicana, of which little, if anything, now remains.

Figure 3. Cubiculum in the Vigna Randanini catacomb, showing damage from water and the scribbling in charcoal over some of the tombs.

Revisiting these sites today, it is encouraging to find that some of Leon's concerns about the conditions and security of the Jewish catacombs are now finally being addressed. Generally speaking, we can say that an increased awareness on the part of the authorities has led to more, and not less, evidence from the Jewish catacombs becoming available. In the last decade alone, a "lost" Jewish catacomb has once again come to light (Vigna Cimarra), as well as bits and pieces of artifacts in the other sites.[20]

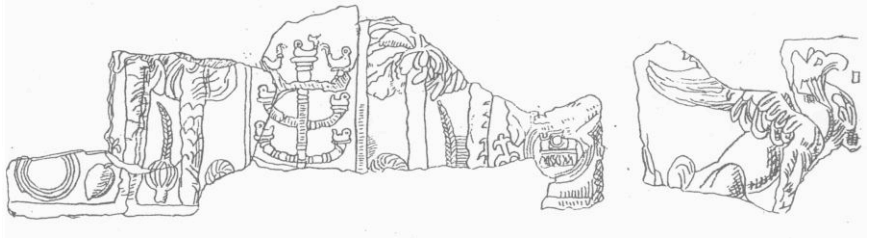

Figure 4. Reconstruction of Vigna Randanini sarcophagus panels with a fragment recovered on the site in 2001.[21]

[19] Leon, 1995, p. 51, pp. 56-57, p. 63 & p. 206.

[20] Vigna Cimarra was identified and photographed by the author in 2002. A fragment of an important Jewish sarcophagus now in the Berlin Museum was also discovered by the author in the Vigna Randanini catacomb in 2001. The new piece is part of the front panel depicting a menorah at center, flanked by a rather symmetrical arrangement of Jewish ritual objects alternating with palm trees. There is also renewed interest in the problematic inscription CIJ 1.1, an inscription universally regarded today as Jewish. Scholars in Leon's time were unaware that this piece survived in full view in the "loggia dei vetri" of the Palazzo Rondinini on the Corso in Rome, and was, in fact, on a child's sarcophagus "a lenos" decorated with human figures and a peacock. It is an open question as to whether this piece is a modern forgery or ancient, and therefore highly unique, example of late Roman funerary art of the 4th century CE. Maria Luisa Brutto and Claudia Ferro have collaborated on a detailed description of the sarcophagus and inscription CIJ 1.1 in *I Marmi Antichi del Palazzo Rondanini*, ed. D. Candilio & M. Bertineti, Rome, 2011, pp. 216-218 (n. 233).

[21] The examples in Rome are few, but are regarded as unique for the use of a "Jewish iconography" not directly tied to a Classical repertoire. Two are found on marble sarcophagi (interestingly, the epitaphs on

Yet while access to the Jewish catacombs is now strictly controlled, not all artifacts are secure (loose pieces in the Vigna Randanini site have been stashed away for years in a large sarcophagus by the entrance). The impending construction of Rome's Holocaust Museum in the Villa Torlonia is also expected to complicate issues of security and conservation by introducing large numbers of visitors to the Jewish cemeteries below its now-public park.

Lesson Two: "No Linguistic Island."

Of course, what fascinated Leon most were the people themselves in the tombs. He describes what a "strange impression" it made on him "to read on a loculus … "here lies Julia R… and, at the same time, within the partly open niche … see Julia's moldering skull and bones."[22] However humble, these were testimonies to the significant witnesses to Jewish history in Rome. Leon was determined to document the identities of these obscure individuals as well as he could from such remains.

Epitaphs in the Jewish catacombs were created in a variety of ways. Most often, they were incised on marble slabs, or painted onto surfaces of marble, tile or plaster; otherwise, they were simply scratched into the mortar that sealed a tomb. Yet, in all, only about 600 inscriptions survive from the roughly 4,000 tombs identified so far in the Jewish sites (a poor showing, indeed, compared to an estimated 35,000 inscriptions from the catacombs and other cemeteries for Christians around Rome).[23] This is not only the result of repeated vandalism over time, but also because not every tomb had been originally marked, and the manner of identifying those in multiple burials – frequently made in arcosolia, kokhim, sarcophagi, and *forma* – is not always clear. Contrary to what has been said in the past, it is not possible to identify a distinct "method" employed by the Jews in Rome to seal their tombs.[24] The simple "rubble and mortar" closures on many tombs are identical to what has been found in non-Jewish sites, including those in more rural settings outside of Rome.

Leon produced much original work on the Jewish inscriptions from Rome. Possessing an excellent command of Greek, an enthusiasm for Latin, and thorough knowledge of Hebrew thanks to his Jewish faith, Leon copied epitaphs as he saw them in

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these pieces, if ever they existed, do not survive). The first, from the Vigna Randanini catacomb, is described in n. 19. The other sarcophagus, found virtually intact, is now missing but was last seen on the Torlonia property outside the Porta Nomentana in the 1930's. While more massive in design, it likewise depicts a menorah at center, accompanied by an etrog, shofar, and lulab.

[22] Leon, 1995, p. 65.

[23] The totals are in constant flux, but G. Lacerenza, "Le iscrizioni giudaiche in Italia dal I al VI secolo: tipologie, origine, distribuzione," in *I beni culturali ebraici in Italia. Situzaione attuale, problemi*, ed. M. Perani, Ravenna, 2003, p. 77, has recently calculated 119 Jewish inscriptions from the Villa Torlonia; 203 from the Monteverde, and 197 from the Vigna Randanini. In terms of burial use, L. V. Rutgers has counted a total of 3828 tombs in the Villa Torlonia/via Nomentana cemetery, and estimates about 1200 tombs for the Monteverde site, with slightly more, maybe closer to 1900, in those below the Vigna Randanini: he then drastically lowers the number to 141 for the Vigna Apolloni catacomb (and makes no estimation of those in the Vigna Cimarra): L. V. Rutgers, "Nuovi dati sulla demografia della comunità giudaica di Roma," in *Hebraica hereditas: studi in onore di Cesare Colafemmina*, ed, G. Lacerenza, Naples, 2005, p. 24.

[24] This is contrary to what has been claimed by Muller, who was anxious to establish a direct connection between Jewish burial practices in Rome and those used in the Middle East.

the Jewish catacombs, *de visu* wherever possible, and from older manuscript sources or reports when the original itself could no longer be found. The "checklist" of bibliographic sources on epigraphy included in his 1927 dissertation is remarkably complete when we consider that he prepared his dissertation well in advance of the publication of the first volume of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum* in 1936 and the subsequent *addenda* to the latter work by Fr. Ferrua and others, including Leon himself. Several of Leon's readings that do not appear in the CIJ 1 might well be considered for inclusion in a new syllogy of Jewish inscriptions from Rome, since Leon's work predates that of Frey and could provide key data on items later missing or destroyed. But neither the CIJ 1 nor the more recent *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe* 2 (1995) consider Leon's manuscript notes. Here is our opportunity to do so, and properly acknowledge the value of Leon's "traditional" methodology for the study of the Jewish catacombs, even in light of more comparative approaches to define what exactly is "Jewish" in these sites.

Leon devotes many chapters of *The Jews of Ancient Rome* to the inscriptional evidence: it is possible here to mention only a few, essential points. Although found in a primarily Latin-speaking area of the Roman world, the vast majority of the Jewish inscriptions known today from Rome (around 75%) are written in Greek: this is a consistent feature of all the Jewish catacombs containing significant epigraphic evidence (namely the Vigna Randanini, Villa Torlonia, and Monteverde sites).[25] A small, very small number of the surviving epitaphs include expressions in Hebrew like shalom/peace, or "peace upon Israel," and less than a handful are written entirely in Hebrew or Aramaic (CIJ.1.291, 291, 293, and possibly one in the Villa Torlonia site copied by Leon).

The inscriptions most easily recognized as Jewish in Rome are decorated with motifs distinct to Late Antique Jewish practices rather than the scenes from Biblical narratives used by many Christians at this time. For this reason, the menorah is the object most frequently found, often accompanied by other ritualistic items such as the lulab (bundle of branches from the Sukhot Festival); etrog (cedar fruit); shofar (horn for ritual, perhaps for Rosh Hashanah); aron (Ark of the Law or scrolls alone), and, occasionally, the amphora or container for wine or oil. There are also many inscriptions that identify a synagogue or community title or office.[26] But the most common attributes of the deceased are those frequently found in many non-Jewish funerary inscriptions of the time (above all, variations on the expression γλυκύς or *dulcissimo*). Only a small number, in fact, suggest Jewish beliefs (the characteristics of piety, observance of the law, and devotion to one's community): including όσιος (*pious*), and, in a more unique context, φιλόλαος, φιλονόμος, φιλεντολος (lover of the Commandments), and φιλοσυναγωγος.[27]

To Leon, every fragment of an inscription was precious, though not necessarily Jewish. Others who collected and published Jewish inscriptions did not always share his attention to detail.[28] Leon could be conservative and exclude pieces that came from

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[25] Rajak, 2002, p. 433.

[26] Lists of these titles are available in a number of publications: most recently, that of E. Laurenzi, as a "tabella di riepilogo delle cariche testimoniate dalle iscrizioni" in *Le Catacombe Ebraiche. Gli ebrei a Roma e le loro tradizioni funerarie*. Rome, 2011, p. 36.

[27] N. De Lange, "Jewish Greek" in *A History of Ancient Greek From the Beginnings to Late Antiquity*, ed. A.-F. Christidis, Cambridge, 2007, p. 644.

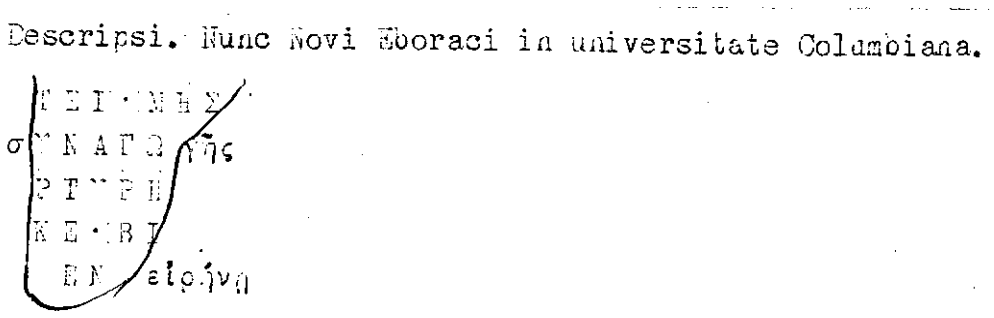
[28] L. Moretti, in "Iscrizioni Greco-Giudaiche di Roma," *Rivsta di Archeologia Cristiana* 50 (1974), p. 213, n. 8, has shown that Frey omitted a number of inscription fragments from the Vigna Randanini that were inventoried in the Museo Nazionale Romano in 1917. Moretti himself finds these to be "miseri

apparently pagan sites, just as he is reluctant to accept a pagan origin of the "double cubiculum" in the Vigna Randanini because at some point it appears to have been used by Jews.[29] In other instances, however, he questions the exclusion of "neutral" texts by Frey and others if the artifact had been found in a "Jewish" site.[30] The Jews, he maintained, did not live on "an linguistic island in Ancient Rome", and he stresses all the while how little actually survives to document Jewish identity and customs at this time.[31]

Leon's 1927 doctoral thesis contains several items that do not appear in later collections of Jewish inscriptions. The provenance of the following is not known.

Leon, 1927, p. 133, n. 495. In Greek.
"Descripsi nunc Novi Eboraci in Universitate Columbiana"

ΤΕΙ ΜΗΣ
[σ]ΥΝΑΓΩ[γῆς]
ΡΤΥΡΗ
ΚΕ ΒΙ
ΕΝ [εἰρήνη]



This is not the piece found in the Vigna Randanini site in 1882 and published by H. J. Leon, "A Jewish Inscription at Columbia University," AJA 28 (1924), pp. 251- 252 (CIJ 1.111), nor is it recorded in the CIJ 1 or later collections of Jewish inscriptions. Leon

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frammenti," but among them is n. 72929, which strongly resembles a fragment copied by R. Garrucci into one of his notebooks from the Vigna Randanini site in 1862-1863.

[29] Leon, p. 105, does not accept as Jewish an inscription in Latin to a certain "Zabda" because it had been found in a columbarium in the Vigna Randanini (CIJ 1, p. 537): yet he concurs with Frey that the tomb of another individual with the same name on the fifth mile of the Appian Way is that of one of three "Jewish freedmen" (1995, p. 142, n. 2). Then, on pp. 203-204, Leon declares that Goodenough is "entirely justified in accepting the Vigna Randanini cubicula as Jewish without hesitation," because of known examples of figurative decoration in Diaspora synagogues as well as in Israel itself. He does not venture, however, any "cosmic" interpretation of these images, accepting, on p. 227, A. Ferrua's position that we cannot today "decide where decoration ends and symbolism begins."

[30] Leon, 1995, pp. 345-346 (appendix), nn. *11, *24, *30, *31, *32, *33, *35: all but the first are from the Monteverde site.

[31] Leon, 1995, p. 92.

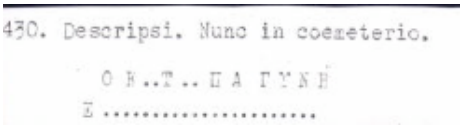
restored line 2 as συναγωγ. Presumably it was part of the Olcott collection donated to Columbia University after Prof. George N. Olcott's death in 1912.[32]

On two visits to the Villa Torlonia catacombs in 1922, Leon copied and measured 68 inscriptions, 22 of which were still unpublished at that time. According to Leon, "fifty were originally painted on the loculi, three are graffiti, and fourteen are on marble slabs removed to the stables above for safekeeping."[33] With the exceptions noted below, the inscriptions he copied were published over the next decade or so in the first volume of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum* (1936). Leon was not able to visit every part of the Torlonia cemetery because some areas had not yet been excavated and others needed to be buttressed with wooden frames to prevent or delay their collapse.

Leon believed that Paribeni had made copies of the Torlonia inscriptions under difficult circumstances, leading to many errors in his1920 report (JIWE, in fact, tends to favor Leon's readings over those in the CIJ). While later editors were careful to verify, whenever possible, their readings from the originals, a number of epitaphs seen by Leon in the early 1920's, all in a very fragmentary state, appear not to have been included in later syllogies of Jewish epitaphs from Rome. Given that most of these had been seen by Leon "in coemeterio," they were probably destroyed soon after the catacomb's discovery, or easily overlooked as "scrap" because the few letters they preserved made it "hardly worth the effort of copying" as Leon himself put it upon finding additional fragments of inscriptions in the catacomb on a later visit in May of 1951.[34] They may well exist today, since a thorough documentation of the Villa Torlonia catacombs and their artifacts is still in preparation.[35] David Noy, the last to publish a complete collection of the Torlonia inscriptions, was unable to access the site in 1993, and Fasola's excavation notes from 1974 remain in a private collection.

Admittedly, the "new" inscriptions contain few surprises and, if seen out of context, with the exception of Leon's n. 413, they would not easily be assigned to a Jewish site. Yet Leon either saw them in the catacomb or in the stables directly above with the other Jewish inscriptions, making it very probable that these are also epitaphs from Jewish tombs. With the reasonable certainty of their origins, these fragments should not be ignored. As with the majority of inscriptions from the Villa Torlonia catacombs, they, too, appear to be in Greek, and are, for the most part, painted on the tombs (in one example, within a *tabula ansata*).

1. Leon, 1927, p. n. 430, copies JIWE 2.421, which Fr. U. M. Fasola found on a "loculo ad arcosolio" in area E (Fasola, 1976, p. 51). The copies are very similar, except Leon believed their were some letters in line 1 between the T and IA.

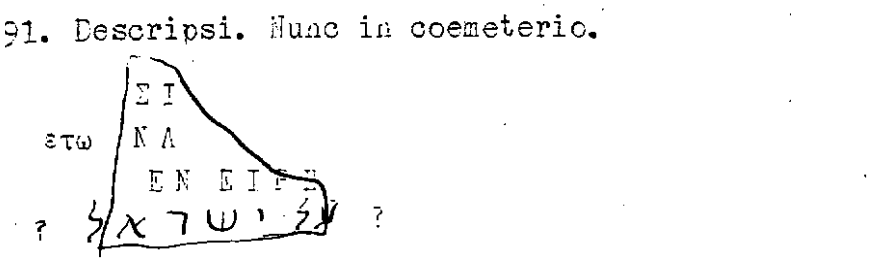


[32] U.S. Epigraphy Project, Epigraphic Holdings: NY, NY, CU, Butl: (http://usepigraphy.brown.edu/epigraphic_holdings.html). A digital catalogue of inscriptions in the Columbia collections is expected to become available in late 2012.
[33] Leon, 1928, p. 313.
[34] Leon, 1960, p. 73, n. 3.
[35] Laurenzi, 2011, p. 63, n. 86.

2. Leon, 1927, p. 47, n. 91. (CIJ, 1975, p. 62, n. 89)?
   Vigna Randanini/Appia Site.
   Leon: "litterae hebraicae, quae pessime scriptae sunt, minime certae sunt."
   Unclear if this is reference to CIJ 89, fragment of a marble tablet: Leon omits menorah, lulab at left.

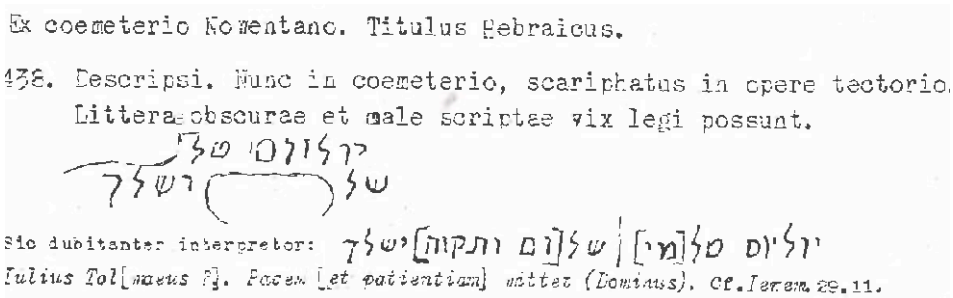
   ΣΙ
   (ετω) ΝΛ
   EN EIPH
   ישראל על שלום

   Translation: Shalom upon… (Israel?).



3. Leon, 1927, p. 117, n. 438.
   "Descripsi. Nunc in coemeterio, scariphatus in opere tectorio. Litterae obscurae et male scriptae vix legi possunt." Leon, with great difficulty, interpreted the second line as a reference to Jeremiah 29:11:
   Possibly JIWE 2.529, from Leon, 1960, p. 73, n. 2 & p. 76, n. 1. In Leon's 1960 study, however, only the second line was read: ישראל על שלום ("Peace upon Israel").

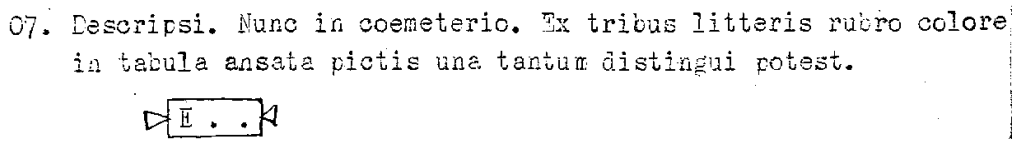
   לנו סיפר יוליוס
   יהוה ישלח וסבלנות שלום.



According to Fasola, 1976, p. 22 (quoted in JIWE 2, p. 344), there were two "indecipherable" painted inscriptions, possibly in Hebrew or Aramaic): one of these was on a tile.

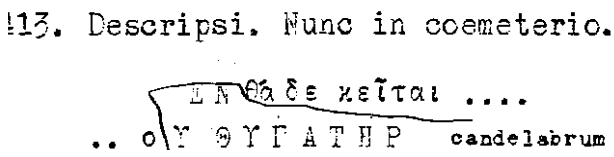
4. Leon, 1927, p. 113, n. 407. "Descripsi. Nunc in coemeterio. Ex tribus litteris rubro colore in tabula ansata pictis una tantum distingui potest."

   E ---



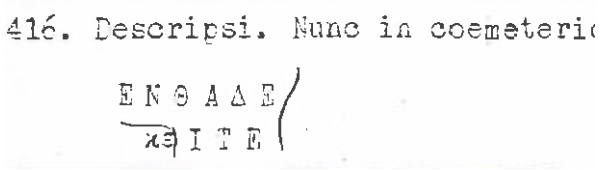
5. Leon, 1927, p. 113, n. 413. "Nunc in coemeterio."

   EN [θάδε κεῖται…]
   […o] Y ΘΥΓΑΤΗΡ (candelabrum)



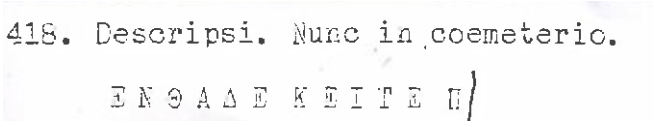
6. Leon, 1927, p. 114, n. 416. In the cemetery. Possibly CIJ 1.65/JIWE 2.464?

   ΕΝΘΑΔΕ
   [κε] ΙΤΕ



7. Leon, 1927, p. 114, n. 418. "Nunc in coemeterio."

   ΕΝΘΑΔΕ ΚΕΙΤΕ Π



8. Leon, 1927, p. 115, n. 424.

   ET [- - -] E

ΥΤΑ ΣΥΝΑ (γωγης?)

424. Descripsi. Nunc in coemeterio.

Ε Τ ..... Σ
Υ Τ Α Σ Υ Ν Α

9. Leon, 1927, p. 117, n. 437. "Descripsi. Nunc extra coemeterium in stabulo equino."

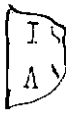
[mensibu?] S XI
[di]EBUS

37. Descripsi. Nunc extra coemeterium in stabulo equino.

? mensibu S X I.
di E B V S.

10. Leon, 1927, p. 115, n. 426. "Descripsi. Nunc in stabulo equino extra coemeterium."
Ι [- -]
ΛΥ [- -]

426. Descripsi. Nunc in stabulo equino extra coemeterium.



Even with the passing of time and much progress in this area of study, Leon's work, fifty years later, is a modern classic, in the sense that it is not only a great pleasure to read but also rich in primary source material from unpublished manuscripts as well as the artifacts themselves. We rightly question a number of Leon's statements today since his knowledge of "general" (non-Jewish) catacomb topography and tomb typology is incomplete (he does not even provide site plans in his works), and he makes a number of assumptions about the organization of Roman Jewry that more comparative studies on the catacombs today rightly question or challenge.[36] It is not at all clear, in fact, that Jewish catacombs were administered by, and perhaps even owned by, the synagogues in Rome, nor do we have clear evidence of cemetery founders, a "Jewish" Trason, Praetextatus, Domitilla, or Priscilla, although it has long been assumed that such benefactors did

[36] Among those who have recently challenged Leon's statements in *The Jews of Ancient Rome* are E. Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*, trans. E. Trapnell Rawlings & J. Routier Pucci, Ithaca, NY, 2009, pp. 18-27, and L. V. Rutgers, *The Jews of Late Ancient Rome*, Leiden, 1995, introduction, p. xviii, for summary of points on which he disagrees with Leon, including the "Romanization" of those buried in the Appia catacomb tombs.

exist.[37] We cannot share Leon's confidence that the languages and formulae used in sepulchral texts (almost exclusively in Greek or Latin) can indicate "conservative," "unassimilated," or "liberal" ("Romanized") trends among communities of Jews in Ancient Rome: above all, it is not out of the question that these sites held tombs for non-Jews, given their frequent development within far larger cemeteries (*sub divo* as well as subterranean).[38]

Leon also makes reference to the oft-repeated theory that Christians "copied" the idea of subterranean burial from the Jews, agreeing with a number of his contemporaries that certain Jewish catacombs must have been in operation by the first century CE.[39] This last issue, of course, cannot be addressed as long as our knowledge of the Jewish sites remains incomplete, but looking carefully at structural details that do survive as well as similar features in the far larger number of non-Jewish catacombs around Rome, it is probable that catacombs were not extensively developed in Rome before the end of the second century CE.[40] In addition, the "ideology" of communal burial, if it at all exists, is seen in both the Christian and Jewish catacombs.[41] In fact, one of the mid-19th century leaders in this school of thought, Giovanni Battista de Rossi, believed that distinctly Jewish and Christian sites must have developed separately, without one group imitating the other.[42] Now, of course, there is more discussion about how exactly such sites were organized, and by whom.[43]

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[37] Leon appears fairly confident that synagogues in Rome used the catacombs closest to their location within the city (Leon, 1995, p. 142 & p. 150), rather ingenuously explaining on p. 145 that members of the Campesian synagogue were found in more than one catacomb because the community itself had switched burial places at a certain point. Rebillard, 2009, p. 24, agrees with an earlier observation by M. H. Williams that "it is unlikely that membership in a synagogue determined a burial site: it is even more difficult to imagine a centralized system." He is also inclined, like Williams, to view "entrepreneurs funeraires" as having had a major role in the development of these sites, although individuals could also arrange for burial in more private and familial tombs: V. Fiocchi Nicolai, "L'organizzazione dello spazio funerario." *Christiana loca: lo spazio cristiano nella Roma delprimo millennio*, ed. L. Pani Ermini, Rome, 2000, p. 47.

[38] Leon, in the *Jews of Ancient Rome*, draws these conclusions primarily from epigraphic evidence, the results of which are stated on: p. 76 (highest percentage of Latin inscriptions and Latin names in the Vigna Randanini site); p. 110 (highest percentage of Semitic names from the Monteverde site, presumably the most "conservative"); p. 110 (highest percentage of Greek names from the via Nomentana site, seen as the least "assimilated"). He can be quite rigid about these categories, arguing on pp. 217-218 that CIJ 1.283, a sarcophagus lid with Greek/Hebrew inscription and Jewish symbols, could not be from the via Appia, even though it was found there in 1732, because Hebrew had been used primarily in the Monteverde cemetery, and the latter had been the only Jewish cemetery known before 1859.

[39] Leon, 1995, pp. 54-55, believes it "not unlikely" that Rome's Christians had learned about catacomb excavation from their "Jewish neighbors," and, on p. 66, assumes "with a fair degree of confidence that the Monteverde catacomb was the earliest" (1st cent. BCE). The idea that certain Jewish catacombs predate those used by Christians has recently resurfaced in the work of Leonard V. Rutgers on radiocarbon dating from the Villa Torlonia site: see Rutgers et al, "Radiocarbon dating: Jewish inspiration of Christian catacombs," *Nature* 436 (21 July 2005), p. 339, and Rutgers, *op. cit*. n. 23, p. 246.

[40] Laurenzi, 2011, pp. 40-41.

[41] Development as a communal burial area is strongly evident in the Villa Torlonia site, where distinct areas develop from a single point of entry into the lower catacomb.

[42] G. B. de Rossi, *Roma Sotteranea Cristiana*, vol, 1, Rome, 1864, p. 91.

[43] See n. 34 and Rebillard, "Chrétiens et formes de sépulture collective à Rome" in *Origine delle catacombe romane*. ed. V. Fiocchi Nicolai e J. Guyon Sussidi allo studio delle antichita' critiane 18. Vatican City, 2006, pp. 41-47.

In very few instances, Leon labels something "Jewish" that could be better defined as "Roman," given the context in which it was found.[44] But he was hardly alone in identifying as "Jewish" the objects that came from a Jewish cemetery: it was widely believed – and still assumed by many today - that Jewish catacombs contained exclusively Jewish tombs.[45] Regrettably, as research into the excavation records has shown, this has caused confusion as to the provenance of artifacts lacking clear Jewish elements (the absence of the menorah, for example, or other objects most commonly associated with the Jews).

Leon's magisterial work, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* nonetheless remains an excellent starting point from which to dig deeper – in quite a literal sense – into the Jewish catacombs of Rome, above all with a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach. Most recently, it has inspired Dr. Bruno Orvieto, former president of the Fondazione Beni culturali ebraici in Italia, to propose a new topographical study of the Monteverde region in order to locate more precisely the Jewish catacombs last seen in the late 1920's on the southernmost slope of that steep ridge southwest of Rome. Of this catacomb, Leon himself had seen little more than a "hill cut back for new streets and houses," but his photograph of the empty lot next to the Circonvallazione Gianicolense (1960, t. V. fig. 7) shows buildings that still exist today close to the spot below which hypogaea were discovered during construction of a subterranean parking garage in 2009.[46] It is this visual evidence, and Leon's reliability on the whole as a witness to the condition of these catacombs in the early 1920's, that has now motivated leading members of Rome's Jewish community to secure funding for a project entirely dedicated to the Monteverde catacomb site and possible burial remains.

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[44] It is difficult to define certain structural or decorative elements in these catacombs as strictly "Jewish," although many scholars, including Leon, have continued to do so without considering evidence from other hypogaean sites in Rome. Consider how Leon and others accept the "kokh" tomb as a distinctly Jewish form of burial in Rome, although it is presently seen only in the Vigna Randanini site (Leon, 1995, p. 60 & Rutgers, 1995, p. 62). Yet, on numerous occasions in the past, identical tombs have been described in Christian or "anonymous" sites (including the catacombs of Cyriaca and an anonymous hypogaeum near the "Nunziatella"), suggesting that "kokhim" were commissioned by individuals (not necessarily Jewish) familiar with the use of this tomb-form in the Middle East. D. Nuzzo, *Tipologia Sepolcrale delle catacombe romane*, Oxford, 2000, p. p. 189, n. 88, cites a 1914 description of around 20 "forno" tombs in the Catacombs of Ciriaca. Those in a site on the fourth mile of the via Ardeatina ("Nunziatella") were noted by P. Bonavenia: "Conferenze di Archeologia Cristiana," *Nuovo Bollettino di Archeologia Cristiana* 1-2 (1897), p. 183. Two tombs "a forno" in the "Cava della Rossa" catacomb near the via Latina were documented by R. Kanzler, "Di un nuovo cimitero anonimo sulla via Latina," *Nuovo Bollettino di Archeologia Cristiana* 9 (1905), pp.173-186. In addition, the two "kokhim" in the back wall of a painted chamber in the Vigna Randanini site are similar in size, number, and placement to those "a forno" found in an "anonymous" catacomb on the via Latina, known as that of "Roma Vecchia" or "Cento Scaline": their presence does not guarantee that that particular area of the Randanini catacomb (with an independent entrance) was originally excavated by Jews. Leon, 1995, p. 60, may actually have identified a motive for "kokhim" when he observes that their form allowed for more tombs to fit in a single gallery since the opening for a kokh on a wall surface was smaller than that for an arcosolium or loculus. There are distinct areas in the Vigna Randanini catacomb that contain, in fact, almost exclusively this type of tomb (at present, virtually nothing is known of the distribution of kokim in other sites in Rome).

[45] A. Ferrua, S.J., "Simbolismo Ebraico" (review of E. Goodenough's *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*), *Rivista di Archeologia Crist*iana30 (1954), pp. 237-243.

[46] On the appearance of the Monteverde site in the early 1920's, see Leon, 1995, p. 58.

Figure 5. The Monteverde catacomb site ca. 1920
in Leon, 1995, t. V, fig. **7.**

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17. Review of E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, *Archaeology* 7 (1954), pp. 261-262 (vol. 1-3); ibid, 9 (1956), p. 154 (vol. 4); ibid. 11 (1958), pp. 135-136 (vol. 5-6); ibid, 13 (1960), p. 155 (vol. 7-8).

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