

Postscript

Reflections after Twenty Years

THIS HOLY PLACE WAS a step in a journey that began in my teen years and has continued ever since.¹ It reflects learning that commenced even before I entered the university and that continued as I—then a nice third-generation American Jewish boy from a San Diego suburb—trekked through the history of religions, art history, and Jewish history, stopping off, by and by, at the University of California, Santa Barbara, the University of Southern California, UCLA, various *yeshivot*, and (more than once) the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Like many dissertation books, it is a palimpsest, reflecting the breadth of my academic experiences to that point. It also contains within it themes, issues, and subjects that I have continued to think about since. This trek reflects both my abiding curiosity as a historian and my personal search for meaning in the texts, artifacts, and approaches that I have encountered along the way. It is fair to say that *This Holy Place* has been with me from project to project, and from book to book.

Thinking about this research during the years that followed the publication of *This Holy Place*, I took the unusual (but not unheard of) step of

1. Many thanks to Joseph Angel, Jonathan Dauber, Vukan Marinković, and Ronnie Perelis for their insightful comments on this essay.

responding to its weaknesses in my second book, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* (Cambridge University Press, 2005; rev. ed., 2010). There I set out—in part—to expand upon many of the methodological issues of *This Holy Place* that I felt had been unresolved. My comments concluded the final section, “Reading Holistically: Art and the Liturgy of Late Antique Synagogues”:

Completing *This Holy Place*, I was left with the overwhelming sense that something was missing—that there was more to say, yet I did not know how to say it. This becomes painfully clear in my discussion of zodiac mosaics, where I frankly admitted that “I can think of no reason why this image in itself is holy . . .”² A decade after I penned these words, I look back upon them with the horror of a (more) mature scholar reading the work of a doctoral student. In defining synagogue sanctity, my approach was far too tied to the ways that late antique Jews might have verbalized this notion (that is, to “philology”) and not focused enough upon the broader phenomenon. The zodiac and all the other imagery within synagogues did indeed form a single matrix, expressed in the notion of “holy place.” Together with the Torah shrine, Temple imagery, inscriptions that often only Jews could read that praise donors through liturgically based formulae (and at Rehov, instructed Jews how to live a sacred life), and the blatantly secular motifs decorating virtually all synagogue remains, the zodiac was (or at least, became) a projection of conceptions that are central to the “holy people” and its “holy Torah” (particularly in a “Holy Land” increasingly populated and controlled by Bible-reading colonialists). The synagogue was the place where this content was expressed and acted out, where the value concept (to borrow a term from Max Kadushin³) of *qedushah*, holiness, a central organizing principle of Jewish practice and belief, was given liturgical life. Every element of this “set” worked with every other to facilitate the notion of a synagogue as a “holy place”—an alternate and distinctly Jewish space. This is a sloppy definition, one for which earlier scholarship on the synagogue—and my own training—were ill prepared. It is, however, a most human

2. Fine, *This Holy Place*, 124.

3. Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1952), 167–93, and Kadushin, *Worship and Ethics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963), 216–34.

definition. Constructed in three and not two dimensions, my current approach does not assume a consecutive and authoritative narrative but a flowing notion of sanctity that flexed across categories and was never static—even as it coagulated in different ways within the bounds of the generally shared common Judaism as it developed through the very long period covered in this study. Kadushin’s fluid notion of the value concept well describes the many themes and impulses that led to the construction, decoration, and maintenance of distinctly Jewish “holy places” throughout the Roman and Sasanian Empires.⁴

It has been more than a decade since I wrote this critique of my own work and nearly twenty years since *This Holy Place* went to press. I will refrain here from adding yet another level of reflection and mention only a few developments that affect the reception of this study.⁵ The first-century Magdala synagogue, with its iconographically significant carved ashlar, may be of some significance. This stone bears the image of a large menorah, likely resting atop a square base.⁶ This object—whatever its original purpose—supports my claim in *This Holy Place* that “the extant evidence [for synagogue holiness during the latter Second Temple period] stems from marginal groups within Jewish society of the time, the defenders of Masada, the Qumran sectarians, and Philo’s Essene. There is no evidence to suggest that these phenomena were prevalent among wider segments of Jewish society, though that may be a factor of our sources and not representative of historical reality.”⁷ The menorah from Magdala suggests an interest in Temple themes within a nonsectarian context. For sheer ingenuity, the life-size first-century synagogue model at Nazareth Village and the stone-by-stone reconstruction of the late antique Umm el-Qanatir synagogue, especially the Torah shrine, deserve special mention. Each

4. Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, 209–11.

5. *Art and Judaism*, xv–xxii, and *Art, History and the Historiography of Judaism in Roman Antiquity* (Boston: Brill, 2013), 1–19.

6. See my essay “The Magdala Ashlar: From Synagogue Furnishing to Media Event,” in *Symposium: Constructing and Deconstructing Jewish Art*, ed. Ilia Rodov, Mirjam Rajner, and Sara Offenberg (forthcoming).

7. Fine, *This Holy Place*, 33.

conveys a taste of being “inside” an ancient synagogue environment, an experience that I have striven for throughout my career.⁸

In recent years, I had imagined that I had (finally) moved on from *This Holy Place*—until just recently when a Yeshiva University doctoral student, participating in my historiography seminar, brought me back to it again. In that course, I asked each student to choose one historian, read all of her or his oeuvre, do archival research, and explore the relationships between the published work, archival sources, and the time in which this work was carried out. With quite a bit of chutzpah, Vukan Marinković, a student of Jewish thought and not of ancient Judaism, asked to write about . . . *me*. I laughingly agreed, gave him access to my files, and was fascinated with the result. Marinković focused his analysis on *This Holy Place*. His study hit on a point that I had long ago put aside—and nearly forgotten. Marinković argued that a main argument of my book was not directed exclusively to the Jewish history/ancient Judaism/late antiquity conversation—though it was certainly most at home there and caused some ripples. Marinković adduced, correctly, that my main argument was with the basic structures of the history of religions as then practiced—a direct response to Mircea Eliade and his foundational volume, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959). Marinković perceptively argued that Eliade, and the history of religions broadly, was at the core of my project (and in many ways still is).

This Holy Place was indeed a kind of return to Eliade, to my *gersa dayanquta* (as the ancient rabbis called it), to my earliest university studies. I encountered him in the fall of 1976 in a freshman introduction to religious studies course at the University of California, Santa Barbara. It was, I now know, a best books course—not of religious traditions, as I had expected, but of religious phenomenology. Readings ranged from John G. Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (1932) to Carlos Castaneda’s *Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1968); to theoretical classics like William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and Eliade’s *Sacred and the Profane*. All of this was common fare in religious studies at UCSB, where the spirit of Eliade’s “Chicago School” predominated⁹

8. On Nazareth Village, see Joel Kauffman, *The Nazareth Jesus Knew* (Nazareth: Nazareth Village, 2005); on Umm el-Qanatir, see Chaim Ben-David, “Um el-Kanatir: Putting Humpty Dumpty Back Together Again,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 42 (2016), 40–49.

9. For a generally affirmative presentation of these scholars by an Eliade student, see

and Joseph Campbell, with his associations with the nascent Pacifica Graduate Institute and the Esalen Institute to the north in Big Sur,¹⁰ was in the air. A famously individualistic, experimental, and “secular” religious culture predominated. Of all the readings in that course, Eliade’s volume was most significant to my development. In Eliade I found a theory of “sacred place” that seemingly explained a phenomenon that had long attracted me. His theory of *hierophany*, of divine intervention in space, creating a unique and eternal *axis mundi*, seemed to explain the religious significance of the Jerusalem Temple in broad and universal terms.

I was smitten, and the cultural environment, both within the university and beyond, reinforced my admiration. Eliade’s approach fit well with a work that I had studied intensely while in high school, Erwin R. Goodenough’s thirteen-volume *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (1953–68), with its seemingly authoritative and, again, comparative approach. Relying upon a kind of Jungian interpretation of archaeological remains, Goodenough’s magnum claimed to discover a “mystical Judaism” that was at odds with the religion of the ancient rabbis (whose literature, it turned out, he could not read without the mediation of translation and modern interpreters). Little did I know that a third “hero” of my college education, the venerable doyen of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem,¹¹ was also part of a scholarly collegium known as the Eranos circle that met yearly in Ascona, Switzerland, a group that was convened by Carl Gustav Jung.¹² Eliade, Goodenough, and Camp-

Robert S. Ellwood, *The Politics of Myth: A Study of C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999). This should be read in conjunction with Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) and Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade: From Magic to Myth* (New York: P. Lang, 2014).

10. On Campbell and Esalen, see Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 188–92. See also “Joseph Campbell and Pacifica Graduate Institute,” <http://www.pacifica.edu/joseph-campbell-at-pacifica>.

11. For my experience of Scholem while at UCSB, see my “Review of Gershom Scholem, *Magen David: Toldotav shel Semel* (*The Star of David: History of a Symbol*), ed. A. Shapira, tr. and ed. G. Hazan-Rokem (Ein Harod: Mishkan Le-Omanut, 2008), Hebrew,” *Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture* 5 (2011) 128–30.

12. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*. See now: Noam Zadoff, *From Berlin to Jerusalem and Back: Gershom Scholem between Israel and Germany* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2015), 294–331, Hebrew.

bell were also members of this group. It was dedicated—each “mythologist” in his own way—to uncovering and foregrounding the religious experience of the individual virtuoso, religion beyond authority structures, and universal experience. Little did I know that under the eucalyptus trees and blue skies of Santa Barbara, I was an inductee to a modern mystery religion of its own making—in an environment that reinforced and was supported by the larger (unstated) tenants of this new religion.

My infatuation with this culture began its slow descent soon after I landed at Lod Airport near Tel Aviv to begin my junior year of study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1977–78). These were the glory years of the Hebrew University, and I was fortunate to study with the best—folklorist Dov Noy, historian Isaiah Gafni, historical geographer Yehoshua Ben Arie, art historian Bezalel Narkiss, city planner Israel Kimhi, and many others. Perhaps most importantly, I spent the year as an intern (and assistant to Professor Narkiss) in the Department of Judaica of the Israel Museum, my charge from curator Chaya Benjamin being to “touch and get to know every object in the collection.” I studied artifacts and texts, art, archaeology, Talmud and Midrash, learning to focus on the small before asking the kinds of big questions that had dominated my earlier education. Each of these scholars influenced me profoundly, slowly convincing me that great history is in the details and that what we call today “micro-history” must proceed—and never follow after—macro-theories.

My MA studies in art history (at USC, especially my engagement with Pratapaditya Pal) and much of my doctoral program (under the mentorship of Amos Funkenstein at UCLA, then in Jerusalem with Lee Levine and Lawrence Schiffman) were spent working out my early fascination with the “big ideas” of the history of religions and my love of philology (particularly of rabbinic literature), close reading, artifacts—and most of all, the real people whom I had taken it upon myself to “find” between the manuscripts and rocks that are all that now remain of Jews in the Greco-Roman world. In my dissertation, the base text for *This Holy Place*, I returned to Eliade, this time hoping to avoid the pitfalls of overgeneralization and “phenomenology,” yet hoping to maintain the sense of largeness and experience that I so appreciated in his work. As a beginning academic, I was (naively) astonished that Eliade’s “phenomenology of religion” left no place for synagogues, churches, and mosques as holy places, even though late antique synagogues, the topic of my interest, were labeled

explicitly as “holy places” in their inscriptions and in literary sources. How could a synagogue be holy to ancient Jews but not to the modern master of spatial sanctity? I was aware that a wholesale re-evaluation of Eliade was underway in the American academy, both within religious studies (by Jonathan Z. Smith and others) and beyond. It was time to respond, I thought, from within Jewish studies.

I engaged the then-recent scholarship of Peter Brown, with his emphasis upon the “sacred” in late antiquity, the still new anthropological turn of history later associated with Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner, and the liturgically focused art history of Thomas Matthews.¹³ I hoped to explain the “sanctity” of the synagogue from the inside out, rather than imposing theory on my subjects. With Brown, I adopted a synthetic discourse, positing a “Jewish koine” that paralleled both his late antique “Christian koine” and the “common Judaism” that E. P. Sanders sees in the various Jewish expressions known from Jewish texts of the Second Temple period. I particularly appreciated Brown’s often exuberant regard for his subjects, which I sought to emulate. Taking on this approach, I was responding directly to Goodenough’s sectarianization—even marginalization—of the ancient rabbis, a notion promoted actively by his younger colleague, the Scholem acolyte Morton Smith, and in differing though recognizable ways by Smith’s students. This approach was then widespread among American scholars of ancient Judaism. After my experience with a rather totalizing (and often anti-clerical) history of religions, I was not convinced. At the urging of my advisors, I left this issue for my next book.

I explored the thought of Erwin Goodenough, Morton Smith, and Smith’s students in great detail in *Art and Judaism*, laying out for the first time the intellectual and communal roots of their project.¹⁴ It was only as Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) was reaching the apex of popularity (and my students were asking me questions based on the novel), however, that I reluctantly returned to

13. See my *Art, History and the Historiography of Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, 5–16. What I did not recognize there, however, was my continuing engagement with the “Chicago School.”

14. Gershom Scholem and Morton Smith, *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem, Correspondence 1945–1982*, ed. and introduced by Guy G. Stroumsa. (Leiden: Brill, 2008). Scholem evaluated the Eranos phenomenon in a letter to Smith dated December 30, 1950 (pp. 50–51).

reread Eliade, his students, and his fellow travelers.¹⁵ I was not surprised when Brown identified Campbell as a major influence, nor that George Lucas had forged a strong bond with him through his *Star Wars* trilogy (1977–83). I revisited questions of symbols as interpreted by historians of religion and lectured widely as a real live “symbologist” (a term devised by Brown to describe the professor-hero of his novel).¹⁶ My newest book, *The Menorah: From the Bible to Modern Israel* (Harvard University Press, 2016), explores this preeminent Jewish “symbol” not through the essentializing lenses of Jung, Goodenough, Eliade, Campbell, and the like but as an actual historical phenomenon. Few scholars take the theses developed by these mid-century thinkers seriously anymore—except as examples of mid-century thinking. The legacies of Eliade, Campbell, and Jung are further tainted by their rightist—in Eliade’s case, nearly fascist—associations and by predilections against Jews and Judaism (they didn’t much like Christianity either!). In general, scholarship has developed less explicitly globalizing approaches—often, alas, choosing the. In the “big world,” however—from *Star Wars* to *The Da Vinci Code*—Jung, Eliade, and (most of all) Campbell are alive, well, and meaningful. In a real sense, *The Menorah* forms a continuum with *This Holy Place*, being yet another response to the big and diachronic questions raised by these now troubling scholars and the implications of their approaches for contemporary culture. Once again, I begin by mulling over their questions, though I provide very different historically, philologically, and art historically grounded answers. Still, my framing of both *The Menorah* and this short essay

15. Regarding my reluctance, see my review of *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison*, by Lindsay Jones, *Religion* 34 (2004) 253–56. See “Dan Brown: By the Book,” *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, June 23, 2012, 8. On Lucas and Campbell, see, for example, Joseph Campbell, *The Hero’s Journey: The World of Joseph Campbell*; *Joseph Campbell on His Life and Work*, ed. Phil Cousineau (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

16. In a related development, see my 2007 comments on the Society for Biblical Literature’s website, “Concerning the Jesus Family Tomb,” *SBL Forum*, <http://sbl-site.org/article.aspx?articleid=655>. There I refer to the “Da Vinci codification” of our culture. More recently, see my *Art, History and the Historiography of Judaism in Roman Antiquity*, 160–80. See also the comments of Ariel Sabar, “The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus’s Wife,” *The Atlantic*, July/August 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/07/the-unbelievable-tale-of-jesus-wife/485573/>. I return to this theme in “The Magdala Ashlar: From Synagogue Furnishing to Media Event.”

as a personal “trek” is largely beholden to these authors, for whom such “heroic” personal journeys are central to religious experience.

I am thrilled that *This Holy Place* is again in print, nearly twenty years since its original publication. I invite you to join me on the path that leads through it on my search of the holy, the tactile, and the deeply human in the Jewish historical experience.

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