

The Design of the Lampstand (Menorah) [מְנוֹרָה *mənôrah*] – P. Schmidt, 2025

In these notes, I discuss what the lampstand looked like – its form. Here, I do not address questions about the material, the weight, the size, or the manufacturing.

Exodus 25:31 names the parts of the lampstand when it says (ESVUS16):

The lampstand shall be made of hammered work: its base, its stem, its cups, its calyxes, and its flowers shall be of one piece with it.

The following verses continue its description.

Summary (cf. Figure 4 at the end)

- Every “flower” consists of the small green sepals below and the large beautiful petals on top. In Hebrew terms: a גָּבִי *gābī(a)* ‘cup/goblet’ consists of a כַּפְתֹּר *kaptôr* ‘calyx’ (sepals) and its פֶּרַח *perah* ‘bloom’ (petals). (Houtman says that *kaptôr* & *perah* are a hendiadys in apposition to *gābī(a)* ‘.)
- The middle shaft has four such cups.
- Each of the other six branches has three such cups.
- The top cups of each branch and of the middle shaft function as lamp-holders into/onto which the lamps themselves are placed as separate items (v. 37!). (Durham: “Each of these branches ended in the leafy base of a bud, from which opened the petals of an almond flower, and into this receptacle was fixed a lampholder”)
- These “cups” are shaped like almond flowers.¹
- On each of the six branches, the remaining two cups are situated somewhere along the branch. Probably, the cups are all shaped similarly. That is, they are not just decorative relief or embossing, but they have an open flower, like the top ones. In the lower ones, “the stalk runs through the cup”/flower (Houtman), the petals form a collar (Sarna: “floral ring”).
- On the middle shaft, the remaining three cups are situated under each of the places where the branches split off.

Vocabulary

About the flowery details, the UBS *Realia Handbook* says (§ 4.3.4 Lampstand, menorah):

Gavi ‘a (EXO 25.31, 33-34; 37.17, 19-20): This Hebrew word refers to a kind of cup at the top of each of the seven stems of the lampstand. Olive oil and wicks that burned, giving off light, were placed into the seven cups. The cups were evidently shaped like the head of a flower when it is open. NCV has “flower-like cups” (similarly NIV). REB has simply “cups,” while GNT says “decorative flowers.”

¹ There is some question about the adj. “almond-flower-shaped”. Jacob (780) takes מְשֻׁקָּדִים as “opened-up [flower]” (see “Translation & further comments”).

As the UBS *Handbook* on Exodus points out (see below), the word “decorative” is not in the text. I would probably avoid calling the flower-like cups “decorative”, because they had a function as lampholders.

Sarna (165) describes *gābî(a)* ‘as “a goblet, hence a bulbous-shaped receptacle”.²

The UBS *Realia Handbook* continues:

Kaṭor (EXO 25 [8 times]; 37 [8 times]): This Hebrew word is also used to designate the “capital” (so RSV in AMO 9.1) of a column (see 3.5). Here it seems to indicate a kind of knob or bulb, a swelling like a ball or an egg at the joints between the branches and where the head of the flower joined the stem. Most translations maintain the flower image by rendering this word “buds” (GNT, NIV) or “calyxes” (NRSV, NJPSV).

Perach (EXO 25 [4 times]; 37 [4 times]; NUM 8.4; 1KI 7.49; 2CH 4.21): This Hebrew word means “flower,” or more specifically “bloom,” which is the head of a flower made by the open petals. The flowers of the lampstand formed the cups. While most translations keep the flower image for this word, they vary in how they express it. Some have “petals” (GNT, NJPSV), while others say “flowers” (RSV).

Further exegesis

1. One question is where the cups “sit” on the stem and on the branches.

UBS *Handbook* (on v. 33):

On one branch means that each **branch** was to have **three cups**, but it is not clear where these cups were to be placed, nor whether they were to be three-dimensional or simply embossed along the surface. Possibly they were three-dimensional cups, with two of them producing new segments of the branch, and the third one serving as a lamp holder at the top of each branch. To call them “decorative flowers” (TEV) suggests that they had no function other than to decorate. The word “decorative” is not in the text and should probably be omitted. An alternative translation model is “Each of the six branches is to have three flowers shaped like almond blossoms, with buds and petals.”

“Simply embossed along the surface” would not work for the top ones. I prefer to take them all in the same way, as “three-dimensional” forms.

Houtman explains helpfully (on v. 33, p. 406):

Each of the six branches has three cups. Probably the lower two of these were wrapped around the stalk – the stalk runs through the cup – and the top one is at the end and has space for a lamp. The central stalk has four such cups ..., the lowest of which was likely at the point where the stem became the central stalk.

Sarna (164) speaks of a “floral ring molding” and a “bowl element”.

Vv. 34–35 read (ESVUS16):

And on the lampstand itself there shall be four cups made like almond blossoms, with their calyxes and flowers,³⁵ and a calyx of one piece with it under each pair of the six branches going out from the lampstand.

The UBS *Handbook* explains:

And on the lampstand itself refers to the “central stem” (TOT), or “shaft” (TEV), of verse 31, although the word menorah is used here. ...

² *Bulbous* = “knollig / zwiebelartig” in German.

Thus, the mention of “four cups” does not relate to the branches – only to the middle stem. It continues:

Literally the phrase “and a calyx under two of the branches from it” is repeated three times. This means that, just below the joint where each of the three pairs of branches go out from the “shaft,” there is to be a **cup** that is a part of the “shaft.” (See the illustration, page 601.) The fourth cup evidently was to be at the top end of the central stem as the seventh lamp-holder. (See verse 33.)

Durham (364):

Each of these branches ended in the leafy base of a bud, from which opened the petals of an almond flower, and into this receptacle was fixed a lampholder or cup. This bud-and-bloom motif was repeated along both the trunk or shaft of the Lampstand and also along the six branches extending from it, four times on the trunk (v 34) and three times on each branch (v 33).

2. Another question is how the three terms **גָּבִיעַ** *gābī(a)*, **כַּפְתֹּר** *kaptôr*, and **פֶּרַח** *perah* relate to each other.

The UBS *Handbook*’s explanation on 25:31 sees the “capitals” [*kaptôr*] and the “flowers” [*perah*] as part of the “cups” [*gābī(a)*]:

Its cups refers to the holders for the lamps, which were probably placed at the end of each of the branches as well as at the top of the shaft. The word is used elsewhere for a drinking cup, but here the shape was to resemble an almond blossom (verse 34). In some languages it will be helpful to mention this here, “its cups in the shape of almond flowers.” Its capitals is translated in NRSV as “its calyxes.” The calyx is the green, leafy base of a flower, or the bud which has opened up into a blossom. NAB has “knobs.” Its flowers refers to the “blossoms” (NIV) or “petals” (TEV). Both the capitals and the flowers should be thought of as part of the cups, so TEV has “its decorative flowers, including buds and petals.” The word “decorative” is not in the text.

Cassuto (343) expresses it like this: “Every cup [i.e., **גָּבִיעַ** *gābī(a)*] shall consist of two parts: (a) *a knob*, that is, the receptacle at the base of the almond-blossom, which contains the ovary; (b) *and a flower* – in the restricted sense of the term; what is called ‘corolla’.

Houtman (406) explains this well in grammatical terms:

Likely פֶּרַח וּכְפֹתֵר (25:31; 37:17 etc.) is a hendiadys: ‘calyx with petals.’ Coming right after גָּבִיעַ, the hendiadys serves as apposition, further description.³

Jacob (780), too, speaks of an apposition (“Kelche, ..., Fruchtknoten und Blüte”).⁴

NIV11R, for example, follows this (v. 33): “Three cups shaped like almond flowers with buds and blossoms are to be on one branch”.

³ Houtman (406) has an extra remark saying:

The **כַּפְתֹּרִים** mentioned in 25:34; 37:20 should be distinguished from those mentioned in 25:35; 37:21. In the latter, כַּפְתֹּרִים is not used as part of the hendiadys. **כַּפְתֹּר** here is not term for the calyx from which the petal arises, but apparently the thick part, the knot in the stem from which the stalks protrude.

Still, in both spots *kaptôr* is the knob/bud from which something else grows.

⁴ Jacob (778) translates “Kelche, sich öffnende, Fruchtknoten und Blüte” [≈ calyxes, opening-up ones, ovary and blossom] and comments (780) that “Kelche mit Fruchtknoten und Blütenblättern” [≈ calyxes with ovaries and petals] is not enough, because that would apply to all flowers; it matters that the calyxes come as opened-up ones; this is how he interprets **מִשְׁקָדִים**; it is then that ovaries and petals appear.

Cf. the German Elberfelder (v. 33): “Drei Kelche in der Form von Mandelblüten seien an dem einen Arm, (aus) Knauf und Blüte (bestehend), ...” (≈ three calyxes, consisting of knob and bloom).

To imagine this more easily, it will be helpful to look at the botanical facts.

The flower of the almond tree, like other members of that family, has

1. the calyx, consisting of five sepals – usually green or reddish, small, and located on the outside of the flower
2. the corolla, consisting of five petals – white or pink; these are what makes the flower attractive.

See Figure 1 below.

To think of a *kaptôr* as a sepal, and of a *perah* as a petal, and of a *gābî(a)* ‘as the whole flower-shaped “cup” seems a reasonable way of making sense of the text.



Figure 1: Almond flower⁵

In v. 33, we find a minor translation issue re: תְּנִיחַ ... תְּנִיחַ. The verse reads (ESV):

three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on one branch, and three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on the other branch—so for the six branches going out of the lampstand.

Most versions say “on the other branch” like ESV above, or “on the next branch” (e.g. NIV; so also the UBS *Handbook*). It is right that the pair תְּנִיחַ ... תְּנִיחַ expresses “the one ... the other” (cf. BDB), but the pair is usually used of two opposing sides or contrasting objects or persons (see Exod. 17:12; 18:3, 4; Jer. 24:2; 2Chr. 3:17). It comes with the article in this verse too. In view are the two opposite parts of the same branch, not “the first” and “the second” (neighboring) branch. Therefore, translating “the opposite one/branch” is to be preferred. I found no English, French or German version that does that. But it is what Durham suggests as well when he translates “on the matching branch”.

⁵ Murkemur, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

Translation & further comments

Not recommended:

- “bud” (e.g. NET 08: “buds and blossoms”; NLT07: “buds and petals”). – A flower cannot be in the pre-stage of a bud and at the same time show its petals as when blooming.
- “lamp cups” (e.g. NLT07: “Each of the six branches will have three lamp cups”). – Only the top ones are meant to serve for holding a lamp.
- “decorative” (GNTD: “decorative flowers”). – Theoretically, this is possible; but most likely the top “flowers” served as receptacles onto which the lamps are placed, so they have a function.
- “on the lampstand” (in v. 34) (e.g. NIV11R) is literally right, but will be unclear. See other versions.
- Durham says (364): “The bud-and-flower design was located at the top of the central trunk, apparently where each pair of branches left the trunk; its location on the branches is not specified.” – This sentence is unhelpful. It is unclear how four separate cups can be located “at the top of the central trunk”.
- Strangely, WSB (249) places the cups above the spots where the branches branch off. (“An dem Stamm sitzen drei Blumenkelche unmittelbar über dem Ansatz der Armpaare. Der vierte ist dann der Abschluß des Schaftes.” But v. 35 clearly places them “under each pair of the six branches” (ESVUS16).
- In v. 35, referring to the central shaft, the word *kaptôr* comes without *gābî(a)* ‘and *perah*’. This leads some to surmise that either these are knobs/bulges only, from which the branches sprout, and thus they have a bit of a different function as the ones under the blossoms (cf. *Realia Handbook*, 246), but I doubt this can be reconciled with both v. 34; or these ‘knobs/bulbs’ in v. 35 are *in addition* to those in v. 34, but that makes it unnecessarily complicated. (So Jacob? 778, 781; Houtman? 406; Cassuto? 343 – I find some of their comments difficult to understand.)
- For some reason, some models show the fourth calyx of the stem somewhere between the base and the lowest branches (and another one directly at the first pair of branches). There is no need and no room for that. If the top one is right under the lamp, and the three other ones under the points where the branches branch off, no further calyx is left that could or would need to be placed anywhere near the bottom.

Compare the figures in the *Realia Handbook*, 246, and Figure 2 below: the *Realia Handbook* shows the top knob of the stem right under its lamp (just as with the other six branches), and the three others under the points where the branches branch off. I believe that is correct. Figure 2 shows the fourth knob sitting closer to the base, and a fifth one – if one wants to interpret it that way – under the lamp; that would be one too much. Also, the side branches do not show the required number of three knobs.
- Just to state this again, the Hebrew text does not say anything about the design of the base of the lampstand. While some models might draw on historical data more than others, all illustrations are more or less speculative. Because we know so little, I would be hesitant to show an elaborate design of the base.

Illustrations

The UBS *Handbook*, at Exod. 25:31/33, offers a drawing of the lampstand and one of almond flowers. The one for the lampstand is not the most beautiful, but it shows the various parts of the lampstand in the right positions.

Except, the third and the fourth cup on the stem (at the bottom) seem to be merged; also, the fourth one is shown larger than the other ones. The Hebrew text does not say anything about their size.

The UBS *Realia Handbook*, on p. 246, in § 4.3.4 Lampstand, menorah, offers a drawing which is different from the one in the Exodus Handbook.]

The pictures show tiny flowers only at the top, and on the branches only buds/knobs. I find it more likely that they were all of the same shape; that is, each “cup” had a bud/knob/calyx and a flower.

The design of the top part with the cups being “stacked” I do not find to be a representation that is very likely either.

The next pictures below show the menora of the *Temple Institute*.



Figure 2a: Golden menorah in the Jewish Quarter, Jerusalem⁶

⁶ Edmund Gall, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 2b: Golden menorah in the Jewish Quarter, Jerusalem⁷

The website says:⁸

The menorah which stands today in Jerusalem's old city Jewish Quarter, overlooking the Temple Mount, is the work of the Temple Institute. ... The menorah was painstakingly crafted after years of extensive research by the Temple Institute's full time staff of researchers.

However, it is not clear to me which element in the object is supposed to match which element in the text (cups, calyxes and flowers).

The website also addresses the question whether the branches were straight or curved. It says: “While many of our sages are of the opinion that the six branches are rounded, there is a minority of sages who opine that the six branches are straight” (cf. pictures on the website).⁹

Below, I add a picture of the Menorah that stands before the Knesset.



Figure 3: Knesset Menorah¹⁰

⁷ zeevvez from Jerusalem, Israel, CC BY 2.0
<<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

⁸ <https://templeinstitute.org/history-holy-temple-menorah/>.

⁹ For the latter view, cf. WSB.

¹⁰ Benno Elkan (photo by Deror avi), CC BY-SA 3.0
<<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

This object is well-known, but it is not one that can serve as a model that attempts to follow the description in the text closely.

Finally, here is a model from an independent website:¹¹



Figure 4: The Menora

I find this to be the most helpful model to go by.

Except, I suppose that the bottom-most flower-like “cup” through which the stem runs would sit right under the spot where the lowest pair of branches are attached to the stem.

Also, although the text does not say so explicitly, it is fairly obvious that the top “flowers” serve as receptacles onto which the lamps are placed.¹² I would therefore show them all right under the lamps.

A similar arrangement can also be seen in a picture on another website.¹³

Commentaries (*in chronological order*)

Jacob (1940 / Calwer Verlag 1997)

Cassuto (1951 / Hebrew University 1997) p. 342

Durham (WBC, 1987)

Sarna (JPSTC, 1991) pp. 164-165

Bräumer (Wuppertaler Studienbibel (WSB), 1996)

UBS *Handbook* (Osborn and Hatton, 1999)

Houtman (HCOT, 2000), pp. 405-406

Stuart (NAC, 2006), p. 578

Carpenter (EEC, 2016)

¹¹ <https://menora-bibel.jimdofree.com/>. The website also offers a large collection of historical pictures of the Menorah, <https://menorah-bible.jimdofree.com/english/ancient-menorahs/>. ©: A PDF file which contains this kind of picture is freely available for download.

¹² So also Cassuto and Durham.

¹³ <https://hochschul-bibelkreise.de/>, under menu item “Bibelkreis/Artikel/Stiftshütte” (accessed Nov. 2025).