

Jewish Religious Architecture

From Biblical Israel to Modern Judaism

Edited by

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Introduction

Steven Fine

For almost two hundred years the history of the Jews has been a history of texts and social movements, ideas and persecutions and un-persecutions. From Isaak Markus Jost to Heinrich Graetz, Benzion Dinur, Cecil Roth, Salo W. Baron, H.H. Ben Sasson and recently David Biale,¹ the narratives of the Jewish past have been written thickly, with deep significance first and foremost for the Jewish communities for whom these histories were created. These were the diachronic histories of Jewish past greatness, tools of Emancipation, Americanization and national liberation. They were pro-ecclesiastical and anti-ecclesiastical, communal and national – sometimes all at once. They are as long as Jewish memory – looking back to the Bronze age and forward to our own days. The sweep is breathtaking. Whether “imagined” or not, Jewish memory – whether written in the garb of modern historicism or in pre-modern genres, is thick – and for its creator-communities, deeply meaningful.²

A second narrative tradition, while less apparently monumental, followed the development of literary genre and was actualized in the assembly of great libraries. Scholarship began with Leopold Zunz’s diachronic histories of Jewish homiletical traditions (*midrash*), prayer and liturgical poetry (*piyyut*) to Ismar Elbogen’s expansive history of Jewish prayer and Gershom Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.³ Jewish “visual culture,” the “stuff” and “things” of

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- 1 The literature on the history of Jewish scholarship is now vast. See especially, Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1994); Michael A. Meyer, *Judaism Within Modernity: Essays on Jewish History and Religion* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001); David N. Myers, *Re-inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), David J. Engel, *Historians of the Jews and the Holocaust* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2010); David Biale, *Cultures of the Jews: A New History* (New York: Schocken Books, 2006), xvii–xxxiii.
 - 2 Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982, 2nd. ed; 1996) and the comments of Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), esp. 10–11. See my discussion of the approaches of each in *The Menorah: From the Bible to Modern Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 251–252.
 - 3 Leopold Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden, historisch entwickelt: Ein Beitrag zur Alterthumskunde und biblischsn Kritik, zur Literatur- und Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin: A. Asher, 1832); idem, *Literaturgeschichte Der Synagogalen Poesie* (Berlin: A. Cohen, 1876); Ismar Elbogen, *Studien Zur Geschichte Des Jüdischen Gottesdienstes* (Berlin: Mayer & Müller, 1907); Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946).

the Jewish past, have generally been left out of these discussions. As in general history, Text ruled supreme. Based upon Protestant formulations that most modern European Jews adopted, Judaism was categorized as “the most un-iconic (indeed anti-iconic) of religions,” and so the materiality of Jewish life was not even considered by most historians.⁴ This was certainly the case of the generally Germanophone scholars who created Jewish history in the shadow of an equally text-centered European historicist movement.

A second approach was developed in Austria-Hungary, an empire that encouraged Jewish embodiment as an ethnicity, by the legendary Budapest-based David Kaufmann and his students Ludwig Blau and Samuel Krauss.⁵ Numerous scholars focused upon Jewish architecture within specific historical periods and cultures. Notable are the foundational work of archaeologists Heinrich Kohl, Carl Watzinger (1916)⁶ and E.L. Sukenik, on ancient synagogues⁷ and architectural historian Richard Krautheimer’s *Mittelalterliche Synagogen* (1927).⁸ Russian-born Jewish architectural historian Rachel Wischnitzer’s *European Synagogue Architecture* (1965)⁹ is nothing less than a paean to a lost tradition, a requiem and monument to a world decimated a short time before. Her earlier *Synagogue Architecture in the United States* (1955),¹⁰ by contrast, was an exploration of Wischnitzer’s adopted homeland, reflecting the hopeful Americanization of a thoroughly Continental scholar.

Twentieth-century histories of “Jewish art,” fully integrated Jewish architecture. They invariably opened with apologetics, arguing against notions that “Jews don’t do art,” and then set out to prove the opposite. This is evident in Ernst Cohn-Wiener’s pioneering 1929 volume, *Die jüdische Kunst, ihre*

4 Jaś Elsner, *Imperial Roman and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100–450* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 215. On the history of this conception and its implications, see: Kalman Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Margaret Olin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), and Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology*, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, rev. ed., 2010).

5 See my most recent discussion, “Lernen To See: ‘Modernity,’ Torah and the Study of Jewish ‘Art,’” *Milín Havivin* 7 (2013–2014), 24–35, and the bibliography there.

6 Heinrich Kohl and Carl Watzinger, *Antike Synagogen in Palästina* (Leipzig: Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlg, 1916).

7 E.g. E.L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece*. (London: Pub. for the British Academy by H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1934).

8 Berlin: Frankfurter Verlags-Anstalt, 1927

9 Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1965, hereafter Wischnitzer, *European Synagogues*.

10 Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1955, hereafter Wischnitzer, *United States*.

*Geschichte von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*¹¹ as it is in Cecil Roth's chronological anthology *Jewish Art: An Illustrated History* (with Zusia Ephron, Hebrew: 1958; English: 1961).¹² This volume reconstituted the pre-War community of European Jewish art scholars, now mostly living in the United States and Israel, in a continuous narrative that stretches from the Bible to the School of Paris to modern Kibbutz planning. "Jewishness" is imagined in religious and national terms, without apparent need for explanation. It is a national history, designed for a new nation – in many ways presenting the sweep that became the exhibition narratives embodied by both the then Bezalel National Museum of Mordecai Narkiss and the Jewish Museum/New York of Stephen S. Kayser in a single volume.¹³ In fact, a decade later, the new Israel Museum paralleled the open-ended Jewish/Israeli civil religion of Roth's *Jewish Art*.¹⁴ For three generations, this book served as the "bible" of Jewish art study, and in some ways, it still does. In many respects, it is a cross-over volume, created by a major historian of the Jews – from Abraham to Zionism, whose earlier narrative histories never included the physical side of Jewish life. Through this anthology, Roth, the Oxford don and avid collector of "Jewish art" (his collection is now at Beth Tzedec Congregation in Toronto¹⁵) clearly sought the integration of "things" into the Jewish historical narrative and not just as decorations. His inspiration can be felt on every page of the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1972), which he conceived and edited – a veritable repository of Jewish visual culture of all periods and places.¹⁶

The first general historical "survey" of Jewish history to integrate Jewish visual culture into its very sinews was David Biale's 2002 edited volume, *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*. Biale's interest in the "things" of Jewish history is

11 Berlin: Martin Wasservogel Verlag, 1929.

12 Tel Aviv: Masada, Hebrew: 1958; English: 1961.

13 On Kayser and the Jewish Museum, Julie Miller and Richard I. Cohen, "A Collision of Cultures: The Jewish Museum and the Jewish Theological Seminary, 1904–1971," *Tradition Renewed: a History of the Jewish Theological Seminary*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997), 2: 311–361; Grace C. Grossman, "Stephen S. Kayser in Los Angeles: A Personal Memoir," *A Crown for a King: Studies in Jewish art, History, and Archaeology in Memory of Stephen S. Kayser*, eds. Shalom Sabar, Steven Fine, William M. Kramer (Berkeley: Magnes Museum and Jerusalem: Gefen, 1997), 1–21. On Narkiss, Gilit Ivgy, *Beit Hanakhot "Bezalel" be-Nihul Mordecai Narkiss ke-Muzeon Leumi 1925–1957*, MA thesis (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2009), Hebrew.

14 Karl Katz, P.P. Kahane, and Magen Broshi. *From the Beginning: Archaeology and Art in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968).

15 <https://www.beth-tzedec.org/page/museum>.

16 Jerusalem: Keter, 1972. On Roth's contribution, see the comments of Yitzhak Rischin, 1: before page 1, and p. 5.

part of a new and welcome larger trend in the academy. As the title suggests, Biale's "cultural history" is best characterized as an un-narrative or even "anti-narrative." It presents multiple Jewish cultures, multiple Jewish paths – a very popular open-end approach among American Jews of this time. Jewish visual culture serves for Biale, as it does many newcomers to visual culture studies, as a somewhat univocal alternative voice – in some ways reflecting the anti-clerical approach to the Jewish past that was essential to American Jewish scholarship of our own *fin de siècle* – the late twentieth century and first decades of twenty-first. More broadly an anthology of "Jewish cultures" over time than a conventional thesis-driven history, this work presents as many passageways as a Peter Eisenman building of the same era, its angles asymmetrical and its hallways sometimes ending abruptly.¹⁷

Jewish Religious Architecture builds on the traditions of earlier histories of Jewish culture, from Zunz to Wischnitzer and Roth in its stress on the development of a particular genre of evidence over time and place. With them, it asserts without apology continuity across Jewish history from the Bible to the present, construing architecture as an indicator and unifying factor in this long development. We are enriched by broad scholarship on Jewish visual culture, and particularly architecture, over the past century. Long on important articles, text editions, archaeological publications, exhibitions, monographic studies, and canon-construction through the *Bezalel Narkiss Index of Jewish Art*,¹⁸ few attempts at synthetic presentation over time has been attempted beyond an expanded edition of Roth published by Narkiss in 1971.¹⁹ Particularly notable as synthetic statements in terms of architecture are Carol H. Krinsky's *Synagogues of Europe: Architecture, History, Meaning* (1996),²⁰ the various essays that make up Gabrielle Sed Rajna's compendium, *Jewish Art* (1997) and Dominique Jarrassé's monograph *Synagogues: Architecture and Jewish Identity* (2001).²¹ Studies of the Jerusalem temples and the "Temple Mount" have been rather intense, especially since the Six Day War of 1967. The most significant statement of recent research is the collection edited by

17 Peter Eisenman, and Cynthia C. Davidson, *Tracing Eisenman: Peter Eisenman Complete Works* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006).

18 <http://cja.huji.ac.il/browser.php>.

19 London: Valentine and Mitchell, 1971. See also Franz Landsberger, *A History of Jewish Art* (Cincinnati: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1946).

20 Mineola, NY: Dover, 1996.

21 New York: Abrams, 1997, and my review of this latter volume, H-Judaic (August, 1999), <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28655/reviews/30616/fine-sed-rajna-jewish-art>.

Oleg Grabar and B.Z. Kedar, *Where Heaven and Earth Meet: Jerusalem's Sacred Esplanade* (2010).²²

My contention as editor of this volume is that Jewish architecture serves as a connecting thread across the nearly three thousand years explored here. At the same time, and with Roth and Biale, this volume is a partially integrated anthology, each article reflecting the unique voice and imprint of each author and field that is represented. Unlike Zunz or Roth or Sed-Rajna, we make no attempt to be all inclusive, and some overlap is inevitable. Rather, the goal throughout has been to be generally representative of Jewish religious architecture and its place both in the history of Judaism and within the larger cultures of which Jews were a part. Continuities across time and space are given voice, but never at the expense of the distinctly local. The overwhelming conceptual significance of the biblical tabernacle and the Jerusalem Temples connects many of the articles, and the formative role of the late antique synagogue and the writings of the Talmudic and medieval rabbis can be felt in later, local variations on the theme from Cochin to San Francisco, Berlin to Rome and Jerusalem. Is this volume a comprehensive narrative of Jewish religious architecture? Absolutely not. There is so much more is left to say! It is, I hope, a useful statement of many ways that Jewish religious tradition has been expressed in brick and mortar and wood, in stone and word and spirit, over a very, very long time – and ways that leading scholars of our generation – social historians, cultural historians, art historians, archaeologists and philologists – look back on these millennia of development.

This volume began its life a decade ago as a section of the *Cambridge History of World Religious Architecture*, under the general editorship of architectural historian Richard Etlin. An ambitious (perhaps too ambitious) undertaking, this massive project stretched from the architecture of Christian sacred space to the architectural glories of Islam, to Indian religion and East Asia. A splendid and embracing idea, Richard enthusiastically read and helped each article “speak” to the others. In the Jewish case, I made the unconventional decision to contrast the relatively small Jewish tradition with the larger traditions of European and Asian sacred architecture by emphasizing both buildings that exist and those that do not, embracing the fragility and continuities of Jewish life through both the permanent and the passing. Thus, this volume begins with structures that exist only in memory – the tabernacle in the desert, the Solomonic Temple and the “Temple of Herod” and concludes with the most

22 Grabar, Oleg, and B.Z. Kedar. *Where Heaven and Earth Meet: Jerusalem's Sacred Esplanade* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010). See also S. Fine, ed. *The Temple of Jerusalem: From Moses to the Messiah, In Honor of Professor Louis H. Feldman* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

ephemeral architecture of all – the *Sukkah*, the temporary booth dwelling of the festival of tabernacles, and the *Eruv* – a small, thin and conceptual string used to create Jewish Sabbath community that has been valorized in recent scholarship and exhibition. Along the way, scholars explore varied and deep traditions of the synagogue, the whole expressing both the shared and the specific lenses of each time and place.