



The Torah Scroll and God's Presence^{*}

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At some point—just when, I can't recall—it dawned on me, as it has on others, that when Jews open the Torah Ark and face it to recite important prayers, they are acting as if God is in the Ark, and when they carry the Torah in procession dressed like a person, wearing a velvet or silken mantle, a breastplate and crown, and kiss it, they are treating it very much like others treat a king, a pope, or an idol. This impression was only strengthened when I joined the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and learned from colleagues that some of the shrines in which Japanese idols are kept look very much like the Torah Ark in synagogues, while others look like Middle Eastern Torah cases (see figs. 1 and 2).¹

^{*} It is a great pleasure to take part in this tribute to Adele Berlin, whom I have known and admired since our student days and whose lucid and insightful scholarship has done so much to illuminate the dynamic and message of biblical literature. This paper originated in 1987 as a Dvar Torah, later published as "Parashat Terumah," in *Learn Torah With . . .* (ed. S. Kelman and J. L. Grishaver; Los Angeles: Alef Design Group, 1996), 141–47. Expanded versions were presented in lectures at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, in April 2002, and at the University of Maryland, College Park, at the program in honor of Adele Berlin's retirement on May 3, 2009. For several references and suggestions I am indebted to Dan Ben Amos, Michael Carasik, Linda Chance, Sol Cohen, Harvey Goldberg, Arthur Green, Tamar Kadari, Aryeh Kosman, Ann Matter, David Stern (who was also kind enough to read and critique an earlier draft), Chanan Tigay, and Elliot Wolfson. Translations of biblical verses are based on *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), with modifications as required by the context.

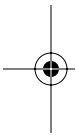
¹ For details of the illustrations see E. Lyons and H. Peters, *Buddhism: The History and Diversity of a Great Tradition* (Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1985), 9, 15, 31. It goes without saying that I see only a functional parallel, not a case of borrowing or influence.



Fig. 1. A large household Buddha shrine from Japan, 19th century. University of Pennsylvania Museum, 29-96-741. Printed with permission.



Fig. 2. Small portable shrine, Japan, 19th century. University of Pennsylvania Museum, 29-156-5. Printed with permission.



Eventually, and not surprisingly, I found a similar observation in the *Jüdisches Lexikon* of 1928:

[The Torah scroll] . . . is honored like a kind of flag (*Fahne*) of Judaism, like the ruler of the Jewish theocracy, indeed almost like a manifestation of the divine (*Erscheinung des Göttlichen*). Like a king, it is adorned with the “Crown of the Torah” and the place where it is deposited, the Torah shrine, is the focal point of the entire synagogue and its worshipers. . . . for hymns in praise of God the Holy Ark is often opened, (and) thereby the sight of the Torah mediates, as it were, the “Vision of God” (*“Schauen Gottes”*). It is kissed, as were idols in ancient times.²

² H. Fuchs, “Tora,” *Jüdisches Lexikon* (4 vols.; Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1928), 4.2, col. 982. For kissing idols, see 1 Kgs 19:18; Hos 13:2; and possibly Job 31:27. An Assyrian prophecy to Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) contains a tantalizing reference to a ceremonial reading of a “covenant tablet” of the god Assur in the presence of the king. The tablet “enters the king’s presence on a cushion(?); fragrant oil is sprinkled, sacrifices are made, incense is burnt, and they read it out in the king’s presence” (S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies* [Helsinki: Helsinki University Press,





These comparisons suggest, as others have likewise observed, that the Torah scroll is a representation, or embodiment, of God's presence. In this respect it functions in ways similar to the function of idols in the ancient world. It is clear today that in idolatry the statue was not identical to or coterminous with the deity (as generally implied by the Bible) nor was it merely a reminder or a symbol that stands for the deity. It was an object that somehow participated in the reality of the deity that it represented. The deity was believed to be present in the image "ontically and not metaphorically."³ But since the scroll is not thought to represent God visually—it does not *resemble* him—it functions as a case of "material aniconism," a term coined by Tryggve Mettinger to refer to an object that represents the deity but does not resemble humans or animals.⁴

What are the roots of these practices, and what are their theological underpinnings? In the following pages I would like to gather some of the most pertinent material together into a more comprehensive picture, tracing these practices back to their biblical antecedents and following them down to their manifestations in the Torah service as it is conducted today.

The Biblical Period

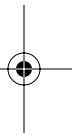
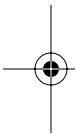
To the best of my knowledge, this phenomenon of the Torah as representing God began—or is at least most clearly observable—in the post-exilic period.⁵ But it has an earlier antecedent in the conception

1997], 24–25; M. Nissinen et al., *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* [SBLWAW 12; ed. P. Machinist; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003], 120–21). Processions bearing idols and icons, as well as monarchs, are well attested in many times and places and require no documentation.

³ I owe the phrase to E. R. Wolfson, "The Mystical Significance of Torah Study in German Pietism," *JQR* 84 (1991): 74, although he uses it in a slightly different way. For this understanding of idols see T. Jacobsen, "The Graven Image," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. P. D. Miller et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 15–32; M. B. Dick, ed., *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999).

⁴ T. N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1995). See also the important review by T. J. Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel," *JAOS* 118 (1998): 36–53 (42).

⁵ K. van der Toorn argues that already in Deuteronomy there is a functional





of the Ark.⁶ According to the book of Samuel, the Israelites called for “the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of Hosts who sits on (or between) the Cherubs” to be brought to the Israelite camp to help them defeat the Philistines (1 Sam 4:3–7). As they explained, “thus He will be present (*yābō*) among us and will deliver us from the hands of our enemies.” The Philistines understood the Ark the same way: “When they learned that the Ark of the Lord had come to the camp,

similarity between images and the Torah scroll, with the latter taking the place of the former as an incarnation of God (“The Iconic Book: Analogies Between the Babylonian Cult of Images and the Veneration of the Torah,” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East* [ed. K. van der Toorn; Leuven: Peeters, 1997], 229–48). However, although iconoclasm and God’s *tôrâ* are both emphasized in Deuteronomy, there is no indication that Deuteronomy sees the *tôrâ* scroll as a replacement for idols. Deuteronomy rarely mentions them in the same context and never contrasts them. The passages prohibiting idols and commanding the destruction of those belonging to the Canaanites (4:15–18, 23, 25; 5:8–9; 7:5, 25; 12:2–3; 27:15) never mention *tôrâ* scrolls, not even 12:2–5, which explicitly prescribes the alternatives to Canaanite cult sites and their appurtenances. If 6:8–9 and 11:18–20 really meant that inscriptions with passages of the *tôrâ* were intended to replace household idols (van der Toorn, “The Iconic Book,” 241), it would be inexplicable that the Deuteronomistic Code’s laws about the sanctuary—where the most important cult images would have been located (cf. 16:21–22)—never mention the *tôrâ* or the Ark next to which the scroll is stored (Deut. 10:1–2; 31:26; in the latter it functions as a witness against the Israelites, not as an incarnation of God). Although I do not agree that the idea is already present in Deuteronomy, the title of van der Toorn’s article, “The Iconic Book,” aptly describes the conception of the Torah in post-biblical times, which van der Toorn also describes briefly (243–44).

⁶ For the following, see N. Na’aman, “No Anthropomorphic Graven Image: Notes on the Assumed Anthropomorphic Cult Statues in the Temples of YHWH in the Pre-Exilic Period,” *UF* 31 (1999): 391–415 (410–13) (repr. in his *Ancient Israel’s History and Historiography* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006], 311–38); N. B. Levtow, *Images of Others: Iconic Politics in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 135–43. The statement that God’s Presence (*Shekhinah*) was within the Ark is made several times in *Tanḥ Vayyaqhel* 7 (see E. Zundel, *Midrash Tanḥuma al Hamishah Humshe Torah* [repr.; Jerusalem: Lewin-Epstein, 1964]); see also *Yalqut Shimoni*, Torah, § 729 (repr.; New York: Pardes, 1944). Elsewhere I have argued that at least in Exod 20:19–21 (22–24) and 24:4–8 and a few other passages, the altar is conceived as the locus or symbol of God’s presence. See Tigay, “The Presence of God and the Coherence of Exodus 20:22–26,” in *Sefer Moshe: The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, Qumran, and Post-Biblical Judaism* (ed. C. Cohen et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 195–211.

the Philistines were frightened; for they said, 'God has come to the camp'" (1 Sam. 4:6–7). Both sides understood that when the Ark was present, God was present.⁷ When the Ark was captured by the Philistines it was believed that "the Glory (*kābôd*) has departed from Israel" (1 Sam 4:21–22). God's connection with the Ark is expressed in the name by which the Israelites referred to it: "the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of Hosts who sits on (or between) the Cherubs" (1 Sam 4:4), referring to the images of cherubs on the lid of the Ark.⁸ The idea of God as sitting on, or between, the cherubs is also expressed in the book of Exodus, which states that God would communicate to Moses from a position above the Ark and between the cherubs (Exod 25:17–22). God was conceived of as invisibly present above the Ark between the cherubs. The same close connection of God with the Ark is reflected in Num 10:35–36, which reports that:

When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: Advance, O Lord!
May Your enemies be scattered, And may Your foes flee before
You! And when it halted, he would say: Return (to Your place),
O Lord, You who are Israel's myriads of thousands!

According to these verses, when the Ark advances, God advances; when it stops, he stops, since he is seated between the cherubs above the ark.

Another possible explanation for the sense that God is present when the Ark is present is suggested by the designation of the Ark as "the Ark of the Covenant," meaning that it contains the two tablets of the covenant, or the Ten Commandments. This could suggest that the Ark represents God because it contains the text of his words. One might even speculate that the tablets represent his presence.⁹ It has

⁷ According to *Midr. Shemuel* 11:4, "the Philistines honored the Ark: they said, this [the Ark] is a god and that [Dagon] is a god; let one god come and dwell next to the other" (*Midrash Shmuel* [ed. S. Buber; Vilna: Rom, 1925], 37).

⁸ The phrase "who sits on the Cherubs" appears also in 2 Sam 6:2; 2 Kgs 19:15; Isa 37:16; Ps 80:2; 99:1; 1 Chron 13:6. See P. K. McCarter, *1 Samuel* (AB 8; Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 108f.

⁹ The textual evidence for the word "covenant" in several of these passages is problematic and this conception may, therefore, represent the view of later interpolators, not the original passage. The LXX of Samuel lacks the word "covenant" and reads merely "the Ark of the Lord," not "the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord." In Num 10 the phrase "the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord" is part of the narrator's words, not the words uttered by Moses.



sometimes been proposed, on the basis of portable shrines containing idols among Arabs, that the Ark originally contained an idol.¹⁰ But this is not consistent with the description of the Ark in Exodus or the epithet “the Lord of Hosts who sits on the Cherubs,” which imply that God is above the ark, not in it.

When the first Temple was destroyed, the Ark disappeared, if it had not disappeared already.¹¹ In later times its place was taken by synagogue arks, at first simple chests and later wall-cabinets, but such arks had no cherubs on top and could not symbolize God’s seat. As we shall see, these arks, too, sometimes represented God’s presence, but increasingly it was the Torah that became the primary representation. The beginnings of this development are visible in post-exilic parts of the Bible.

The Book of Nehemiah describes the day on which Ezra read the Torah publicly to all the assembled people. Earlier books of the Bible had likewise described public readings of the Torah, or parts of it (Exod 24:1–8; Josh 8:30–45; 2 Kgs 23:1–3). But this time something new happened: as Ezra opened the scroll, the people stood up; Ezra blessed God, and the people answered “Amen” with hands upraised; they then bowed their heads and prostrated themselves. For this occasion and in this context, the reading has become a ritual, a ceremony, and the Torah scroll, as the embodiment of God’s word, has become a cultic object. Here is how Yehezkel Kaufmann describes the event:

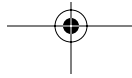
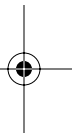
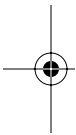
The Law is read daily during the festival (Tabernacles); it is as though the light of the Shekinah breaks forth with the reading. Herewith, a significant cultic development: the Torah as the embodiment (*hagšāmā*) of the word of God, of His spirit, the symbol of sanctity and the sublime, the source of all that is holy on earth, the book of the Torah as a cultic object.¹²

Even more remarkably, the famous 119th Psalm treats the Torah not only as the embodiment of God’s *word*, but speaks of his words in

¹⁰ See the works cited by N. M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 198; cf. van der Toorn, “The Iconic Book,” 242.

¹¹ See M. Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into the Character of Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 276–88.

¹² Y. Kaufmann, *The History of the Religion of Israel*, vol. 4 (trans. C. W. Efroymson; New York: Ktav, 1977), 391 (= Kaufmann, *Tōlēdōt hā’Ēmúnā haYisrē’ēlīt* [Jerusalem: Bialik Institute and Dvir, 1956], 4.340).



terms originally used of God himself.¹³ It is important to note that the psalm does not refer to a material object, the Torah scroll, but to the *contents* of God's teaching, to its laws. Note the following verses about the laws and their counterparts that refer to God:

- | | |
|--|--|
| ¹⁹ Do not hide <i>Your commandments</i>
from me | Cf. Ps. 27:9: "Do not hide <i>Your face</i> from me" |
| ³⁰ I have set <i>Your rules</i> before me | Cf. 16:8: "I set <i>the Lord</i> before me at all times" |
| ³¹ I cling to <i>Your decrees</i> | Cf. 63:9: "My soul clings to <i>You</i> " |
| ⁴² I have put my trust in <i>Your word</i> | Cf. 31:7: "I trust in <i>the Lord</i> " |
| ⁴³ I have put my hope in <i>Your rules</i> | Cf. 31:25: "all you who put your hope in <i>the Lord</i> " |
| ⁴⁵ I have turned
(or: am devoted [דרש])
to <i>Your precepts</i> ¹⁴ | Cf. vv. 2, 10: "I have turned (or: am devoted) to <i>You</i> " |
| ⁴⁸ I stretch out my hands (= pray)
to <i>Your commandments</i> ,
which I love ¹⁵ | Cf. Lam 2:19: "Stretch out your hands to <i>Him</i> ";
97:10: "you who love <i>the Lord</i> " |

In this psalm, the words of the Torah, as the word of God, the embodiment of his will, become almost an embodiment of God himself.

¹³ Note also the comments of H. G. M. Williamson regarding the prayer in Neh 9: "... prominence given to the Law . . . At times it can stand virtually alongside God himself: to reject the one is to reject the other (vv 26a, 29), while to return to the one is to return to the other (vv 26b with 29a)"; and more broadly: "the Law . . . has now begun to replace God himself as the party against whom sin has been committed" (H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* [WBC 16; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985], 306, 316).

¹⁴ Reference to God's commandments as the object of the verb *dāraš* is an innovation of Late Biblical Hebrew. Cf. Ps 119:94, 155; Ezra 7:10; 1 Chron 28:8; and see A. Hurvitz, "Continuity and Innovation in Biblical Hebrew: The Case of 'Semantic Change' in Post-Exilic Writings," in *Studies in Ancient Hebrew Semantics* (ed. T. Muraoka; AbrNSup 4; Louvain: Peeters, 1995), 1–10.

¹⁵ Some of these usages have antecedents, with reference to the instructions/words of kings in the ancient Near East: (a) "And as you love your own wives and your own children, your own houses, just so love the rules of the king and practice them well" (military instructions, cited in M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomist School* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1972], 97, nn. 1–3); (b) "when I heard the words of the tablet of the king, my lord, my heart rejoiced and my eyes shone brightly" (Amarna letters 142, 144, in W. L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992], 228, 230; cf. Ps 19:9).



David Noel Freedman describes this psalm as expressing “the apotheosis of *tôrâ*.”¹⁶ This is perhaps an overstatement. Moshe Greenberg observes more discriminatingly: “[Ps 119] includes a new Torah-centered religiosity.” “Religious sentiment, religious emotion—love, delight, clinging to—are now focused on the Torah . . . but God is not therewith displaced . . . The Torah does not come between the psalmist and God; it serves to link them. God’s Torah, his commandments . . . all these are available on earth to the religious Israelite, enabling him at all times to feel contact with God.”¹⁷

The Post-biblical Period

Nevertheless, the line between the Torah as a link with God and the Torah as a synonym for God was a line easily missed, and the rabbis sometimes ignored the line. According to *Abot* 2:12,¹⁸ “R. Yose said: . . . and let all your deeds be for the sake of Heaven (i.e., God).” In *Abot de Rabbi Natan* this is explained as meaning “for the sake of Torah” (*Abot R. Nat.* A 17).¹⁹ This synonymy of God and Torah was also expressed in the very idiom of rabbinic discourse. When the midrash describes God making a covenant with Aaron, it says “*Scripture* made a covenant . . .” (*Sifrei Num.* 117). “*Scripture*” stands for God.²⁰

But the synonymy of Torah and God was not only an idiom. Speaking words of Torah could also *evoke*—that is, attract, summon—the Divine Presence:

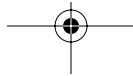
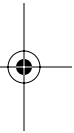
¹⁶ D. N. Freedman, *Psalm 119: The Exaltation of Torah* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 88.

¹⁷ M. Greenberg, “Three Conceptions of the Torah in Hebrew Scriptures,” in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte: Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff* (ed. E. Blum et al.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), 365–78 (376–78).

¹⁸ Mishnayot cited according to the numbers in H. Albeck, *Šiṣā Sidrê Mišnâ* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute and Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1954–1959).

¹⁹ S. Schechter, *Abot de Rabbi Nathan* (2d ed.; New York: Feldheim, 1945), 66.

²⁰ The converse also happens: the rabbis often say, “God said,” when they mean, “the Torah says.” For example, the term *rahmānā*, “The Merciful One” (a name of God) is used hundreds of times in the Babylonian Talmud for the Torah, and “[T]here are many places in rabbinic literature where יהוה and הקב"ה are used interchangeably; the idea is that the will of God is expressed in the Torah . . .” L. Ginzberg, quoted in J. Goldin, *Studies in Midrash and Related Literature* (ed. B. L. Eichler and J. H. Tigay; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 86, n. 10; see also Jastrow, 1468; W. Bacher, *Erkhe Midrash* (trans. A. Z. Rabinovitz; Tel Aviv, 1922–23; Jerusalem: Carmiel, 1969–70), 2.294–95. David Stern has



R. Hananiah b. Teradion said: . . . when two sit together and there are words of Torah [spoken] between them, the *Shekhinah* (the presence of God) abides among them. (*Abot* 3:2; similarly 3:6)

Rabbi Yose bar Halafta said to R. Ishmael, his son: If you wish to behold the face of the *Shekhinah* in this world, occupy yourself with the Torah in the land of Israel. (*Midr. Tehillim* 105:1)

Rabbi Simon said in the name of R. Joshua b. Levi: Wherever the Holy One, Blessed is He, places the Torah, He places His *Shekhinah*. (*Midr. Shir HaShirim Rab.* 8:15)

These examples, as noted, have to do with the *contents* of the Torah. But the Torah *scroll* was also used in some of the ways that idols were.²¹

First Maccabees 3:48 states that on the eve of the battle of Emmaus, Judah's army "opened the Book of the Law for what the gentiles would have inquired/searched from the images of their gods." According to the most plausible interpretation of this passage, the scroll was opened for the purpose of seeking divine guidance, that is, for divination, with the scroll serving as an oracle in the way that an idol would for idolaters.²² I presume that the method used was bib-

discussed a passage in *Song Rabbah* 5:11ff. that contains a group of interpretations of Song 5:11–12 in which the parts of God's (the lover's) body stand for different parts of the Torah scroll: its words, the ruling lines on the parchment, its letters and the decorations on some of them, its various sections, its laws, its students and scholars. He weighs whether these interpretations are "divinizing" the Torah or using it as a synecdoche for God, or using the Torah as a "screen" for God, to avoid interpreting them as references to God's body. See D. Stern, "Ancient Jewish Interpretation of the Song of Songs in a Comparative Context," in *Jewish Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Exchange* (ed. N. B. Dohrmann and D. Stern; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 102–3. The passage, by the way, bears a certain resemblance to Akkadian texts that identify various deities as parts of the body or as attributes of the supreme god. See B. R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (2 vols.; 2d ed.; Potomac, Md.: CDL Press, 1996), 2.619–20, no. III.47(c); 2.598–99, no. III.44(g).

²¹ See further David Stern's chapter, "The Torah Scroll," in his forthcoming *The Jewish Library: Four Classic Jewish Books and the Jewish Experience* (Seattle: University of Washington Press).

²² See J. Tigay, "An Early Technique of Aggadic Exegesis," in *History, Historiography, and Interpretation* (ed. H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), 169–89 (175–76).



liomancy, that is, interpreting the passage to which the scroll was opened as an omen. But whatever the method, the passage explicitly compares the scroll functionally to pagan idols: Judah's army used the scroll for a purpose for which idolaters would have used an idol.

Another comparable function is found in oath-taking. A common feature of oath-taking was holding an image or divine symbol while swearing, thus bringing the oath-taker into direct contact with the deity who would punish him if he lied or violated the oath.²³ The Talmud prescribes holding a Torah scroll, another book of the Bible, or some other sacred object such as phylacteries, which contain excerpts from the Torah.²⁴

A passage that criticizes those who "forsake the Torah scroll"—meaning, leave the synagogue while the Torah is being read—appears in *b. Ber.* 8a and in *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 14:5 (ed. Mandelbaum 1.244).²⁵ The first bases the criticism on the verse "those who forsake (‘ozēvê) the Lord shall perish" (Isa 1:28), while the second invokes "they abandoned (rāḥāqū) me" (Jer 2:5). According to *b. Sotah* 39b, after the Torah is read the congregation may not leave the synagogue until the scroll is put away. It quotes an explanation based on Deut 13:5: "Walk/go after the Lord your God," apparently understood to mean, "leave (only) after God does." In both passages, again, the scroll embodies or is a metonymy for the presence of God. (In later times, this verse was invoked as the basis of the requirement that the scroll be accompanied as it is returned to its place; see below.)

The Ark, which contained the scrolls, was treated similarly. In the synagogues of late antiquity, Torah scrolls were originally kept in low, freestanding portable chests. But eventually the scrolls were placed in niches in the walls of synagogues, either directly or in wooden cabinets placed within the niches.²⁶ These were two forms of what is today

²³ See *CAD*N2 5a (s.v. *nasāḥu*); 83d–84a (s.v. *našū*); *CAD*Š3 345a–c (s.v. *šurinnu*).

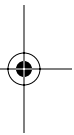
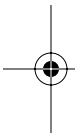
²⁴ *b. Sheb.* 38b, 39a, etc. See G. Libson, "The Use of a Sacred Object in the Administration of a Judicial Oath," *Jewish Law Association Studies* 1 (1985): 53–60.

²⁵ B. Mandelbaum, *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* (2 vols.; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), 1.244. Variants for both passages read "leave the Torah scroll while it is open." See S. Buber, *Pēšiqṭā': VēHī' 'Aggādat 'Ereṣ Yiśrā'el, Mēyūḥeset lēRav Kāhānā'* (Lyck: Hevrat Meḳitse Nirdamim, 1868), 118a, and *Ba"Ḥ* and *Dikdukei Soferim to Ber.* 8a.

²⁶ See B. Yaniv, *The Torah Case: Its History and Design* (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan University Press and Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1997), 21–27. See also A.



called the Aron Qodesh, the Holy Ark. Modern scholars call these cabinets “shrines,” reflecting the fact that they were adopted from pagan devices for displaying idols.²⁷ In the pagan world the niche was a recess in a wall, in which an idol was displayed. The niche in ancient synagogues had a façade of two or four columns, an arch or a gable supported by the columns, a base, and a flight of stairs leading up to it.²⁸ This form, according to E. R. Goodenough, resembled Greek temples, which were abodes of deities.²⁹ Sephardic sources of the Middle Ages aptly called the Ark the *heikhal*, literally “palace,” a term used in the Bible for the Temple (e.g. 1 Sam 3:3; 1 Kgs 6:1; Jer 7:4). As classicist Carl Wendel (1874–1951) observed, the architectural design of the Torah shrine “marked [it] as a *temple*, that is, as the lodging place of the Laws whose divine author was personally present in them.”³⁰ This, for our purposes, is the key point: God was sensed as personally present in the Torah and hence in the Ark. In this sense, Torah arks in synagogues continued the function of the biblical Ark of the Covenant, which, as we have seen, also represented God’s presence. Perhaps this notion is echoed in the mottoes that are often inscribed today above Torah arks or on the curtains covering them, “know before whom you stand” (based on *b. Ber.* 28b and parallels) and “I have set the Lord always before me” (Ps 16:8).³¹ These mottoes imply that when participants in worship face the Ark, they are in the presence of God.³²



Reifenberg, *Ancient Hebrew Arts* (New York: Schocken, 1950), 98; R. Hachlili, “The Niche and the Ark in Ancient Synagogues,” *BASOR* 223 (1976): 43–53.

²⁷ The resemblance of the Ark to pagan shrines is even visible today. In Japan, there are temples constructed as synagogues are, with an ark-like shrine at the front of the worship hall; the difference is that the Japanese ark contains one or more idols. See above, p. 326.

²⁸ Hachlili, “The Niche and the Ark,” 43.

²⁹ E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (13 vols.; New York: Pantheon Books, 1953–68), 4.133. Cf. L. I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue* (2d ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 618. See also his comments on 146–48.

³⁰ *Die Thoraschrein im Altertum* (Halle [Saale]: Max Niemeyer, 1950), 23, quoted in Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 4.117.

³¹ See below with reference to Eleazar ben Judah of Worms. Note the echo of this passage, applied to Torah, in Ps 119:30, “I have set Your rules (*mišpāṭêkā*) before me.”

³² Cf. also “This is the gateway to the Lord—the righteous shall enter through it”





Daniel Al-Kumisi, a ninth to tenth-century Karaite, berated his Rabbanite opponents for bowing to the Ark, and thus the Torah scroll, in the synagogue.³³ S. Lieberman noted that the practice is also reflected in a story in *Midrash Mishle* that tells of an incident when the High Priest opened the Ark and the Jews present “bowed from the waist, and their faces were filled with the radiance of the *Shekhinah*,” indicating that the *Shekhinah* was present inside the Ark.³⁴ M. Bar-Ilan suggests that the practice of bowing before the Ark goes back to the Hekhalot literature, in which there are references to praying before the Ark and to praying and bowing to God’s Throne of Glory. Bar-Ilan connects these references and infers that the Ark was considered to be God’s throne as in the Bible.³⁵

A conception of the Ark or Torah scroll as the locus of God’s presence is reflected also in the talmudic account of the ritual for communal fasts:

(Ps 118:20) on an Ark curtain from Padua or Cairo; see V. Mann, “Between Worshiper and Wall: The Place of Art in Liturgical Spaces,” in *Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue: Studies in the History of Jewish Prayer* (ed. R. Langer and S. Fine; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 116, fig. 3.

³³ Daniel al-Kumisi, *Pitrôn Shēnēm ‘Āšār* (Jerusalem: Mekitse Nirdamim, 1957), 5 (at Hos 3:4), 46 (at Mic 5:12). See also the sermon attributed to him, published in L. Nemoy, “The Pseudo-Qumisian Sermon to the Karaites,” *PAAJR* 43 (1976): 49–105 (63–64, 92–93).

³⁴ S. Buber, *Midrash Mishle* (Vilna: Rom, 1893), 21b (41), second paragraph (= B. L. Visotzky, *Midrash Mishle* [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1990], 6, ll. 40–44); see the translation of B. L. Visotzky, *The Midrash on Proverbs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 19 (cf. 8) and the discussion in Visotzky, *Midrash Mishle: A Critical Edition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1983), 47–49, 168–69. See also S. Lieberman, *Shkiin* (2d ed.; Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1970), 9, and *Midreshei Teiman* (Yemenite Midrashim), in the same volume, 98. Lieberman notes that bowing to the Torah scroll is also prescribed in *Soferim* 14:8 (13 in the Vilna edition). Bowing to God and the Torah is mentioned in the prayer *Bērīk šēmeh*, cited below, and perhaps Aristeas §177. See also Wolfson, “Mystical Significance,” 73.

³⁵ M. Bar-Ilan, “The Book-Case (Ark) in Ancient Synagogues,” in *Libraries and Book-Collections* (ed. J. Kaplan and M. Sluhovsky; Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2006), 49–64 (62–63) (Hebrew). Bar-Ilan also cites the statement in *Tanhuma Vayyaqhel* 7, *hābīl hū’ ma’āseh hā’ārōn kēkissē’ hakkābōd šel ma’ālā ...vēhā’ārōn mēkūuwān kēneged kissē’ hakkābōd šel ma’ālā*.





[On fast days] the Ark is taken out to the open space of the city, wood ashes are placed on the Ark, on the head of the Patriarch and on the head of the President of the Court. Everyone else puts ashes on his own head. (*m. Taanit* 2:1)

The Gemara provides the following explanations:

And why do they place wood-ashes upon the Ark? [var. "the Torah scroll"]—R. Judah b. Pazzi said: This means to say (*kēlōmar*), "I [God] will be with him [Israel] in trouble" (Ps 91:15). Resh Lakish said: [This means to say] "In all their afflictions He was afflicted" (Isa 63:9). (*b. Taanit* 16a)³⁶

Ḥasidei Ashkenaz

As Elliot Wolfson has shown, this connection of the Ark and Torah scroll with the presence of God, the *Shekhinah*, is also found in medieval Jewish pietism and mysticism.³⁷ An anonymous commentary on the seventy names of God deriving from the German-Jewish Pietists (*Ḥasidei Ashkenaz*), a mystical movement of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, says that, "The Torah is the Presence (*kāvōd*) of God."³⁸ This is based on the Kabbalistic tradition that the Torah—its very letters, in various combinations—actually consists of names of God.³⁹ In other words, it is not just the words of Torah expressing God's *teachings*, but his very name, that makes the Torah an embodiment of his presence. Since the Torah is the *names* of God and the Kaddish prayer sanctifies God's *name*, Rabbi Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (ca. 1165–1230) says: "When [the Cantor] says the Kaddish he should cast his eyes to the holy ark, for the *Shekhinah* rests in it, as it says 'I constantly place the Lord before me'" (Ps 16:8).⁴⁰ For the same reason, *Sefer Ḥasi-*

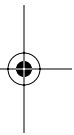
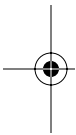
³⁶ Translation based on Soncino and H. Malter, *The Treatise Ta'anit of the Babylonian Talmud* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1928), 204, 220. For the variant, see Malter and *Dikdukei Soferim ad loc.* (the parallel passage in *y. Ta'an.* 2.1, 65a reads "the Ark"). Malter, *Treatise Ta'anit*, 220, n. 240 explains, "The Torah scroll represents God."

³⁷ Wolfson, "Mystical Significance," 43–78 (67–75).

³⁸ Wolfson, "Mystical Significance," 67.

³⁹ Ramban, *Introduction to Torah Commentary*; see C. B. Chavel, ed., *Pérušē haTōrā leRabbēnū Mošeh ben Naḥmān (Ramban)* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1962), 1.6, from *Zohar, Yitro*, 87a.

⁴⁰ Wolfson, "Mystical Significance," 72. See above with reference to this verse as a motto inscribed on the Ark.





dim, the classic work of the Pietists, says that when the Cantor recites the Kaddish, the *congregation* should turn to the Torah *scroll*.⁴¹

Apparently some of the pietists thought this was going too far. Eleazar also reports a different tradition in the name of another rabbi:

When we return [the Torah to the Ark, after it is read], we say the verse “Let them praise [the name of the Lord, *for his name alone is sublime; his splendor covers heaven and earth*]” (Ps 148:13), to indicate that one does not bow down because of the divinity that is in the Torah (*’ēlohūt šebatôrâ*), but rather one bows down to the Holy one blessed is he *because his presence rests upon it* [the Torah], and not because it too is a god, for “his name alone is sublime.”⁴²

As Wolfson observes, this is a polemic against the full identification of the Torah and God’s presence (*kābôd*).

Nevertheless, this mystical identification of the Torah with God persisted and is found also in the early twentieth-century Torah commentary *Sefat Emet* by the Polish Ḥasidic Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (1847–1905):

Torah, God, and Israel are one. The Midrash interprets the word *anokhi* (“I am,” at the beginning of the Ten Commandments) as an abbreviation for the words “I wrote and gave Myself” (*Shabbat* 105a). *Torah is truly divinity* [i.e., is God Himself].⁴³

The Torah Service in the Synagogue

Some of these conceptions of the Torah are reflected also in aspects of the Torah service in the synagogue, in which the Torah scroll is carried in procession from the Ark, opened and read, and then carried in another procession back to the Ark. The scroll is carried through the synagogue, as noted earlier, the way some cultures do with monarchs, popes, icons, and idols. In the synagogues of north- and central-European Jews, the scroll is dressed up in a mantle, breastplate, belt, and crown, like a king,⁴⁴ and people kiss it as it passes.

⁴¹ Wolfson, “Mystical Significance,” 72.

⁴² Wolfson, “Mystical Significance,” 73, translation slightly modified. On the polemic, see 73–75.

⁴³ *Sefat Emet Ki Tavo* 4. See Arthur Green, *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 96 (Hebrew), 327 (English); translation slightly modified. Cf. *Torah Temimah* on Exod 19:2, comment 3.

⁴⁴ For Torah crowns as modeled on the crowns of contemporary kings, see S. Sabar,



Before, during, and after the processions, the congregation sings a number of biblical verses and other passages, about God and about the Torah. More of them are about God—as if it is he who is being carried and honored in the procession.⁴⁵ For example, when the Torah is read on the Sabbath, prior to opening the Ark the congregation chants several verses, beginning with Ps 86:8: “There is none like You among the gods, O Lord, and there are no deeds like Yours”; followed by Ps 145:13: “Your kingship is an eternal kingship; Your dominion is for all generations”; and then “The Lord is King, the Lord was King, the Lord Shall be King for ever and ever” (a pastiche drawn from Exod 15:18; Ps 10:16; and verses such as Ps 93:1). On weekdays, as well as the Sabbath, as soon as the Ark is opened, the congregation sings a series of verses addressed to God, such as Num 10:35, mentioned above: “When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: Advance, O Lord! May Your enemies be scattered, And may Your foes flee before You!” When the procession begins, the congregation sings a series of verses beginning with 1 Chron 29:11: “Yours, LORD, are greatness, might, splendor, triumph, and majesty—yes, all that is in heaven and on earth; to You, LORD, belong kingship and preeminence above all.”

On Sabbaths, before the procession, the prayer *Bērīk šēmēh dēMārē’ ‘ālmā’*, “Blessed be the name of the Lord of the universe,” is recited. This prayer is taken from the *Zohar*, according to which “when the scroll of the Torah is taken out [of the Ark] to be read to the congregation, the heavenly gates of mercy are opened and love is aroused in the world above. A man must say [this prayer]”⁴⁶—a prescription that reflects the view that “the physical presence of the Torah creates a ‘channel’ through which the prayers of individuals reach On High.”⁴⁷ The prayer includes the declaration:

“Torah and Magic: The Torah Scroll and its Appurtenances as Magical Objects in Traditional Jewish Culture,” *EuroJJS* 3 (2009): 137, n. 5.

⁴⁵ See the comments of Wolfson, “Mystical Significance,” 71–75.

⁴⁶ *Zohar*, vol. 2 (Exodus), Vayyaqhel, p. 206a; see I. Tishby, *Mišnat HaZohar* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1961), 2.327; translated as *The Wisdom of the Zohar* (3 vols.; Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press for the Littman Library, 1989), 3.157.

⁴⁷ H. Goldberg, *Jewish Passages: Cycles of Jewish Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 97. See also R. Langer, “Sinai, Zion, and God in the Synagogue,” in Langer and Fine, *Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue*, 121–59 (146–47).



I am a servant of the Holy One, blessed be He, and I bow before Him and before the glory of His Torah at all times.⁴⁸ I do not put my trust in man, nor do I rely on a son of God (*bar 'elahîn*), but only on the God of heaven, who is the true God, whose Torah is true, and whose prophets are true, and who is bountiful in love and truth. In Him [alone] do I put my trust, and to His holy and glorious name I utter praises.

Some take “son of God” here to mean an angel, as is often the case in the Bible,⁴⁹ but I. Tishby takes it as a reference to Jesus. Harvey Goldberg observes that “in addition to matters of belief, the Zohar, a product of late thirteenth-century Spain, may be distancing itself from the adoration of saints’ images as ‘intermediaries’ between the individual and the Almighty. Instead, the sefer [Torah], as an embodiment of Divine power, takes on anthropomorphic qualities and becomes the focus of intimate prayers.”⁵⁰

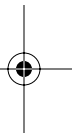
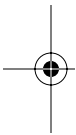
Following the procession, the Torah scroll is brought to the table from which it is to be read. Before the reading begins, the reader or the *gabbai* recites a prayer that begins: “May His kingdom soon be revealed and made visible (*vētiggāle vētērā’e*) to us . . .” Very telling is Maḥzor Vitry’s description of the precise moment when this prayer is to be recited: “Then he carries the Torah scroll to a wooden platform made for the purpose, uncovers (*mēgalle*, lit. ‘reveals’) the Torah scroll [i.e., removes the mantle] and says: “May His kingdom soon be *revealed* and made visible to us.”⁵¹ In other words, making the words of the Torah scroll visible represents a making-visible of God’s kingdom (kingship? Majesty?).

⁴⁸ Bowing before both God and his Torah is reminiscent of the blessing of Yah and the altar (*t. Sukkah* 3:1 end); see J. Tigay, “A Second Temple Parallel to the Blessings from Kuntillet Ajrud,” *IEJ* 40 (1990): 218. Also relevant are a Nabataean curse by “Dushara and his throne” (*COS* 2, 191, text 2.67) and the texts that invoke both a deity and one of its cultic objects, such as the deities and statues in the Assyrian *tākultu* ritual; see B. N. Porter, “The Anxiety of Multiplicity: Concepts of Divinity as One and Many in Ancient Assyria,” in *One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World* (ed. B. N. Porter; Chebeague, Maine: Casco Bay Assyriological Institute, 2000), 211–72 (236).

⁴⁹ See J. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), at 3:24; 32:8; and Excursus 31.

⁵⁰ Goldberg, *Jewish Passages*, 98.

⁵¹ S. Hurwitz, *Maḥzor Vitry* (Nuremberg: Y. Bulka, 1923), 71–72. Some modern *siddurim* say that this is recited when the scroll is unrolled, but in *Maḥzor Vitry* the unrolling is a separate step that follows the prayer.



When the reading of the Torah is finished, it is carried back to the Ark. According to Maimonides and the *Shulḥan Arukh*, those present in the synagogue are to follow it to its place.⁵² Some of the commentaries on the *Shulḥan Arukh* explain this by invoking the same verse that was invoked in *b. Sotah* 39b to explain why none might leave the synagogue before the Torah does, Deut 13:5, now understood to mean “you shall follow the Lord your God.”⁵³ Following after the scroll is following after God.

While the Torah is being carried back to the Ark on weekdays, Ps 24 is recited. Verses 7–10 call upon the gates of the Temple to prepare for God, the King of glory, to enter. In the context of the Torah service this is undoubtedly an address to the Ark to make ready to receive the Torah. Once again, when the Torah is placed in the Ark, God enters it.⁵⁴

Finally, when the Torah is put back into the Ark, a number of verses are recited, including Num 10:36 (the counterpart to Num 10:35, which is recited when it is taken out): “And when it halted (lit. came to rest), he would say: Return (to Your place), O Lord, You who are Israel’s myriads of thousands!” In other words, when the Torah scroll is returned to its place, God is returned to his.

The Ashkenazi Torah service as it appears today is the result of a long and complex evolution that has been thoroughly described by Ruth Langer in a masterful study in which she concludes as follows:

Ashkenazi Jews today have received a liturgy that encourages them to experience the presence of God, not just through the proclamation of the Torah text, but also through the very presence of the Torah scroll in the synagogue. . . . God is today present and accessible through the medium of His Word, the Torah.⁵⁵

⁵² Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Tefillah* 12:24; *Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 149:1. According to *Sop.* 14:11 (14:14 in Vilna edition), the “pure-minded” of Jerusalem would follow after it (in procession) when it was taken from the Ark and when it was returned.

⁵³ *Levush Hatekhelet, 'Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 149:1, quoted in S. P. Gelbard, *'Otsar Ta'ame ha-Minhagim: Meqorot u-Te'amim le-Dinim u-Minhagim* (Petaḥ Tikvah: Hotsa'at Mif'al Rashi, 1995), 222, no. 17; *Mishnah Berurah* 149:4.

⁵⁴ See the detailed discussion by B. D. Sommer, “A Commentary on Psalm 24,” in *Gazing on the Deep: Ancient Near Eastern and Other Studies in Honor of Tsvi Abusch* (ed. J. Stackert et al.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2010), 495–516 (509–13).

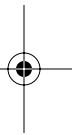
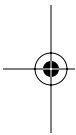
⁵⁵ Langer, “Sinai, Zion, and God in the Synagogue,” 159.

*Conclusion*

The Torah became in Judaism more than a book of narrative and laws. In its words and in its physical form as a scroll it became a replacement for idolatry, in complete consistency with its contents. It came to share a *function* of idols as an embodiment of divinity. But this is not idolatry. The difference has been described nicely by M. Halbertal and A. Margalit in their discussion of the biblical cherubs:

“The biblical tradition, which so clearly forbids similarity-based representations of God, permits metonymic representations of him . . . The cherubim do not represent God by resembling him; rather, they are a metonymic representation of God: they represent God because they are directly associated with him, being his chariot . . . Metonymic representations are permitted because they do not lead to error in the conception of God, as they do not represent him by being similar to him.”⁵⁶

It is important to add that the way the Torah is used also prevents too much focus on the scroll itself, since whenever it is carried in procession it is always opened and read, which keeps the focus on its identity as a book. It is the text, the words, the content, that remain the primary link between the Jew and God.⁵⁷



⁵⁶ M. Halbertal and A. Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 48.

⁵⁷ There are at least superficial similarities between the attitudes and practices described above and certain Christian attitudes and practices. In both churches and synagogues, a table stands at the front. In churches it is the altar, and it holds the host, which is believed to be the body of Jesus; in synagogues the table is for the Torah scroll, the embodiment of God’s presence. The idea of Scripture as the embodiment of God’s presence also has counterparts in Christianity:

Orthodoxy regards the Bible as a verbal icon of Christ, the Seventh Council laying down that the Holy Icons and the Book of the Gospels should be venerated in the same way. In every church the Gospel Book has a place of honor on the altar; it is carried in procession at the Liturgy and at Matins [morning prayer] on Sundays and feasts; the faithful kiss it and prostrate themselves before it. Such is the respect shown in the Orthodox Church for the Word of God.

See T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), 209–10; (rev. ed., London: Penguin Books, 1997), 201. I shall not attempt to discuss how close the Jewish and Christian ideas are to each other or whether there was influence in one direction or the other.

