

Judaism from Moses
to Muhammad:
An Interpretation

Turning Points and Focal Points

Edited by
Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green, and
Alan J. Avery-Peck



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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ANCIENT SYNAGOGUE: PUBLIC SPACE IN JUDAISM

MORDECHAI AVIAM AND WILLIAM SCOTT GREEN

It is impossible to imagine ancient Judaism without the synagogue. After the Temple in Jerusalem was lost for good, the synagogue became the quintessential and defining institution of the Jewish religion. It has remained so without interruption until the present moment. Scholars argue about the synagogue's geographic, architectural, and ethnic origin: Did it emerge in the Land of Israel or the Diaspora? Is it a Jewish invention or a modified pagan structure? The answers to these questions—even if we could ever discern them—would be interesting but unilluminating. Knowing the initial location of the pieces on a chess board does not help us understand the game that follows. The synagogue matters because of its role in the preservation and transmission of Judaism over time. It is often supposed that the synagogue changed Judaism by making it democratic and communal. An equally important question is how the synagogue reflects Judaism and exposes its nature and character. The synagogue could not have persisted if it were inauthentic to Judaism as a religious system. This chapter, therefore, focuses on what the synagogue reveals about the structure and values of Judaism in antiquity.

In his compendious overview of the ancient synagogue, Lee I. Levine claims that the synagogue is “one of the unique and innovative institutions of antiquity” and that four traits mark its distinctiveness. As opposed to the Jerusalem Temple, the synagogue was a “universal” institution but always under local control; had an open leadership; fostered congregational participation; and was a place of worship.¹ Levine's synthetic judgments help to define the problematic of this chapter:

¹ Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 1–2.

First crystallized in the course of the Second Temple period, the synagogue was the communal center of each Jewish settlement, the Jewish public building par excellence. During late antiquity, however, while maintaining its status as a communal center, the synagogue began to acquire an enhanced measure of sanctity. Its liturgy expanded enormously, and its main hall assumed a dimension of holiness.²

The synagogue, more than any other Jewish institution of antiquity, demonstrates a fascinating synthesis of Jewish and non-Jewish elements within a single framework.³

It makes little difference whether the discussion has focused on the nomenclature of the synagogue, officials, architecture, art, inscriptions, or liturgy: in each and every one of these areas the ancient synagogue reflects a kaleidoscope of styles, shapes, customs, and functions . . .⁴

In Levine's description, variability and inconstancy mark the synagogue in antiquity. Over time and from place to place, the synagogue's core mission shifted from a multipurpose community center to a locus of sanctity. Even within a single temporal period or geographical region, the synagogue's physical and decorative characteristics could exhibit an unusual range. Levine's description, therefore, yields a conundrum. On the one hand, the synagogue was the Jews' core communal institution, the emblem of their collective life. Yet, for all its centrality and ubiquity, the synagogue exhibited stunning diversity in function, form, and style. Neither consistency of purpose over time nor uniformity of style within a single time or place defines the ancient synagogue. Anywhere and everywhere, it was never the same.

This picture raises interesting and provocative questions about the character of Judaism in antiquity.

An established theory of religion holds that religions typically exhibit an integrated conception of story and behavior, time and space. In his now classic formulation, Mircea Eliade claimed that religions have a conception of "sacred space," a location qualitatively different from others, in which practitioners re-encounter the religion's fundamental theophany. Sacred space provides a physical and, therefore, existential grounding, a secure foundation that orients religious people in the world. Sacred mountains, holy cities, temples, and shrines are typical examples of this conception. Levine's description of the devel-

² *Ibid.*, 604.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

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opment of the ancient synagogue seems to make it a poor candidate for Eliade's thesis. How can an institution diverse in function and structure serve as a religion's "sacred space"? What in the nature of ancient Judaism made such variability possible?

To illustrate the diversity of the ancient synagogue, it will be useful to focus on two well known structures from two different periods and locations: Gamla, from the first century C.E. Golan Heights, and Hammat Tiberias, from the fourth century C.E. eastern lower Galilee. Examining these buildings in their archaeological and cultural contexts can help us understand the diversity that characterizes the ancient synagogue.

Gamla

Towards the end of the first century B.C.E., perhaps in the last years of Herod's reign, the Jewish community of Gamla, a town in the Golan, built a synagogue. The archaeological remains in the fill below the floor of the building fix the date of its establishment. These trenches yielded some second and first century B.C.E. coins, but the latest find is a fragment of an oil-lamp that dates to between the last quarter of the first century B.C.E. and the end of the first century C.E. The synagogue's location on the northeastern margin of the town also helps to explain the time of its construction. It must have come as a consequence of Gamla's expansion and development because the center of the town is already congested. To place a synagogue on Gamla's distant southern outskirts likely would have been inconvenient for the town's inhabitants. Since most people apparently entered and exited Gamla from the north, the synagogue's location in the northern outskirts was maximally convenient.⁵

Which elements of this building make it a synagogue? First, it comprises one coherent space of 16 × 20 meters, which yields an area of about 320 square meters. Tiered benches are located all around

⁵ James F. Strange, "Archaeology and Ancient Synagogues up to about 200 C.E.," in *The Ancient Synagogue From Its Origins until 200 C.E.* (ed. B. Olson and M. Zetterholm; Coniectanea Biblica, New Testament Series 39; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003), 37–62; on 51, Strange suggests that the synagogue at Gamla was part of a "municipal structure" because of its attachment to the city's wall. The excavations at Gamla, however, demonstrate that the wall was built after the synagogue's construction, in preparation for the war against the Romans.

the walls, including the short walls of the entrance's corridor (probably to enhance seating capacity). The inner elements of the building, mainly the benches and the pavers, are made of basalt ashlar. Four rows of basalt drum columns and four corner pillars (doubled with a heart-shaped section) supported the roof. The columns probably all carried simply cut Doric capitals. A fragment of an Ionic capital, as well as a fragment of a base decorated with meanders, were also found. Near the entrance, a large fragment of a lintel decorated with a rosette was found, similar in design to the complete lintel with rosettes and palm tree discovered on the surface in the south of the town. The area of this building is the only place in Gamla where decorated capitals and bases were found. In the northwest corner of the building, there is a square niche that probably was used to house the chest with the Torah scrolls. Near the main entrance, a large, public ritual bath (*mikve*) was built that collected water from the building's roof.

Besides the decorated lintel that adorned the door in the barely visible narrow corridor, the walls of the synagogue contained no other external decoration; except for the capitals and decorated bases, no other decorated stone element was found inside the building (What, if any, decorations in wood there were obviously is impossible to discern). It is very important to note that although some houses in the town's wealthy southern neighborhoods contained frescoed and stuccoed walls, no frescoes were found inside the synagogue. Scholars have long observed that the well designed and simply made synagogue interior, the arrangement of benches around all walls, and the location of the niche all suggest that the building's focus was its center.

Structures at six other first century sites—Jericho,⁶ Masada,⁷ Hero-

⁶ At Jericho, the excavator suggested that the building discovered on the east side of the Hasmonaean palace and dated to the first half of the first century B.C.E. is a synagogue that belonged to the neighborhood of the palace workers. It is a rectangular structure made of mud-bricks with benches along the walls (see E. Netzer, Y. Kalman, and R. Loris, "A Hasmonaean Period Synagogue at Jericho," *Qed.* 117 (1999): 17–24. On the eastern side, there is a small room with an unusual feature, a partially underground space, identified by the excavator as the room for the Torah scrolls and a *geniza*. In a nearby room there is a *mikve*.

⁷ The building at Masada was the first of the pre-70 period to be identified as a synagogue. It is a square building that was transformed from a room in the fortress wall used by Roman garrison as a stable into a synagogue by adding benches and a small room to house the Torah scrolls; see E. Netzer, *Masada III, The Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963–1965, Final Reports: The Buildings Israel Exploration Society and Hebrew University of Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, 1991), 402–13.

dium,⁸ Qumran,⁹ Qiryat Sefer,¹⁰ and Modi'in¹¹—exhibit archaeological traits similar to those at Gamla. James F. Strange explains:

These buildings organize the interior space in a similar manner, namely by nesting the walls, benches, aisles or walkways, columns, and the innermost rectangle of space. That is, the central space is a rectangular floor with no mosaic, but either simply a dirt floor or paved with plaster or squared paving stones. Columns surround this space on two and sometimes four sides . . . An aisle or walkway surrounds three or four sides of the internal rectangle of space. The walkway is always paved. Ranges of benches surround the aisles on two, three, or four sides. The benches nest against the walls. There may be one, two, or three or more benches arranged in ascending or descending ranks.¹²

A building recently excavated at Horvat 'Etri probably can be added to the list. It is dated from the second half of the first century to the first half of the second century C.E. and apparently was added to

⁸ At Herodium, on the border of the Hebron mountains and the Judaeen desert, the zealots transformed another Herodian hall into a synagogue by adding benches around the walls. An entrance to a small adjoining room was left to the north, but the entrance to the southern room was sealed. As Masada, it is dated to the second half of the first century C.E. See G. Foerster G. "The Synagogues of Masada and Herodium" *Encyclopedia 'Ivrit* 11:224–28 (Hebrew).

⁹ Levine, *Ancient Synagogue*, 63, also suggests identifying it as a synagogue.

¹⁰ Qiryat Sefer differs from most other locations because during the excavations, the entire village was excavated. It thus provides a comprehensive picture of the complex of a small, rural, Jewish community. Qiryat Sefer contains eight to nine large buildings, some ritual baths (*mikva'ot*), an olive press with a *mique*, and wine presses. At the center of this village there is a small public building with decorated elements, benches around the walls, and a small plastered room on the western side. See Y. Magen, Y. Zionit, and E. Sirkis, "Qiryat Sefer: A Jewish Village and Synagogue of the Second Temple Period," *Qad.* 117 (1999): 25–32.

¹¹ Recently, the excavations at Modi'in revealed portions of another village, larger than Qiryat Sefer (ca. 12 dunams), with a large building in its center. Although the excavators do not suggest that the early phase of the building, which dates to the Hasmonean period, is a synagogue, it is not implausible to do so, and they offer no alternative interpretation. The second phase of the building is a 13 × 10 m structure with two rows of four pillars each and a wide sitting bench along the walls; it is dated to the first half of the first century C.E. The third phase is from the second century, and new benches were built above the early wide one. See A. Onn, S. Wexler-Bdolah, Y. Rapuano, and T. Kanias, "Khirbet Umm el-Umdan," *HA* (2002): 114 (64*–68*).

¹² Strange, "Archaeology and Ancient Synagogues," p. 40. Curiously, Strange includes Capernaum on his list of Second-Temple period synagogues. The Franciscan excavators of this Byzantine period building date only the basalt foundations of the western wall and the basalt pavement east of it to the first century; they suggest that these are the remains of a first-century synagogue. None of the elements Strange mentions in his article exists in the first-century remains from Capernaum. Therefore, it cannot illustrate the building traits Strange identifies.

the village in the period between the two revolts. The building's plan resembles those mentioned above: a rectangular building, the largest in the village, and the sole structure in the village whose roof was supported by pillars decorated with capitals (found nearby). No benches were preserved at the building, but along part of the eastern wall are the remains of what seems to be the foundation of a bench.¹³ Identifying the building as a synagogue is, therefore, plausible.

The presence of benches in these buildings (perhaps excluding Horvat 'Etri) suggests they were designed to accommodate groups of people. The edifices on the list that are in villages¹⁴ can easily be distinguished as public buildings because they are the largest in their settlements. Moreover, unlike most of the other buildings in their locations, these structures exhibit some decoration, but it is restrained, modest, and limited in range: simple capitals (Gamla, Qiryat Sefer, Horvat 'Etri), a decorated lintel (Gamla, Qiryat Sefer), pieces of red fresco (Qiryat Sefer), or delicate white lime-plastered walls (Jericho, Masada). Five of the eight structures have an adjoining small room or niche. We shall return to this detail below.

Hammat Tiberias

About three hundred years after the construction of the synagogue at Gamla, Severus, a distinguished member of the Patriarchal court in Tiberias, decided to honor his hometown and community by refurbishing its century-old synagogue, which stood on the southern outskirts of the city of Hammat, near Tiberias. This synagogue was already decorated with a mosaic floor, which Severus replaced with a new floor, and its walls were decorated with frescoes of a floral design and inscriptions.¹⁵ In comparison to Gamla, two new essential components should be emphasized in this structure. The first is the use of a richly decorated, beautifully designed, and colorful mosaic pavement, made of three panels with scenes. At the entrance is a panel with Greek inscriptions flanked by two lions; in the center is a square panel containing a zodiac with Helios at its center and four female figures representing the four seasons in the corners; the last

¹³ B. Zisu and A. Canor, "Horvat 'Etri: the Ruins of a Second Temple Period Jewish Village on the Coastal Plane," *Qad.* 123 (2002): 18–28.

¹⁴ This would exclude Masada and Herodium. At Jericho, the excavator suggests that synagogue was part of the neighborhood of palace workers.

¹⁵ M. Dothan, *Hamath Tiberias: Early Synagogues* (Jerusalem, 1983), 22–26.

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panel, in front of the *bima*, contains a picture of the ark or the Temple, with menorahs and other Jewish symbols alongside it. Finally, there are more mosaic panels with geometric design, as well as some Greek and Aramaic inscriptions. The second new component is the raised platform against the wall facing Jerusalem, on which was placed the ark or niche, containing the Torah scrolls. The ark may have been modeled on its depiction at the bottom of the mosaic floor.

Although the exterior of this building was simple and bore no decoration, the interior was rich and elaborate with the mosaic floors mentioned above. No benches were found along the walls, suggesting that the synagogue used wooden seats.¹⁶ The visual focus for visitors to the building was no doubt the southern wall. Several factors support this suggestion. The southern wall contained the opulent Torah shrine, probably with one or two free-standing menorahs at its side. In addition, because the mosaic panels all face the north, the point of entry, they drew the worshippers' attention to the south. The entire structure and arrangement of the interior, therefore, inexorably draws the eye to the Torah shrine, which appears virtually as a sacred object.

In terms of their artistic and architectural components, the synagogues at Hammat Tiberius and Gamla barely resemble one another. The contrast between them illustrates a well established general shift in synagogue design from the Roman to Byzantine periods. From the first to the fourth centuries, the ancient synagogue underwent a major transition from a simple, plain hall lined with benches, often with an adjoining room or niche and a visual and aural focus on the building's center, to a large structure with artistically elaborate interiors, a fixed and ornate Torah niche or shrine, extensive use of figurative and pagan artforms, and a clear visual focus on the ark itself.

Archaeology demonstrates that the disparity in decoration and design that marks the synagogue in antiquity is not merely a function of changing times but also reflects divergent communal tastes and cultural values. Not only among geographical regions but, more significantly, within them, the synagogues from the third to seventh centuries C.E. could and did vary considerably in design, size, location, direction, and decoration. Levine trenchantly observes that the five contemporaneous sixth-century synagogues in the Bet She'an region differed from one another in architectural plan, art, and language. The buildings do not follow a consistent design, and their

¹⁶ There is no reason to believe that carpets covered the mosaics.

"range of artistic representation . . . is about as broad as one could imagine, from strictly conservative to strikingly liberal;"¹⁷ "The floors of these five contemporaneous Bet She'an synagogues demonstrate a wide diversity, ranging from the strictly aniconic on the one hand to elaborate representations of Jewish and non-Jewish figural motifs on the other."¹⁸ The community at Rehob avoided Greek and decorated its mosaic floor with halakic quotations from rabbinic literature. By contrast, the mosaic of the nearby Bet Alpha synagogue combines Judaic motifs with the a depiction of Helios at the center of the Zodiac.¹⁹ Although the fixed and increasingly elaborate Torah shrine or niche is a relatively standard feature of synagogues from the Byzantine period onward, both among and within regions, the Torah shrines also exhibit no uniformity in either size or decoration.²⁰ Contemporaneous synagogues in Galilee, such as Navorayah,²¹ Qazyon,²² and Horvat 'Ammudim,²³ and in the Hebron mountains, such as Susia,²⁴ exhibit the same persistent diversity.

¹⁷ Levine, *Ancient Synagogue*, 199-200.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 203.

²⁰ Eric M. Meyers, "The Torah Shrine in the Ancient Synagogue: Another Look at the Evidence," in *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction during the Greco-Roman Period* (ed. Steven Fine; London: Routledge, 1999), 201-23.

²¹ Contemporaneous with Severus' renovation of the synagogue at Hammath Tiberias, the community at the Upper Galilean village of Navorayah enlarged their synagogue (about 150 years old) by designing it as a basilica with two rows of 3 columns. Each column stood on a pedestal and was adorned by a simple capital. The main entrance faced south and was decorated with a wreath and a menorah in its center. Inside the building, alongside the main entrance, were decorated niches that housed the Torah scrolls. The lintel of one of these niches was discovered in secondary usage in the *bema* of the third phase of the building. It was decorated with a gable with a lion on each side and a conch in the center with a hole for a hanging lamp. The floor was probably made of stone pavers. See E. M. Meyers, J. F. Strange, and C. L. Meyers, "Preliminary Report on the 1981 Excavations at en-Nabratein, Israel," *BASOR* 246 (1982): 35-54.

²² The ruins of the ancient Jewish village of Qazyon are close to and north-east of Navorayah. On the banks of two partly artificial pools are the remains of what Aviam judges to be an ancient synagogue. The site is not yet excavated, but the remains show two rows of columns with pedestals along the western and northern outer walls of the building along with other architectural fragments. One of the entrances carried a lintel with a Greek inscription dedicating the synagogue to the Emperor Septimius Severus, his sons Caracalla and Geta, and his wife, Julia Domna, "by the vow of the Jews".

²³ In lower Galilee, at Horvat 'Ammudim, the synagogue is a long basilica building with three rows of columns arranged as a square with no bottom, with pedestals and ionic capitals. The lintel of the main door was decorated with two lions and a bull's head in between. The building had a colored mosaic floor, of which only a small part was preserved, with an Aramaic inscription. See L. I. Levine, "Excavations at Horvat ha Amudim," in *Ancient Synagogues Revisited* (ed. L. I. Levine; Jerusalem, 1981), 78-81.

²⁴ The synagogues in the Jewish villages of Hebron mountains, south of Jerusalem,

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The evidence reviewed above raises at least two basic questions. First, does the function of the synagogue appear as variable as it once did? Is it still reasonable to suppose that the synagogue may have initially served a basic secular purpose and only later was transformed into an institution with a primarily religious mission? Second, what in Judaism's morphology and values accounts for the extraordinary diversity of the synagogue structures and decoration? Let us take up these questions in order.

In his assessment of the first century synagogue in the Land of Israel, Levine draws a nuanced but explicit contrast between these early structures and the later synagogues. He writes:

The buildings themselves are neutral communal structures with no notable religious components—neither inscriptions, artistic representations, or the presence of a Torah shrine. The first century synagogue did not have the decidedly religious profile that it was to acquire by late antiquity.²⁵

In Levine's view, the absence of "notable religious components" means that the first century synagogues were "neutral," or served a general, unspecified communal function. This argument works backward from late antiquity and describes the first century buildings on the basis of what they lack in comparison to what came later. At best, this is an argument from silence, or, better, from absence. A reconsideration of evidence listed above—and a different way of thinking about it—can help reassess Levine's claim.

We noted above that eight Second Temple period public buildings (seven, if we exclude Horvat 'Etri) have been excavated in the Land of Israel. As we saw, although these structures differ in size and decoration, all but Horvat 'Etri exhibit two architectural features in common: columns in the center and tiered benches behind them along the inside walls. Archaeologists differ over whether or not these traits justify seeing the early synagogue as a distinctive type of building. Levine judges that these elements derive from "Greco-Roman architectural traditions"²⁶ to support his notion that the early synagogue lacked a "decidedly religious profile." Most recently, Strange

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looked completely different from those of the Galilee or Beth Shean. At Susia, for instance, the structure is a "broad building," meaning that the entrances are open along the long wall of the building. There is a large and decorated bema for the Torah shrine and the floor is colorful and inscribed mosaic floor.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, 70.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 71. See the literature cited there in note 109 for the opposing view.

has argued that these buildings follow a "cultural template in building synagogues," that they were "first and foremost appropriate for hearing declamation of Torah rather than for watching a spectacle (including liturgy)."²⁷ Perhaps the synagogues themselves can help resolve this difference.

As we have seen, five of the Second Temple period synagogues—Masada, Herodium, Gamla, Jericho, and Qiryat Sefer—contain an adjoining space, either a small room or niche. Scholars have suggested that these spaces served as repositories for the scrolls of the Torah, which were read aloud in the synagogue. There is archaeological support for this view: in the synagogue at Masada, parchment of Scripture was found only in this adjoining room (which was built into the original room the rebels transformed into a synagogue.) This provides a clear basis on which to conclude that the adjoining spaces in the four other synagogues also were designed to house scrolls of Scripture. Support for this suggestion also comes from nature of the remains at Masada and Herodium. Both of these are royal sites taken over by anti-Roman Jewish rebels. It asks a great deal to suppose that those engaged in a struggle for independence against a massive imperial power remodeled existing space—including altering the columns and, at Masada, adding a room—only to fix a place for general meetings. Rather, to take time in the midst of war for this activity suggests that there was something more at stake than merely getting together. Zvi Ma'oz²⁸ argues that the building of the synagogues at Masada and Herodium was an act of rebellion against the Romans. If so, then for these rooms to serve as an emblem of cultural autonomy and resistance, their meaning, purpose, and urgency must have been abundantly clear to the rebels. Hence, the rooms and their structure were not invented on the spot, *ad hoc*, for the purpose of war. Rather, they derived from the rebels' experience in

²⁷ Strange, "Archaeology and Ancient Synagogues", 57. Strange also suggests that the design of these buildings is "a Jewish invention based upon the porches or colonaded spaces of the Temple." Although we find plausible his suggestion that the early synagogue was designed primarily for reading and hearing the Torah, his notion that the architectural structure of these buildings derives from the Temple's "collonaded spaces" is problematic. The primary reason is that Strange himself includes in his list the synagogue at Jericho, which was built before the construction of Herod's temple. The synagogue at Jericho cannot have derived from a building it preceded, and this chronological anomaly undercuts the force of Strange's observation.

²⁸ Z. U. Maoz, "The Synagogue in the Second Temple Period," *Encyclopedia Ivrit* 23:340 (Hebrew).

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the villages and neighborhoods in which they lived and which they fought to protect. In the University of Rochester's excavations at the Galilean site of Qeren-Naphtali,²⁹ we observed a similar phenomenon. At that site, Jews (Hasmonaean troops) who overtook a pagan fortress in the Galilean hills built a large *mizbe* in its midst. On the basis of all this, it is reasonable to conclude that a primary function of these bench-lined rooms was the public declamation of Torah.

This conclusion conforms to the abundant evidence—excellently assembled by Levine—of the importance of the Torah scrolls in Second Temple Judaism. A few highlights make the case. The Theodotus inscription, which is part of the refuse of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70, explicitly claims that the synagogue was built for the purpose of reading the Torah and studying the commandments. The following story from Josephus, in which the Roman procurator executes a Roman soldier who destroyed *ton hieron nomon*, "the sacred law" (the Torah scroll), amply illustrates the status of the Torah in rural Judacan communities.

On the public road leading up to Bethoron some brigands attacked one Stephen, a slave of Caesar, and robbed him of his baggage. Cumanus, thereupon, sent troops round the neighboring villages, with orders to bring up the inhabitants to him in chains, reprimanding them for not having pursued and arrested the robbers. On this occasion a soldier, finding in one village a copy of the sacred law (*ton hieron nomon*), tore the book (*to biblion*) in pieces and flung it into the fire. At that the Jews were roused as though it were their whole country which had been consumed in flames; and, their religion acting like some instrument (magnet) to draw them together, all on the first announcement of the news hurried in a body to Cumanus at Caesarea, and implored him not to leave unpunished the author of such an outrage on God and on their law. The procurator, seeing that the multitude would not be pacified unless they obtained satisfaction, thought fit to call out the soldier and ordered him to be led to execution through the ranks of his accusers. On this the Jews withdrew. (Josephus, *B.J.* 2.226–31 [Thackeray, 413])

Let us imagine that one of the "neighboring villages" of Bethoron was Qiryat Sefar—which in fact is only a short distance from it—and that the a scroll of the "sacred law" had been found there. In a village that consists of eight or nine structures, only one of which

²⁹ M. Aviam, *Jews, Pagans, and Christians in the Galilee* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 59–88.

is a public building, where else in the village besides the public building would the scrolls have been kept and found?³⁰

If this reading of the evidence is correct, then there is reason to support the view of Strange and others, *contra* Levine, that whatever other purposes the early synagogue may have fulfilled, its primary mission was the public reading and, in most cases, storing of the scrolls of Torah. That is, the synagogue as a building was built for reading and, therefore, storing the Torah, and it also acquired additional functions. In this regard, a comparison of the synagogue to the Temple is instructive. In stark contrast to the Jerusalem Temple, the focus of the synagogue was its interior space. In the classical world, temples were sites of animal sacrifice that took place out of doors. Worshippers stood in front of an elaborate and usually massive façade, behind which was a room (*cella*), restricted to priests, that housed the cult object, usually a statue of the god. This was precisely the structure of the Jerusalem Temple, though in Second Temple times the Holy of Holies, Judaism's *cella*, was empty. It is reasonable to suppose that the structure of the ancient temple is a function of the nature of sacrificial worship, which requires the smoke of the burnt offering to rise to the heavens to show that the offering was accepted by the deity (there may have been other practical considerations, as well). The synagogue inverted the Temple's structure, perhaps for comparable reasons. After the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E., the public reading of the newly developed Scripture became a key communal rite.³¹ Over time, a scroll cannot withstand exposure to the elements, and it is surely plausible to think that the synagogue as a building that draws worshippers inside is in part a function of its basic mission as a place for the public reading of a text.

If the synagogue served a primary and consistent religious purpose throughout antiquity, then there is a coherent religious backdrop against which to explore the second issue: the diversity of architectural and artistic form the synagogue exhibits both over time and in place.

³⁰ Also see Josephus, *B.J.* 2.289–91 for the importance of the Torah scrolls in an urban context.

³¹ For a discussion of the antiquity of Torah reading, see Anders Runeson, "Persian Imperial Politics: the Beginnings of Public Torah Readings, and the Origins of the Synagogue," in *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins until 200 C.E.* (ed. B. Olson and M. Zetterholm; Coniectanea Biblica, New Testament Series 39; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003), 63–89.

How should we account for this extraordinary stylistic variation in a building that anchored a community's religious life?

Here, the answer likely has at least two parts: one political, one religious. On the political side, as a dominated people with little control over public space, the Jews had to draw on established non-Jewish architectural and art forms to create their public spaces. On the religious side, the diversity among synagogue buildings and the relative lack of rabbinic interest in the traits of the building itself suggest that, in the morphology of Judaism, the design, plan, and decoration of the synagogue building is religiously inconsequential. Let us take up these issues in turn.

On the political side, every discussion of the synagogue must take into account the fact that the Jews of the ancient Mediterranean—whether in or outside of the Land of Israel—were a small, relatively weak people dominated either by stronger nations or by great imperial empires—Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, Rome, and, later, Christianity. Political domination has ineluctable cultural consequences, which often are most obvious in the realm of public space. Because political power carries with it control over the means of production, the imperial cultures of antiquity had distinctive theories of design, beauty, and space, which determined the visual contours of public space, particularly city design, architecture, and art. In this realm, the practical consequence for the Jews of their almost perpetual imperial domination at home or minority status abroad is the inability to develop an indigenous Jewish architecture. When Jews built buildings designed for communal, as opposed to private, use, they had no choice but to draw on the skills and artisanship of non-Jewish cultures. The construction of every Jewish public building was an unavoidable act of cultural accommodation.

Adaptation to non-Jewish norms of architecture and design is hardly unique to the synagogue. This is evident, for instance, in the scriptural account of the First Temple. In contrast to the Tabernacle or Tent of Meeting, which was a portable shrine (though not itself without non-Israelite parallels). Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem followed the well-known plan of Caananite and northern Syrian public space/temples. Similarly, in his rebuilding of the Second Temple, Herod drew extensively on the architectural conventions of his time. Herod's temple was built on podiums and contained such classical architectural components as pillars, capitals, and friezes, some of which exhibit elements of oriental art as well. G. Foerster long ago

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suggested that Herod's design of the Temple Mount complex is a *Caesareon*: three sides of porticos, one side a basilica (the Royal Stoa), and a temple at the center. Because of its architecture and design, the dominant Jewish public space of its time also was one of the most impressive structures in the ancient Mediterranean.³² Thus, for 580 years, the Jews in the Land of Israel constructed their most important public spaces to reflect the taste and style of the dominant non-Jewish cultures among which they lived. The structure and decoration of the two Temples made the fundamental purpose of both buildings unmistakable to Jews and Gentile alike.

In the Roman and Byzantine worlds, it was no different for synagogues. As the synagogue gradually achieved the status of Jewish public space—a transition greatly accelerated by the Bar Kokhba rebellion and the death of Julian the Apostate—it acquired the traits of the public spaces of surrounding cultures. In the Land of Israel, the excavated villages of ancient Galilee and Golan Heights—Qazrin, Qanaf, Korazin, Capernaum, Nabratein, Kh. Shem'a, and Meiron—provide useful illustrations of this transformation.

These Jewish villages were less architecturally "Romanized" than the Galilean cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias. However, they were surrounded by gentile cities and settlements from Akko-Ptolemais in the west; the Roman temple at Qadesh in the north; Caesaria Philippi in the northeast; Susita-Hippos in the east; Beth She'an in the southeast; and Shuni-Maiumas, Dor, and Caesarea in the southwest. Thus, despite their distance from much of Roman culture, Galilean Jews had direct access to Rome's "architectural language" and learned to speak it in the design of their synagogues. For instance, the façades of the synagogues aped the façades of Roman temples, basilicas, and *buleuteria*. The façade and architectural decorations of the synagogue at Bar'am closely resemble those at the Roman temple at Qadesh, and the soffit of the lintel at the synagogue of Gush Halav is almost identical to the one at Qadesh. The wreath surrounding the menorah in the lintel from the synagogue at Nabratein is staple of Roman art, well-known from temples in Lebanon and elsewhere.

The late antique Jewish villages of Galilee and the Golan Heights were among the most culturally conservative areas in their region. Very few architectural decorations and fragments—such as capitals,

³² Josephus Flavius, *B.J.* 6.260.

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lintels, pedestals, etc.—were found in private homes. This contrasts sharply with the presence of such elements in the decorated private homes found in pagan villages of northern and eastern Syria and even in Byzantine-period Christian villages from the Golan Heights. By comparison, in the Jewish villages, these elements appear primarily in the village’s synagogue. This suggests a divided appropriation of Roman architectural design. In the construction of Jewish public space—the synagogue—in the Land of Israel, the “architectural language” of pagan public spaces played a significant role. In the design of private, domestic space, it did not.

The Jews’ divided appropriation of Roman architectural design is also evident throughout the Land of Israel in their use of Roman figurative art. They used such art extensively in the public space but sparingly in the private realm. Indeed, almost no figurative art has been discovered in the remains of Jewish private houses in the Land of Israel, either in villages or cities. A possible exception is the Leontis House at Beth She’an, which contains figurative mosaic floors. However, this building once served as an inn, a space neither domestic nor strictly private.³³ Without exception, Jews in the Land of Israel avoided decorating their synagogues with three-dimensional human sculptures. But sculptures of animals (mainly lions) have been found in some synagogues, such as Bar’am and Capernaum. Jewish funerary practice also generally avoided figurative art, with the notable exception of the public cemetery of Beth She’arim. We suggest that this exception derives from Beth She’arim’s uniqueness as a cemetery mainly for Jews from the diaspora, where more liberal Judaic artistic and religious sensitivities may have applied.³⁴

This evidence illustrates how, as a social and political minority, Jews of the Roman period constructed their public space by easily adopting a broad range of architectural and artistic forms from the pagan culture that surrounded and dominated them. It also shows that, in general, this adoption was neither comprehensive nor absolute. In the Land of Israel, at least, synagogue decoration did not include three-dimensional human figures, and pagan architectural forms generally did not shape private, domestic space. It is likely that absence of three dimensional human figures is the result of the

³³ At Sepphoris, neither of the famous Dionisus and Orpheus houses exhibited Jewish remains, and they therefore probably belonged to non-Jews.

³⁴ Aviam, *Jews, Pagans, and Christians*, 310.

Torah's prohibition against idolatry. If so, then Judaism allowed broad latitude in the use of pagan art and architecture in synagogue design and constrained it only at the extreme of idolatry. The question is, what in the structure of Judaism makes such latitude religiously possible? This is the issue to which we now turn.

The variability in ancient synagogue design is paralleled by a manifest lack of concern about synagogue construction in rabbinic literature. Indeed, one distinctive trait of rabbinic literature is its nearly total inattention to synagogue architecture. Jacob Neusner observes that rabbinic halakah "does not specify the traits that a building must exhibit to qualify for use as a synagogue;"³⁵ the synagogue "finds merely a subordinated place in the structure of laws that define Israel's relationship with God."³⁶ The Temple and the household are more important loci of contact between God and Israel. Moreover, although rabbinic Judaism treats the synagogue as a locus of holiness, its sanctity has no bearing on the building's style. The wide diversity in synagogue art and architecture is consistent with rabbinism's general lack of interest in synagogue design, which is often attributed to the claim that the ancient synagogue was a lay institution rather than a rabbinic one. In this understanding, rabbinic neglect of the synagogue mirrors the synagogues' neglect of the rabbis. However, the picture of fundamental opposition between rabbis and laypeople in synagogue affairs may be overdrawn;³⁷ even if it is not, the morphology of Judaism provides a more fundamental and systemic explanation for both the wide diversity of synagogue design and the lack of attention to synagogue architecture in rabbinic Judaism.

We observed above that the construction and design of the First and Second Temples followed the architectural and artistic conventions of the surrounding, non-Jewish cultures. Carol Meyers³⁸ points out that Solomon's Temple "was not a static architectural entity" and notes the "substantial alterations made in the Temple's form and contents by various rulers between the reigns of Solomon and Jehoiachin." On the Temple of Zerubbabel, she astutely observes

³⁵ Jacob Neusner, "The Synagogue in Law: What the Texts Lead Us to Expect to Find," in *Religious Texts and Material Contexts* (ed. J. Neusner, and J. Strange; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 151-75.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

³⁷ Stuart S. Millar, "The Rabbis and the Non-Existent Monolithic Synagogue," in *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists* (ed. Fine), 57-70.

³⁸ Carol Meyers, "Temple, Jerusalem," *AD* 6:350-69.

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that there is little textual tradition about the building itself—the books of Haggai, Zechariah, Ezra, and Nehemiah, offer virtually “no description of the edifice itself.” The textual tradition on Herod’s Temple also is uneven, and the basic descriptions are in Josephus and the Mishnah Tractate *Middot*, with scattered references in other Second Temple period and rabbinic documents. Josephus’ writing, of course, has no religious import in Judaism. The material in Tractate *Middot* is descriptive, not normative, and focuses more on the activity of the sanctuary than on the Temple building itself.

In the Hebrew Bible, the sustained lack of attention to the religious nature of the Temple building differs sharply from the treatment of the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle is “the central place of worship, the shrine that houses the ark of the covenant, and frequently it is the location of revelation. It is presented in the biblical narrative as the visible sign of Yahweh’s presence among the people of Israel. More verses of the Pentateuch are devoted to it than to any other object.”³⁹ The form of the Tabernacle comes directly from God to Moses; it is the product of divine revelation. Exodus 25:9 is explicit, “Exactly as I show you—the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of its furnishings—so shall you make it.”⁴⁰ In comparison, 1 Kings 5:9–8:13 presents the design of Solomon’s Temple as the result of the king’s imagination, a mortal fabrication, something Solomon builds for his god. In the entire biblical description of the Temple’s construction, God speaks only once, at 1 Kings 6:11–13, where he admonishes Solomon to “follow my laws and . . . keep my commandments,” to insure that God will “abide among the children of Israel.” There is no godly instruction on how to build the edifice itself. Thus, the building has no religious efficacy apart from the commandments. Absent Israel’s fulfillment of God’s ordinances, the Temple cannot guarantee God’s continued presence in Israel’s midst.

The morphological consequence of this difference is clear. The Tabernacle—with the Ark of the Covenant at its innermost part in the Holy of Holies—is the point of contact between God and Israel. Therefore, its design matters to God, and it must be made in a certain way. It has religious significance. By contrast, the Temple is the public repository or encasement of that point of contact, and its design is religiously nugatory. As the product of human imagination

³⁹ Richard Elliott Friedman, “Tabernacle,” *AD* 6:292–300.

⁴⁰ *NJPS* 123.

rather than divine command, the Temple's design in principle is—and in historical fact was—capable of alteration, adaptation, and variation. The same distinction is replicated in later Judaism. After the destruction of the Second Temple and the loss of the Holy of Holies, the sanctity of the Torah scroll assumed ever greater importance. The holiness of the Torah scroll is evident in both rabbinic literature and ancient synagogue architecture. Allegedly, each Torah scroll was identical to all others, and this putative orthographic constancy gave the Torah scroll an aura of stability. In effect, it replaced the portable Tabernacle as the point of contact between God and Israel.⁴¹ In synagogues, the sanctity of the Torah scroll is evident in the increasingly elaborate fixed Torah shrines that came to occupy center stage in synagogues from the second century C.E. onward. However, as we have seen, although the Torah shrines held the sacred scrolls and may, therefore, have acquired a measure of sanctity themselves, in design and decoration they were no more uniform than were the ancient synagogues that housed them.

The conclusion seems straightforward. Judaism's basic morphology attaches religious significance to the point of contact between God and Israel but not to its encasement or repository. Aside from transgressing against basic commandments and offending local sensibilities, the constraints on the design and construction of Jewish public space were few. In constructing and decorating their public religious buildings—whether temples or synagogues—Jews of antiquity had many options, which they manifestly employed. This does not mean that ancient synagogue art had no religious significance, but rather that we cannot axiomatically suppose that it did. Like the mantle of the Torah scroll itself, in the structure of Judaism, public sacred space—temple or synagogue—achieved its sanctity by what it contained rather than by how it was built or how it looked.

⁴¹ W. S. Green, "Romancing the Tome: Rabbinic Hermeneutics and the Theory of Literature," in *Text and Textuality* (ed. C. Winquist; *Semeia* 40 [1987]), 147–68.