

# Jewish Art in Its Late Antique Context

Edited by  
UZI LEIBNER  
and CATHERINE HEZSER

*Texts and Studies in  
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163

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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Uzi Leibner and Catherine Hezser

Mohr Siebeck

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## Preface

This volume is the outcome of a joint British-Israeli conference on “Jewish Art in Its Late Antique Context” that took place at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in December 2014. The conference was organized by Catherine Hezser (SOAS, University of London), Zeev Weiss and Uzi Leibner (Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University), with major funding from the Academic Study Group (UK) and the British Friends of the Hebrew University. Additional conference funding was provided by the Ruth and David Amiran Foundation at the Institute of Archaeology, the Center for the Study of Christianity, and the Authority for Research and Development of the Hebrew University. The Faculty of Humanities of the Hebrew University provided a publication grant for compiling the indexes of the volume.

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London and Jerusalem April 2015

Catherine Hezser  
Uzi Leibner



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# Jewish Art in Its Late Antique Context

## An Introductory Essay

*Catherine Hezser and Uzi Leibner*

Jewish art of the Land of Israel and the Jewish Diaspora in Roman-Byzantine times can be understood properly only in the context of ancient Jewish literary sources, Graeco-Roman and early Christian artistic traditions, and the political, social, and economic circumstances of the period. In order to take the multiple contexts into account and view ancient Jewish art from a variety of perspectives, a multi-disciplinary approach is necessary in which archaeologists, Talmudists, art historians, classicists and scholars of early Christianity collaborate.

What is striking about late antique Jewish art is the move toward figural representation and the combination of biblical and traditionally Jewish images with images that also appear in non-Jewish contexts and are commonly called pagan.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the second commandment, prohibiting Jews from making a likeness of “anything that is in heaven above or in the earth beneath or in the waters beneath the earth” (Ex. 20:4),<sup>2</sup> seems to have been observed in Second Temple times, from the third and especially from the fourth century C. E. onwards we see the proliferation of figural images of humans and animals in both Jewish and Christian contexts. Graeco-Roman paganism was the cultural heritage of both Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity.<sup>3</sup> Adaptations and combinations of seemingly pagan images appear in synagogue, church, and funerary contexts, as well as on small finds for everyday use, at a time when pagan cults became marginal.<sup>4</sup> The religious and cultural significance of this imagery and its use in scenes and panels needs to be examined within the context of Roman-Byzantine

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<sup>1</sup> On this development and its possible reasons see Levine (2012) 301–39.

<sup>2</sup> A large number of books and articles have been written on the second commandment, its origins, meaning, and impact on Judaism see, e. g., Gutmann (1970) 1–14; Mettinger (1995); Eliav (2002) 411–33; Holter (2003); Deuber-Mankowsky (2006) 15–22.

<sup>3</sup> On paganism and its impact on Judaism see Friedheim (2006) and Stemberger (2010) 505–11. Scholars of early Byzantine Christianity have argued that the boundaries between Christians and pagans were blurred at that time, see Elm (2012) 11: “... the boundary between pagan and Christian was so porous that these terms lose their analytical value”.

<sup>4</sup> For studies on paganism in late antiquity see the bibliographical essays by Demarsin (2011) 3–40 and Mulryan (2011) 41–88 (60–69 on the Middle East, esp. Egypt; 70–81 on the persistence of pagan iconography in art and material culture).

religion, literature, and art to determine its possible associations and meanings among Jews and Christians.

## 1. Terminological and Methodological Issues

The study of ancient Jewish art poses a number of methodological problems and questions. The issue of how to define Jewish art and distinguish it from the art of a certain region and time period is a continuous problem which art historians and Jewish museums have to deal with until today.<sup>5</sup> Does the content of the representation or the Jewishness of the artist or commissioner of the art work render the product Jewish? If one adopts the former criterium, only visual representations of identifiably Jewish literary traditions and subject matters could be considered Jewish, whereas the adoption of the latter criterium might lead to an inflation of what constitutes Jewish art: everything created by a Jew would then be considered Jewish, even if he or she contributed to the artistic projects of non-Jews. Furthermore, it is impossible to determine whether the ancient artists and artisans were Jewish.<sup>6</sup> This leaves us with the respective context of the art work as the marker of cultural specificity. Synagogues and burial sites were culturally specific realms in antiquity just as they are nowadays. The visual representations that appear at burial sites may have been commissioned by individuals but they were nevertheless part of the visual representation of the groups and sub-groups that were buried there.<sup>7</sup> With the artworks found at synagogues and burial sites late antique Jews expressed their distinctiveness from as well as their participation in the visual culture of their surroundings.

At least from the formal, stylistic point of view one may ask whether and to what extent late antique Jewish art constituted an aspect of Romanization that had analogies in other eastern provinces. Should the visual representations in Palestinian synagogues and burial places be seen as crude adaptations of a Hellenistic and Roman visual language that found its “high style” or “classical” expression in the Italian heartland?<sup>8</sup> In view of the phenomenon that Romans themselves

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Baigell (2007) xiii, who asks: “first, what is Jewish about Jewish art and, second, is there something called The Jewish Experience? The answer to the first question is ‘nothing’, and to the second, ‘no’”. The issue is further explored in connection with modern art in the contributions to Soussloff (1999).

<sup>6</sup> It is entirely possible that non-Jewish artisans created mosaic floors in synagogues and incised sarcophagi that were purchased and commissioned by Jews.

<sup>7</sup> According to Schwartz (2001) 154, late antique Jews were not prone to express their Jewishness publicly in burial contexts (“death was not yet generally an occasion among Palestinian Jews for strong public affirmation of group identity”); Bet Shearim, where “Jewish symbols are carved and scratched almost anywhere” (ibid.), allegedly indicates an eventual “judaization” of a Jewish burial space.

<sup>8</sup> This characterization of the relationship between Roman and provincial art is also questioned in Scott and Webster (2003).

copied classical Greek and Hellenistic art, especially sculpture, and adapted it for their own purposes, distinctions between prototype and adaptation, “high” and “low” art, and “official” and “popular” expressions become inappropriate.<sup>9</sup> Ancient visual representation, whether in Rome or its provinces, was part of an ongoing process of emulation, adaptation, and appropriation of other already existing works, a process which involved creativity as much as traditionalism.<sup>10</sup> Especially from a postmodern perspective, the practice of creative adaptation is seen more positively as a means of “visual communication” in time and space.<sup>11</sup>

The meaning of the images has been very controversial in scholarship on Jewish art: Can we assume that all ancient Jews would have understood the images in the same way? Did the combination of scenes in mosaic floor panels have a programmatic meaning?<sup>12</sup> To what extent can the depictions be understood on the basis of ancient Jewish literary sources, whether biblical, Jewish Hellenistic, or rabbinic? Methodologically, it is important to distinguish between the commissioners’ or artists’ particular motivation, which can hardly be reconstructed, and the impression the visual images could have made on the larger public which frequented the respective spaces. Art historians have stressed the importance of the viewer who creates meaning on the basis of his or her own background and values. Therefore one should focus on reconstructing the possible reception of the artwork rather than hypothesizing about its intention, especially if those who created it remain unknown. Paul Zanker and Björn C. Ewald have pointed out that each group and section within the population would have interpreted the art in their own way, depending on their experiences and circumstances, setting forth a variety of possible meanings.<sup>13</sup> In an important book on the meaning of art for ordinary Romans John R. Clarke notes: “The new Roman art history seeks to understand how, in specific circumstances, visual representation functioned within a multilayered system of communication”.<sup>14</sup> Ancient Jewish art can therefore be understood properly only within the context of ancient Jewish history, tradition, and religious practice.

The relationship between visual art, textual traditions, and viewers would have been complex, especially in a society where literacy and access to texts was very limited.<sup>15</sup> In the mostly oral societies of antiquity the power of visual representation would have been “at least potentially, vastly greater than the power

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<sup>9</sup> On the free adaptation of Hellenistic sculpture by Roman artists see Hallett (2002) 393–96; *idem* (2005) 419–35.

<sup>10</sup> On this process see Gazda (2001) 1–24.

<sup>11</sup> For the term “visual communication” see *ibid.* 12.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Weiss and Netzer (1996); Weiss (2000) 15–30.

<sup>13</sup> Zanker and Ewald (2012) 8: “It is the same here as elsewhere: the viewer’s specific interest guides the way he sees and the way he reactivates what he sees”.

<sup>14</sup> Clarke (2003) 3.

<sup>15</sup> On the limitations and distribution of Jewish literacy in antiquity see Hezser (2001) 496–504.

of verbal description”.<sup>16</sup> In spaces such as synagogues and churches the mosaic floors with their scenes and panels would have been permanent: they could be seen whenever one entered the building. Torah readings, on the other hand, happened temporarily only and required the presence of literate males. The visual impact would have been immediate and direct whereas the texts required readers and interpreters. Rachel Neis has recently stressed the importance of the visual even for text-centered rabbis and James A. Francis has emphasized “a greater frequency and a more profound significance of visual conceptions and metaphors” in late antiquity.<sup>17</sup>

Whether images served as substitutes for or illustrations of texts or whether they constituted a more direct representation of spiritual realities has been discussed in connection with Graeco-Roman and Christian art. Peter Brown has been most outspoken in his rejection of an educational function of Christian art before the seventh century C. E.: “the notion that images can act as a substitute for writing – largely as a didactic substitute – ... signals, indeed, the end of Late Antiquity. For this reason, it should not be projected backwards into the late antique period proper”, that is, the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>18</sup> Brown considers Gregory’s notion of church art educating the illiterate masses in Christian traditions and values a novel and unprecedented view of Christian art.<sup>19</sup> He thinks that in late antiquity images spoke to a much broader section of the population, to illiterates and literates, Christians and “barbarians”, speakers of different languages, the elites and the masses.<sup>20</sup> The move to link the images to texts and to make them subservient to them was meant to influence and control Christians’ understanding of the art, to prevent *adoratio*, the possible veneration of the images themselves, which came to be seen as idolatrous: “The most familiar images were not messages. They were presences. As presences, they were not expected to be ‘read’; rather, they were expected to elicit appropriate gestures”.<sup>21</sup>

Seth Schwartz has pointed to the “sacred” atmosphere ancient synagogue visitors would have encountered when entering the buildings and viewing the iconography of the centrally located mosaic floors, perhaps illuminated by sunlight during the day.<sup>22</sup> The experience of a holy place may have been evoked as forcefully by synagogue art and architecture as by the Torah scrolls: “the sanctity of the synagogue was somehow embodied in its decoration, ... it was not only the

<sup>16</sup> Francis (2009) 285.

<sup>17</sup> Neis (2007); Francis (2009) 285.

<sup>18</sup> Brown (1999) 16–7. The time period he refers to is the age of Justinian and Gregory the Great, see *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.* 18 with reference to Gregory, Epistles 11.10: “... in it they read who do not know letters ... a picture stands in place of reading”.

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.* 20–2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

<sup>22</sup> Schwartz (2001) 248: “Whatever precisely the elements of this language may have meant to the people who used and contemplated them, they clearly served as indications of the sacred”.

Torah scroll that made the place holy, as in the rabbinic scheme, but the character of the synagogue's structure and art".<sup>23</sup> Although the Torah remains an important parameter for understanding some of the images and scenes, it does by no means constitute a sufficient explanatory scheme for the entirety of synagogue art. Schwartz also warns against the "rabbinization" of the iconography.<sup>24</sup> The fact that rabbis were not synagogue leaders in antiquity must warn us against a too close association between rabbinic traditions and synagogue art. Viewers of this art were not simply readers of the iconography: their responses would have been much more personal and specific. The reception could neither be controlled by the commissioners of the artworks nor by rabbis. Peter Brown's suggestion that the images "spoke a more muted, frankly supernatural language" may well apply to ancient synagogue art as well.<sup>25</sup> The contributing role of ritual and the liturgy and its relationship to the physical space of the synagogue has yet to be examined.<sup>26</sup>

During the last decades art historical research has moved towards (a) viewing art in its broader social and cultural context and (b) allowing for multiple meanings that could exist simultaneously. Francis writes: "The goal in the past was often to establish the one meaning the artist 'really' intended to transmit, a process that required not only leaving the visual frame in search of written evidence but leaving the viewer behind as well".<sup>27</sup> Jaś Elsner's book, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (1995) was crucial in moving the viewer into the foreground.<sup>28</sup> Since then, ancient art has been seen as part of a broader process of communication and multiple perspectives have been taken into account. The new approach "allows a variety of meanings to unfold without coercion or excessively focused interrogation".<sup>29</sup> Francis summarizes this approach as follows: "There was never only one way of viewing images, even sacred images, in any period. A variety of modes of seeing coexisted side by side".<sup>30</sup> By placing Jewish art into the context of Graeco-Roman and early Christian art and by allowing for multiple interpretations from different perspectives, the present volume contributes to this wider approach.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Brown (1999) 31.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Foerster (1981) 33–40; Yahalom (1986) 313–22. Ian Wood, in his reply to Peter Brown, points to "the role of the liturgy in continuing to endow an object or a space with *praesentia*", see *idem* (1999) 35. An interdisciplinary project under the leadership of Oren Tal and Zeev Weiss, which examines "Expressions of Cult in the Southern Levant in the Greco-Roman Period: Manifestations in Text and Material Culture" is currently conducted at the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

<sup>27</sup> Francis (2009) 288.

<sup>28</sup> Elsner (1995).

<sup>29</sup> Francis (2009) 289.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*



## 2. Goodenough and Beyond

Scholarship on Jewish art in antiquity has come a long way since Erwin Goodenough's *magnum opus* on Jewish symbols.<sup>31</sup> In this work Goodenough had suggested a categorical distinction between Jewish art, displayed in synagogue and burial contexts, and rabbinic Judaism: "Our art symbols heighten the sense of contrast between that popular Jewish faith, to which they obviously belong, and the Judaism of the rabbis. For the rabbis would have disapproved representing the zodiac and Helios in the synagogues as much as they as a group frowned upon Metatron and the mystics of the *Shiur Komah*".<sup>32</sup> He associated Jewish figural art with a popular Judaism he considered mystical and syncretistic, bordering on paganism. Hellenistic Jewish writers such as Philo allegedly provided the ideological basis for the symbolism displayed in synagogues and catacombs. Rabbinic Judaism, on the other hand, was seen as strictly aniconic, following the biblical injunctions against images in the strictest possible way. Therefore rabbinic literature could not provide any clues for understanding synagogue art. The interpretive framework in which Goodenough explained the "Jewish symbols" was shaped by paganism, Hellenistic Judaism, and Jewish mystical cults.

The underlying reason for Goodenough's proposition that a popular mystically-oriented Judaism fed by Hellenism stood behind the synagogue art becomes evident already in his introduction to the first volume: Goodenough used Jewish art as evidence for a hellenized popular Judaism interested in salvation as an explanatory tool for the emergence of Christianity in the first century C.E. and "its rapid hellenization".<sup>33</sup> He thought that the figural images could fill the gap of evidence for widespread Jewish Hellenization which the literary evidence had left: "How then could Christianity so early and quickly have been hellenized?"<sup>34</sup> His answer is that Judaism at that time was already thoroughly hellenized, following a mystic tradition that left traces in apocalyptic literature and Philo. This popular Jewish tradition allegedly "always challenged the rabbis in their claim to speak adequately for all Jews".<sup>35</sup>

Goodenough is right in his assumption that the role of rabbis and their influence on the Jewish population would have been limited. Not all Jews who lived in Roman Palestine and the Diaspora were rabbinic Jews and the latter did not "set the norm for all Jews everywhere".<sup>36</sup> Non-rabbinic Jews would probably have understood the images in a different way than rabbis and their followers. He may also be right in associating some synagogue and funerary art

<sup>31</sup> Goodenough (1953–1968).

<sup>32</sup> Goodenough (1953–1968) vol. 8: 202.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid vol. 1: 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 19.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 11.

with hellenized circles: wealthy local elites who embraced the visual trends of the Graeco-Roman environment may have financed the mosaics and commissioned sarcophagi decorated with images from Greek myths for their deceased relatives. Yet Goodenough's position of a wide-spread and "popular" mystical Judaism as a counterforce to rabbis is not persuasive. Both the lack of literary evidence and social-historical considerations argue against the construction of such a phenomenon. Hellenistic leanings would have been prevalent amongst the upper strata of Jewish society and amongst wealthy city dwellers, but they are unlikely for the rural population of the Galilee and other more traditionalist elements. In any case, the fact that synagogue mosaic panels feature the zodiac alongside biblical scenes and traditional symbols argues against a syncretistic interpretation of Jewish figural art.

Subsequent scholars have criticized Goodenough's categorical distinction between Jewish art and rabbinic Judaism.<sup>37</sup> Rabbis themselves lived in a Graeco-Roman environment and adapted Torah law to contemporary circumstances.<sup>38</sup> In this process Hellenism would have had an impact on various aspects of rabbinic thinking and argumentation.<sup>39</sup> Although rabbis were not synagogue leaders in antiquity, rabbinic traditions indicate that they nevertheless tried to control various aspects of the liturgy and Torah reading.<sup>40</sup> Whether and to what extent they were successful would have depended on their local influence. In some local communities rabbis would have been amongst the few literate males able to read from the Torah in public.<sup>41</sup> Rabbis' connections to synagogues seem to have increased in late antiquity: amoraic traditions suggest that some rabbis gave sermons in synagogues on the Sabbath and some rabbis seem to have assumed positions of authority.<sup>42</sup> Some synagogue donors inscriptions contain variants of the title "Rabbi", suggesting that some rabbis donated to some synagogues.<sup>43</sup> These considerations suggest that rabbinic literature may serve as one possible interpretive basis for some of the images, at least as far as rabbinic Jews' possible reception of these artworks is concerned.

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Urbach (1959) 229–45; Smith (1967) 53–68; Bickerman (1986) 245–69; Neusner (1963) 285–94.

<sup>38</sup> On the Graeco-Roman environment of Palestinian Judaism see Hezser (2010) 28–47, with bibliographical references *ibid.* 44–47.

<sup>39</sup> See esp. Lieberman (1962) and (1965); Schäfer and Hezser (1998–2002).

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., y. Ber 9:1, 12d; y. Yoma 7:1, 44b; Levine (2005) 486–98. See also Sarason (2003) 166.

<sup>41</sup> See Hezser (2001) 467–8.

<sup>42</sup> See Hezser (1997) 221–4.

<sup>43</sup> While Shaye J.D. Cohen dissociated the so-called "epigraphical rabbis" from the "literary rabbis", Stuart S. Miller rehabilitated them by emphasizing the possibility that inscriptional rabbis were indeed scholars, see Cohen (1981) 1–17; Miller (2004) 27–76; Rosenfeld (2010) 234–56, who argues that "epigraphical" and "literary" rabbis belonged to the same set of Torah scholars who constituted a distinct group within Jewish society. On this issue see also Lapin (2011) 311–46, who takes a more limited approach.

At the same time the abundance of Greek donors inscriptions in some of the most decorated synagogues suggests that Greek-speaking hellenized Jews, or Jews who wanted to be recognized as part of the Hellenistic elite, played an important role in funding – and probably also choosing – the kind of images that were so prominently displayed.<sup>44</sup> The combination of biblical scenes (most of which had analogies in late antique Christian art), traditional Jewish symbols (such as the Temple/Torah ark, incense shovel, and showbread; *lulav* and *etrog*, the menorah), and seemingly pagan iconography (the zodiac and Helios in his chariot) may reflect these local elites' combined Jewish and Hellenistic background (cf. Josephus in the first century C.E.) or was deliberately chosen to reflect the various strands within the community which the respective local synagogue represented. Goodenough was correct in pointing to the Hellenistic cultural context of late antique and early Byzantine Palestine in which prominent Jews and Christians would have been keen to exhibit their knowledge and appreciation of Greek traditions and artistic forms. He was wrong, however, in labeling this interest as mystical or syncretistic and in viewing it in stark contrast to rabbinic Judaism.

The relationship between the artistic and literary heritage of ancient Judaism in the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which Jews lived therefore requires a reassessment. Numerous articles have already been written on individual motifs and scenes, whereas only few scholars have attempted a broader, more systematic evaluation of ancient Jewish art. In the latter category, the studies of Rachel Hachlili, Gabrielle Sed-Rajna, Rina Talgam, Steven Fine, and Lee I. Levine are most noteworthy. Rachel Hachlili's book, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel* (1988) was the first detailed archaeological examination of both the formal and thematic features of Jewish art of the Second Temple period and late antiquity, which also pointed to the striking similarities between Jewish and Christian art.<sup>45</sup> Hachlili observed that Jewish figurative art began from the third century C.E. onwards: "It was at this time that the barriers within which Judaism protected itself against foreign influences were being shattered. During this period the Jews acquired some of the customs and decorative elements of surrounding cultures and began to develop their own figurative and representational art, using pagan motifs, figures and animals, for both synagogal and funerary art".<sup>46</sup>

It is rather unlikely that the Jewish adaptation of seemingly pagan motifs was merely "decorative", as Hachlili seems to assume.<sup>47</sup> By claiming a Jewish indifference to images and preference for the written text Hachlili adopts a rabbinized

<sup>44</sup> See also Levine (2003) 98–100.

<sup>45</sup> Hachlili (1988).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 286.

<sup>47</sup> See *ibid.* 287: "The Jewish attitude towards art was basically decorative, in order to add beauty and ornamentation to their buildings".

perspective that sanitizes incongruous pieces by declaring them harmless for the viewer. Especially remarkable, however, are her discussions of the biblical scene panels whose limited thematic focus (Daniel in the Lion's Den, the Sacrifice of Isaac, Noah and the Ark) was replicated in late antique Christian art. She suggested that a shared interest in the subject of salvation may have led to this choice of topics which would have been given different historical and theological interpretations in the respective Jewish and Christian contexts.<sup>48</sup> The volume on Jewish art in the Land of Israel was followed by a volume on Jewish Diaspora art and, more recently, a detailed study of the iconography of mosaic pavements in Jewish and non-Jewish public and private buildings of early Byzantine Palestine.<sup>49</sup>

Gabrielle Sed-Rajna and Rina Talgam have approached ancient Jewish art from an art-historical perspective. In her broad-ranging work on *Jewish Art* (1997, French ed. 1995), Sed-Rajna examines the Jewish artistic heritage from its origins until modern times.<sup>50</sup> She is critical of those who “deny the specificity of Jewish art as a repertoire distinct from other visual ensembles” and defines Jewish art as “all the artistic creations that have accompanied the history of the Jewish people”.<sup>51</sup> In contrast to Goodenough's association of synagogue art with syncretism, Sed-Rajna stresses the combination of biblical and astrological motifs: “The mosaics of the Galilean synagogues, which were based on Roman models of astrological compositions, radically changed their meaning by the insertion of symbols peculiar to Jewish art”.<sup>52</sup> The mural paintings at Dura Europos are seen as “the earliest evidence of a pictorial expression of sacred history” which “represent the first landmarks in the long history of biblical imagery”.<sup>53</sup> The biblical depictions at Dura Europos and in Palestinian synagogues do not simply illustrate the biblical text but interpret and contextualize it.<sup>54</sup>

Rina Talgam's monumental new book, *Mosaics of Faith* (2014), examines late antique Jewish art (fourth to seventh centuries) through the prism of art history and comparative religious studies.<sup>55</sup> There is no doubt that during these centuries the mosaic carpets, on which this book focuses, were the main decorative medium of Jewish art. On the basis of her panoramic and comparative perspective, Talgam emphasizes the influence the rise of Christianity had on Jewish art. Time and again she points out the connections and relationships between Jewish and

<sup>48</sup> See *ibid.* 287–95.

<sup>49</sup> Hachlili (1998) and (2009).

<sup>50</sup> Sed-Rajna (1997) the French edition was published in 1995.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 95–138 Sed-Rajna proceeds with discussing ancient synagogue art. For a comparison between the wall paintings of the Dura Europos synagogue and Christian art in churches see Weitzman and Kessler (1990).

<sup>55</sup> Talgam (2014).

Christian art, which were sometimes polemical but often quite similar, indicating a shared mindset resulting from common origins, themes, and sacred texts. Talgam maintains that the basic shift in the Jewish attitude toward figurative art resulted from the influence of Christianity, “which made wide use of art as an efficient tool for establishing its faith ... The radical changes in Jewish art in Late Antiquity should not be explained just as an internal and independent process but should be viewed in light of both the content of Christian works of art and their didactic role ...”. In contrast to scholars who minimize the influence rabbis had on ancient Jewish society, Talgam maintains that these artistic changes were at least approved by the sages who “could not ignore the effectiveness of visual depictions in the Christian realm and began to understand that the historical circumstances at that time justified a change in the halakhah”.<sup>56</sup>

Steven Fine and Lee I. Levine represent the historical perspective on Jewish art. They position ancient Jewish art within the particular historical situation in which it was created, propagating a broader culture-historical approach. In his book, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* (2005), Steven Fine reexamines earlier scholarly approaches to Jewish art which tended to downplay the visual aspects of Judaism in the pre-Enlightenment period.<sup>57</sup> By marginalizing or delegitimizing those segments of the Jewish population who commissioned the images and by declaring the Jewish adoption of pagan iconography merely decorative, scholars minimized the significance of art in Judaism. Fine counters such earlier attempts by stressing the connection between public visual expression and late antique Jewish identity.<sup>58</sup> The “new Jewish archaeology” he recommends consists of a holistic approach which tries to understand the artworks in the context of other aspects of late antique Jewish society and religion, such as ritual and liturgy. Fine’s most recent book, *Art, History, and Historiography of Judaism in Roman Antiquity* (2014) pertains to continue this investigation of the interplay between art, literature, and (post) modern scholarly interpretation.<sup>59</sup>

Lee I. Levine’s monumental new book, *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art* (2013), can be seen as a combination of the historical and archaeological approaches.<sup>60</sup> The archaeological discoveries are placed within the context of late antique and early Byzantine Jewish history and culture, with a focus on understanding the emergence of Jewish figural art in that particular period of time. The late antique and early Byzantine period brought about many changes for Jews, not only as far as artistic expressions are concerned. Levine is interested in art as a reflection of the local Jewish community,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 258.

<sup>57</sup> Fine (2005).

<sup>58</sup> See also Schubert (2009) 39–51.

<sup>59</sup> Fine (2014).

<sup>60</sup> Levine (2013).

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