

Jewish Art in Its Late Antique Context

Edited by
UZI LEIBNER
and CATHERINE HEZSER

*Texts and Studies in
Ancient Judaism*
163

Mohr Siebeck

Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism
Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum

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163



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Uzi Leibner and Catherine Hezser

Mohr Siebeck

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ISBN 978-3-16-154388-3 / eISBN 978-3-16-154389-0
ISSN 0721-8753 (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism)

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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This book was typeset by Martin Fischer in Tübingen, printed by Gulde-Druck in Tübingen on non-aging paper and bound by Buchbinderei Spinner in Ottersweier.

Printed in Germany.

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.

Special thanks are due to John Levy of the Academic Study Group for his continuous interest and support. He initiated the academic cooperation, secured funding in the UK, administered the British participants’ travel arrangements, and provided practical support and good company during the conference in snowy Jerusalem. We would also like to thank Peter Schäfer and the other editors of TSAJ for accepting this volume for publication in their series. Henning Ziebritzki of Mohr Siebeck accompanied the volume during its publication process and provided answers to urgent questions. Last but not least we are grateful to Mr. Hillel Silberklang for preparing the indexes, to Mr. Martin Fischer for the typesetting, to Ms. Rebekka Zech for coordinating the project, and to all individuals and institutions who allowed us to use images for which they hold the copyrights.

London and Jerusalem April 2015

Catherine Hezser
Uzi Leibner

Table of Contents

Preface	V
---------------	---

Catherine Hezser and Uzi Leibner

Jewish Art in its Late Antique Context: An Introductory Essay	1
---	---

Part I

The Development of Jewish Art in the Roman-Byzantine Period

Orit Peleg-Barkat

Interpreting the Uninterpreted: Art as a Means of Expressing Identity in Early Roman Judaea	27
--	----

Lee I. Levine

Why Did Jewish Art Flourish in Late Antiquity?	49
--	----

Peter Stewart

The Bet Alpha Synagogue Mosaic and Late-Antique Provincialism	75
---	----

Rina Talgam

From Wall Paintings to Floor Mosaics: Jewish and Christian Attitudes to Figurative Art	97
---	----

Part II

Synagogue Mosaic Panels

Zeev Weiss

Decorating the Sacred Realm: Biblical Depictions in Synagogues and Churches of Ancient Palestine	121
---	-----

Uzi Leibner

Rabbinic Traditions and Synagogue Art	139
---	-----

Roland Deines

- God's Revelation Through Torah, Creation, and History:
Interpreting the Zodiac Mosaics in Synagogues 155

Part III

Symbols and Iconography

Rachel Hachlili

- Why Did the Menorah and Not the Showbread Table Evolve Into the
Most Important Symbol of Judaism? 189

Catherine Hezser

- “For the Lord God is a Sun and a Shield” (Ps. 84:12): Sun Symbolism
in Hellenistic Jewish Literature and in Amoraic Midrashim 213

Karen B. Stern

- Celebrating the Mundane: Figural Graffiti and Daily Life Among Jews
in the Levant 237

Part IV

Jewish and Christian Art

Markus Vinzent

- Earliest “Christian” Art is Jewish Art 263

Sean V. Leatherbury

- Competitive Sacrifice: Christian Visual Engagement With Jewish
Sacrificial History and the Temple in Late Antique Arabia 279

Robin M. Jensen

- The Three Hebrew Youths and the Problem of the Emperor's Portrait
in Early Christianity 303

Holger Zellentin

- The Rabbis on (the Christianisation of) the Imperial Cult:
Mishnah and Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah 3:1 (42b, 54–42c, 61) 321

Table of Contents

IX

List of Contributors	359
Source Index	361
General Index	371

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.¹ 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),² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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

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

² 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.

³ 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”.

⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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?⁸ In view of the phenomenon that Romans themselves

⁵ 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).

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

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ Especially from a postmodern perspective, the practice of creative adaptation is seen more positively as a means of “visual communication” in time and space.¹¹

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?¹² 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.¹³ 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”.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ In the mostly oral societies of antiquity the power of visual representation would have been “at least potentially, vastly greater than the power

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

¹⁰ On this process see Gazda (2001) 1–24.

¹¹ For the term “visual communication” see *ibid.* 12.

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

¹³ 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”.

¹⁴ Clarke (2003) 3.

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

of verbal description”.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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”.²¹

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.²² 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

¹⁶ Francis (2009) 285.

¹⁷ Neis (2007); Francis (2009) 285.

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

¹⁹ 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”.

²⁰ See *ibid.* 20–2.

²¹ *Ibid.* 24.

²² 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".²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ The contributing role of ritual and the liturgy and its relationship to the physical space of the synagogue has yet to be examined.²⁶

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".²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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".²⁹ 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".³⁰ 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.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See *ibid.*

²⁵ Brown (1999) 31.

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ Francis (2009) 288.

²⁸ Elsner (1995).

²⁹ Francis (2009) 289.

³⁰ *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.³¹ 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*".³² 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".³³ 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?"³⁴ 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".³⁵

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".³⁶ 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

³¹ Goodenough (1953–1968).

³² Goodenough (1953–1968) vol. 8: 202.

³³ Ibid vol. 1: 3.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid. 19.

³⁶ 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.³⁷ Rabbis themselves lived in a Graeco-Roman environment and adapted Torah law to contemporary circumstances.³⁸ In this process Hellenism would have had an impact on various aspects of rabbinic thinking and argumentation.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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.⁴² Some synagogue donors inscriptions contain variants of the title "Rabbi", suggesting that some rabbis donated to some synagogues.⁴³ 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.

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

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

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

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

⁴¹ See Hezser (2001) 467–8.

⁴² See Hezser (1997) 221–4.

⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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".⁴⁶

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

⁴⁴ See also Levine (2003) 98–100.

⁴⁵ Hachlili (1988).

⁴⁶ Ibid. 286.

⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰ 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”.⁵¹ 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”.⁵² 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”.⁵³ The biblical depictions at Dura Europos and in Palestinian synagogues do not simply illustrate the biblical text but interpret and contextualize it.⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵ 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

⁴⁸ See *ibid.* 287–95.

⁴⁹ Hachlili (1998) and (2009).

⁵⁰ Sed-Rajna (1997) the French edition was published in 1995.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 9.

⁵² *Ibid.* 11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *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).

⁵⁵ 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”.⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰ 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,

⁵⁶ Ibid. 258.

⁵⁷ Fine (2005).

⁵⁸ See also Schubert (2009) 39–51.

⁵⁹ Fine (2014).

⁶⁰ Levine (2013).

Source Index

Hebrew Bible

Genesis		8:8	34
1:14	173	13:18	51
8:1–20	122	16:21	266
14:14	271	17:3	173 n. 61, 215 n. 26
17:22	227	26	143
18:1–16	122	27:15	265
19	282	33	178 n. 74
22:1–19	122	34:1	280
28:13	227		
35:13	227	Joshua	
49:9	178 n. 74	10:13	173
Exodus		Judges	
14	122, 146, 149, 164, 347 n. 80	5	173, 229
15	146, 151	14:5–6	178 n. 74
20:4	1, 173 n. 61, 265, 266	15	104, 123, 146, 164
20:20	266	16:3	123
25	189–190, 195, 196		
27:20–21	196	1 Samuel	
28:33	34	3:3	205
30:7–8	196	17:34–37	178 n. 74
37:17–24	196		
40:24–25	189	2 Samuel	
		1:23	178 n. 74
Leviticus		21:19	164 n. 33
19:4	327 n. 14, 339 n. 54		
24	190, 196	1 Kings	
26:1	265, 266	7	34, 294
		13:24–26	178 n. 74
Numbers		17	164
4:7	190	18	142, 286
8:1–4	196	20	173, 178 n. 74
23:24	178 n. 74		
24:9	178 n. 74	2 Kings	
		2:11	349 n. 86
Deuteronomy		17:25–26	178 n. 74
4	173 n. 61, 215 n. 26, 265	21:5	173 n. 61
5:8	173 n. 61, 265	23	173 n. 61, 215

Isaiah		22	175 n. 66, 178 n. 74
5:29	178 n. 74	27:1	219
11:6–7	178 n. 74	35:17	178 n. 74
15:9	178 n. 74	37:34	337
17:8	215 n. 27	40:7–9	287
30:6	178 n. 74	42:2	292
31:4	178 n. 74	43:3	217
38:8	173	51	18, 125, 280, 285, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 293, 295, 296, 298
47:13	173 n. 61		
65:25	178 n. 74	57	177 n. 71, 178 n. 74
Jeremiah		58:7	178 n. 74
7:18	173 n. 61	84:12	213, 217
8:2	173 n. 61, 217	89:37	227
10:4	173 n. 61	91:13	178 n. 74
19:13	173 n. 61	104:18	292
31:35	173	121:8	176
44:17–19	173 n. 61	137:7–9	173
Ezekiel		147:4	173
1	227	148:3–6	173
6:4	215 n. 27	Job	
8:16	173 n. 61, 215	9:7	173
11:22–24	227	10:16	178 n. 74
Hosea		31:35	270
4:16	175 n. 66	38	173
Amos		Song of Songs	
3:8	178 n. 74	6:10	229
5:26	173 n. 61	Esther	
Jonah		3:2–5	307
1:15	125	Qohelet	
4:5–6	125, 169 n. 48	1:5	228
Zephaniah		6:45	217
3:5	217	7:11	217
Malachi		Daniel	
3:20	229	1:6–7	168
Psalms		2	173 n. 61, 179, 308 n. 9
7:3	178 n. 74	3	168, 303, 306, 307, 308, 319
8:4	173	5:11	173 n. 61, 176
10:9	178 n. 74	8	173 n. 61, 308 n. 9
17:12	178 n. 74	1 Chronicles	
19	18, 155, 172, 173, 217, 220	1:1–4	168
		11:22	178 n. 74

20:5	164 n. 33	13:11	196
23:29	190	14:4	215 n. 27
2 Chronicles		29:18	190
3	294	34	215 n. 27

Bible Translations

<i>Pseudo-Jonathan</i>		<i>Septuagint</i>	
Exodus		Ezekiel	
14	150, 151	9:4, 6	270
Leviticus		Psalms	
26:1	114	51	282
		Daniel	
		6	177

Second Temple Jewish Literature

Apocalypse of Zephaniah		Joseph and Aseneth	
6	221, 222	6	221
Baruch		14:9	221
3:34	172	28:7	221
6:59	172	Jubilees	
3 Baruch		2:7	223
6:5	221	4:21	223
Ben Sirah		Letter of Aristeas	
17:18–19	220	63	34
23:19	220	176–177	156
33:7	218	1 Maccabees	
42:16	218	12:9	156
43:10	172	2 Maccabees	
50:7	220	8:23	156
1 Enoch		Wisdom of Solomon	
72	221	5:6	220
3 Esdras		7	218, 220
4:34	221	18	220

Josephus

Against Apion		Jewish War	
2	37 n. 39, 309 n. 16	2:169–174,	
		184–187	309 n. 16
Jewish Antiquities		5: 210	37 n. 40
3	189, 190, 196	5:217	194, 204
10:186–281	179	6.5.3	342 n. 62
15	37 n. 40, 265	7:148–150	193, 195, 196
17: 149–167	27 n. 3		
20: 49–95	36 n. 34		

New Testament

Matthew		Acts	
13:43	223	7:43	173 n. 61
14:17	159		
14:25	347 n. 80	Romans	
17:2	223	12	288 n. 28, 29
24:2	294		
27:45–51	348	Galatians	
		2:7–8	181
Mark		Epistle to the Hebrews	
6:38	159	10:3–4	287
Luke			
9:13	159	1 Peter	
23:34	348	2:14	336 n. 48
John		Revelation	
1:29	291	1:16	224
6	159, 160	10:1	224
14:9	315	12:1	224, 226

Philo

Concerning Noah's Work as a Planter		On Dreams	
10:40	220 n. 47	1	219, 220 n. 49, 221 n. 54
		2:294	221 n. 55
Life of Moses		On Flight	
2:102,105	204	11:57	219 n. 38, 221 n. 52
On the Cherubim		On the Migration of Abraham	
7:24	221 n. 53	8:40	219 n. 41, 220 n. 46
26:88	218 n. 36		

On the Special Laws		Who is the Heir of Divine Things	
1:3:13	219 n. 38	17:89	220 n. 48
3:1:1	218 n. 33	29:149	221 n. 51
Questions and Answers on Exodus		34:165	219 n. 40
2:71	194	45	219 n. 42, 220 n. 43–44
The Unchangeableness of God		53:263	220 n. 47
78:17	218 n. 35		

Classical Literature

<i>Cassius Dio</i>		<i>Pliny (The Younger)</i>	
Roman History		Epistles	
50.8.2	342–343	10.96–97	311
<i>Lucian</i>		<i>Plutarch</i>	
De Domo		Antony	
2–20	102 n. 26	60.2–3	342
De luctu		De Gloria Atheniensium	
11–12, 19	37 n. 38	2	97, n. 3
<i>Philostratus</i>		<i>Scriptores Historiae Augustae</i>	
Imagines		Alexander Severus	
I-I.1	101 n. 20	28.7	56 n. 20
<i>Pliny (The Elder)</i>		29.2	56 n. 20
Natural History		Commodus	
35.67–68	97	16.5	342 n. 63
35.60	97 n. 3	<i>Tacitus</i>	
36.72	159 n. 12	Histories	
		5.5.4	51 n. 9

Patristic Literature

<i>Acts of Apollonius</i>		<i>Athanasius</i>	
7,14	312	Against Arius	
<i>Ambrose</i>		3.5	315, 333 n. 39
Commentary on Psalm 118		<i>Athenagoras</i>	
10.25	315, 333 n. 39	A Plea for the Christians	
		4–30	310 n. 21

- Augustine of Hippo*
 Exposition on Psalm 50
 23 288
 Exposition on Psalm 51
 21–23 287 n. 23
 Sermon 273 312 n. 30
- Basil of Caesarea*
 On the Holy Spirit
 18.45 315 n. 46, 333 n. 39
- Choricius*
 Laudatio Marciani
 1.17–19 126 n. 26
 1.23 110
 1.28–33 126 n. 26
 1.47–76 113
- 1 Clement*
 45.6–7 305 n. 2
- Clement of Alexandria*
 Paidagogos 3
 59.2 267
 Stromateis
 5.5 226
 6 271
- Cyprian*
 Epistles
 6.3 306 n. 2–3, 308 n. 8
 55.2 313 n. 31
 61.2 306 n. 2, 308 n. 8
- Cyril of Alexandria*
 Letter 41 113
- Cyril of Jerusalem*
 On Faith
 7 347 n. 80
- Egeria*
 Itinerary
 10–12 280, 294
- Ephrem the Syrian*
 Nisibene Hymns
 35.16 347 n. 80
- Epiphanius*
 Panarion
 2.12.2–9 346
 27.6.10 110, 339 n. 54
- Epistle of Barnabas*
 9.7–8 271
- Eucherius*
 Letter to the Presbyter Faustus
 294
- Eusebius*
 Church History
 3.8 342 n. 62
 5.21 312 n. 28
 8.2 313 n. 33
 10.4, 37–68 106
 Life of Constantine
 1.7.2–8.1 341 n. 58
 1.31.2 331 n. 32
 1.40 314 n. 41, 331
 3.42–52 351 n. 92
 The Martyrs of Palestine
 3.1 313 n. 33
 9.1–3 313 n. 33
 9.12 344
 Proof of the Gospel
 9.6–8 126 n. 26
- Gregory of Nazianzus*
 Against Julian
 80–81 316, 333 n. 39
- Gregory of Nyssa*
 Oratio de Deitate Filii
 et Spiritus Sancti
 108
 Oratio Laudatoria Sancti
 ac Magni Martyris Theodori
 109
- Hippolytus of Rome*
 Commentary on Daniel
 Fr. 92–93 306 n. 3
 Treatise on Christ and Antichrist
 61 226

Irenaeus

Against Heresies
5.5.2 306 n. 2

Jerome

Commentary on Ezekiel
3.9 271 n. 39
Commentary on Daniel
1.3 308–309, 315, 333 n. 39
9.24 296 n. 55
Letter to Eustochium (108)
24 347 n. 80
On Illustrious Men
40–42 312 n. 28

Joannes Lydus

De Ostentis
8 343 n. 67
10 342 n. 62

John Chrysostom

Against the Jews
6.7 287
9 64
Homilies on Matthew
4.17–19 309
14.23–24 347 n. 80
Homilies on John
1.14 226
Homily on 1 Corinthians
18.5–6 309
Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews
17.5, Pg. 63 Col. 130
113
None Can Harm Him
Who Does Not Injure Himself
15–17 309 n. 13
On the Statues
6.12–13 319
21.10–11 316–317, 333

John Malalas

13 332 n. 34, 36, 336 n. 47
14.8.357–358
295

Justin Martyr

Apologies
1.13.5–6 310 n. 21
Dialogue with Trypho
11 273
135 274

Lactantius

Deaths of the Persecutors
11–13 313 n. 33

Life of St. Nicholas of Sion

54–57 288 n. 27

*Martyrdom of Bishop Fructuosus and his
Deacon Augurius and Eulogius*

2 312

Martyrdom of Blessed Dasius

7 314
8 314
11 314

Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran

1 313
2 313 n. 31

Martyrdom of Pionius

4–5 313 n. 32

Martyrdom of Polycarp

9–10 311 n. 23

Nilus of Sinai

Letter to Prefect Olympiodorus
4.61 Pg. 79, 577–580
112, 126

Origen

Commentary on John
1.24 226
Exhortation to Martyrdom
33 306 n. 2, 307
Homilies on Ezekiel
9 270

- Paulinus of Nola*
Carmen
27.542–591 108
- Philostorgius*
Church History
2.17 314 n. 42
- Pope Gregory I*
Epistles
11.10 4
9.105 108
- Procopius*
On Buildings
1.1.47–9 13 n. 78
5.6.1–26 295
5.9.1–11 295
- Prudentius*
Contra Symmachum
I.502–505 109
On the Martyrs' Crowns
6 312 n. 30
- Romanos the Melodist*
Hymn 54 294
- Severian of Gabala*
On the Creation of the World
5.5 316 n. 48, 333 n. 39
- Socrates Scholasticus*
Church History
1.16.1 336 n. 47
- Tertullian*
Against Marcion
3.22 272
Antidote for the Scorpion's Sting
8 306 n. 2, 308
Apology
10.1 310 n. 19
18 315 n. 43
28.3 310
30–33 310
On Idolatry
4 267
15 306 n. 2, 308
- Theodore of Mopsuestia*
Commentary on Psalm 51
287
- Theodoret of Cyrhus*
Church History
2.13 309
Commentary on Psalm 51
287, 288, 296
Commentary on Daniel
308 n. 10
- Zosimus*
3.31 332

Byzantine Law Codes

- Codex Justinianus*
1.8 109 n. 51, 126 n. 24
15.4 317, 333 n. 39
16.10.8 330
16.10.12 109
- Codex Theodosianus*
2.18.19 331 n. 29

Rabbinic Sources

- Mishnah*
Yoma
3:10 37 n. 40
- Avodah Zarah
3:1 231 n. 110, 321, 323, 328 n. 18,
335

- 3:3 227
 3:4 51, 109, 326 n. 13
 3:5–7 334
 Bekhorot
 8:7 52 n. 14
 Tamid
 3:9 196
 Middot
 3:8 37 n. 40
 Kelim
 17:4 34
- Tosefta*
 Shabbat
 17:1 327 n. 14
 Ketubot
 12:6 52 n. 14
 Avodah Zarah
 3:1 328 n. 18
 5:1 325
 5:2 110 n. 57
- Yerushalmi*
 Berakhot
 5:3 9c 345 n. 72
 9:1, 12d 7 n. 40
 Peah
 1:1 15d 349 n. 86
 Kilaim
 9:4 32a 11 n. 66
 Yoma
 7:1 44b 7 n. 40
 Megillah
 3:2 74a 265
 4:1 75a 170
 4:5 75b 104
 Mo'ed Qatan
 3:7 83c 338 n. 52
 Hagigah
 2:2 77d 342 n. 61
 Ketubot
 12:3 35a 11 n. 66
 Sanhedrin
 6:9 23c 342 n. 61
 Avoda Zarah
 1:2 39c 345 n. 72
 3:1 42b–c 321, 335, 336 n. 49, 337, 339,
 340, 341, 342, 346 n. 76
- 3:3 42d 18, 106, 127, 139
 3:13 43b 338 n. 52
- Bavli*
 Berakhot
 57a 34
 Yoma
 33b 189
 Mo'ed Qatan
 25b 340 n. 56
 Bava Qama
 81a 170
 Sanhedrin
 106b 286 n. 15
 Avoda Zarah
 10a 346 n. 74
- Midrash*
 Genesis Rabbah
 17:5 228
 32:10 34
 44:17 228 n. 102
 47:6 227
 50:12 227
 58:1 228, 229
 59:4 349 n. 86
 68:14 336 n. 48
 69:4 227 n. 100
 81:3 227
 82:6 227 n. 100
 82:14 336 n. 48
 97:8 227
 Genesis Rabbati
 45:8 56 n. 18
 Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael
 Vayehi-Beshalach
 1–2 149
 4 151
 Shira
 53–64 336 n. 48
 Yithro
 6 266
 Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai
 12:29 150 n. 34
 14 150 n. 34
 Exodus Rabbah
 15:15 142 n. 14, 150 n. 34

- Sifra
- Kedoshim
 - 1:10 325 n. 14
 - Leviticus Rabbah
 - 2:8 227
 - 19:6 227
 - 28:1 229
 - 30:2 229
 - 31:8 227 n. 101
 - 31:9 228
 - Sifre
 - We'ethanan
 - 1 346 n. 74
 - Ha'azinu
 - 23 346 n. 74
 - Song of Songs Rabbah
 - 5:19 229
 - Qohelet Rabbah
 - 1:11 229
 - Lamentations Rabbah
 - 1:45 346 n. 75
 - 1:51 349 n. 86
 - Midrash Hagadol
 - Exodus
 - 13:3 150 n. 34
 - Pesikta de Rav Kahana
 - 12:3 103
 - Pesikta Zutreta
 - 14:2 150 n. 34
 - Yalkut Shimoni
 - Kings
 - 18:26 142 n. 14

General Index

- Aaron 65, 195, 287
– Consecration/Dedication of 122, 123, 127 n. 31
Abba R. 228
Abbahu R. 340, 343, 344, 345
Abin R. 228
Abina R. 227 n. 101
Abraham (Patriarch) 56 n. 20, 79, 88, 122, 126, 128, 131, 168, 169, 179, 180, 227, 286
Abstract Form/Shape/Abstraction 80, 84, 88, 89, 231, 241
Abū Dūhūr, Khirbet 246 n. 47
Abun R. 106, 139, 229, 266
Acelanda 37 n. 41, 38, 39
Acmonia 98
Adoratio 4, 315
Adam 168
– and Eve 58 n. 24, 180, 168 n. 44, 279
– Naming the Animals 279
Aedicula 199, 200, 203, 242, 244, 245, 246, 247
Aelia Capitolina 346
Aha R. 340, 342
Ahab, King 178, n. 74
Akko/Acco/Acre 109
– Bath of Aphrodite 51, 326 n. 13
– Plain of 15
Al-Ein, Khirbet 252
Alba 342
Alexander Severus 56
Alexander the Great 129, 130, 341
– Mosaic 97
Alexandra 265
Alexandria 263, 268
– Martyrs of 343
Altar 61, 79, 110, 142, 244, 246, 286
Ambrose of Milan 315, 351
Ammudim, Horvat 105, 131
Amphorae 39, 40
Amulet 41 n. 56, 202
Anafa, Tel 29, 30 n. 11
Aniconism 114, 264 n. 9
Animal Depiction/Imagery/Representation/Scene 1, 8, 27, 28, 29, 54, 64 n. 32, 99, 230, 241, 242, 246 n. 48, 247, 249, 250, 264, 269, 282
Animal Sacrifice 280, 285, 286, 287, 289, 290, 294, 332
Anti-Jewish Legislation 329, 334
Antioch 89 n. 47
– House of the Red Mosaic 98
Antiochus IV 27 n. 1
Antoninus (friend of R. Yehudah ha-Nasi) 200
Antoninus Pius 52, 324, 325
– Coin 53
Antony, Mark 341, 342, 343, 345
Apamea 208
Apocalypse 224, 296
Apocalyptic Writings/Thought 6, 51, 129 n. 39, 177, 178 n. 74, 217, 218, 221, 223, 227, 270, 287 n. 20, 296, 297, 298
Apollinaris 296
Apollo 222
Apollodoros of Athens 97
Apollonius of Tyana 56 n. 20
Apollonius (Martyr) 312
Apostles 181, 267, 350
Apotheosis 324, 325, 326, 341
Aqedab (see also Isaac Binding of) 15, 65, 79, 122, 125, 128, 169, 181
Aqiva R. 229, 266
Ara Pacis 159 n. 12
Arab Conquest 71
Arabia 248, 279, 280, 285, 292 n. 38, 293
Arcosolium 250, 253
Aretai 58
Ariadne 88
Aristoboulos 265 n. 11
Ark/Shrine, Torah 8, 18, 40, 79, 124, 155, 157, 159, 165, 166, 167, 169, 171, 182,

- 199, 200, 201, 202, 204, 206, 207, 241,
242, 244, 287
- Arles 303, 317 n. 51
- Artemis 59, 63
- Asclepius 52, 324
- Ashera 266, 334
- Asia Minor 16
- Astrology 223, 224
- Astronomy 223, 224
- Astypalaea 69
- Athanasius 309, 315
- Atheism 310
- Athens 342
- Atra Qedisha* 176 n. 69, 178
- Augustus 158, 224, 325 n. 10, 327, 328
– Mausoleum of 159 n. 12
– Statue of 330
- Aurelian 57, 224, 225, 324 n. 8, 325 n. 10,
336 n. 47, 341
– Coin 324 n. 8
- Awza'i 82
- Ayshah the Carpenter 337
- Bar'al 149, 150, 151, 216, 286
- Baptism 125 n. 20, 267, 272
- Bar Kokhba Revolt/War 32 n. 23, 51, 54,
140 n. 7, 268, 269, 270, 273, 274, 326, 344
- Bathroom 16, 32, 33, 34, 35, 51, 109
- Bema* 124, 128, 129, 146, 165, 199
- Bet Alpha 15, 40 n. 56, 65, 75–96, 113,
122, 124, 128, 132, 133, 139, 155, 160,
161 n. 19, 163, 164 n. 31, 165, 166, 169,
175 n. 66, 178 n. 74, 181 n. 86, 199, 200,
201, 213 n. 1, 231, 237 n. 1,
- Bet Guvrin/ Eleutheropolis 15
– Mahatt el-Urdi Church 109, 124, 125
- Bet Midrash* 152
- Bet Shearim 2 n. 7, 11, 15, 16, 19, 237,
238, 239, 248–255
- Beth Shean/ Scythopolis 14 n. 79, 78, 84,
85, 92
– Monastery of the Lady Mary 84, 163
n. 27, 164
– El Hammam 163 n. 27
- Biblical Scene/Depiction 7, 8, 9, 13, 17,
18, 58, 62 n. 30, 64, 103, 104, 105, 111,
113, 114, 121, 124–128, 131, 146, 155,
158 n. 8, 159 n. 12, 163 n. 27, 164, 165,
166, 169, 170 n. 52, 171 n. 55, 175, 179,
180, 195, 264, 279
- Birthday, Emperor's 159 n. 12, 327 n. 18,
331
- Britain 85, 89
- Bull 58, 78, 175 n. 66, 178 n. 74, 282, 285,
286, 287, 289, 290, 292
- Burial 11, 15, 50, 54 n. 16, 341, 342, 349,
351
– Cave 239, 248, 251, 252, 253, 255
– Complex 36 n. 34, 248
– Context (See Funerary Context)
– Site 2, 14, 16, 50
- Caduceus* 324
- Caesar (see also Augustus) 341 n. 58, 342
– Accession of 327
- Caesarea Maritima 30 n. 12, 133, 159
n. 15, 326, 328, 329, 340, 343, 344
– Mithraeum 159 n. 15
– *Officium* of 345
- Calendar 157, 161, 168, 173 n. 62, 208,
213, 223, 224, 309 n. 14
- Candelabrum (see also Menorah) 189,
202
- Candles 158, 159 n. 11
- Candlestick (see also Menorah) 29 n. 8,
189, 20 n. 48, 229
– “Sacred Candlestick” 219, 220, 231
- Capernaum 145, 199, 200, 203
- Capitoline Triad (Roman Deities) 52, 53
- Caracalla 56
- Carpocrates 339 n. 54
- Carthage 88, 268
– Council of 313 n. 31
- Catacomb 159
– Christian 59, 62, 122
– Jewish 6, 59, 62, 206
– Painting 169 n. 48, 180 n. 80
- Cave of Letters 32
- Cemetery 254, 348
– Christian 206
– Jewish 64, 207, 248, 264
– Pagan 206
- Chancel Screen (see also *Soreg*) 33, 65, 66,
158, 199, 205, 289, 290
- Chariot (see also *Merkevah*) 122, 146, 147,
213, 215, 216, 219, 221, 227, 231, 350

- Christ's 225, 226
- Elijah's 349 n. 86
- Helios' 8, 222, 223
- Sun's 19, 216, 217, 218, 221, 222, 229 n. 106, 230, 231
- Chi-Rho* (see also Christogram) 174 n. 64, 271, 272, 331, 336
- Chorazin/Chorazim 90, 199
- Choricus 110, 113, 126
- Christianization of the Roman Empire 11, 12, 19, 131, 132, 329, 330, 333, 338, 339, 351
- Christianization of Palestine 322, 337
- Christmas 157
- Christogram 109
- Christus Victor* 179 n. 75
- Chrysostom, John 64, 113, 226, 287, 290 n. 37, 309, 316, 319, 333
- Church
 - Altar 159, 160, 289, 290, 291, 292
 - Constantinian 352
 - Donor/Patron 291, 295
 - Imperial Sponsorship of 295
 - Mosaic 4, 18, 109, 125, 126, 147 n. 28, 159 n. 16, 162 n. 23, 279, 282, 289, 291, 292, 293, 296, 297, 298
 - Service 290
 - Transjordanian 125
- Cicero 109
- Claudius 36 n. 34, 324
- Claudian Edict of 49 AD 268
- Clement of Alexandria 225, 226, 267, 271, 327 n. 14
- Coins 29, 50, 59, 180, 326, 337, 338, 340
 - Bar Kokhba Revolt 40, 193, 194
 - First Revolt 33, 40
 - Herodian/Herod's 52
 - Jewish 37, 38 n. 41, 40, 52, 191
 - Roman 331
 - Seleucid 42
 - Yehud 52
- Colonia* 345, 346 n. 74
- Commodus 312, 342 n. 63
- Conch 200
- Constantine 109, 158 n. 11, 179 n. 75, 225, 232, 314, 315, 316, 317, 321, 322, 329, 331, 332, 333, 334, 336, 337, 338 n. 52, 341, 346, 351, 352
 - Coin 225, 324, 331, 341 n. 58
 - Conversion to Christianity 180, 225, 306
 - Constantinople 65, 85, 225, 295, 314, 331, 332, 335, 336, 338
 - Great Palace 84
 - Hagios Polyeuktos, Church 294
 - Constantius Chlorus 331, 344
 - Coin 341 n. 58
 - Constantius II 309
 - Coin 88, 89 n. 47
 - Controversy, Judaeo-Christian (see also Polemic) 128 n. 35, 132, 133, 213, 322, 334, 346 n. 79, 349 n. 86
 - Coptic Art 90, 91
 - Corinthian Column 34
 - Cross 30, 64, 65, 66, 109, 126 n. 24, 182, 206, 270, 271, 272, 273, 287, 314, 331, 336
 - Crucifixion 79, 125
 - Curia* 56
 - Cyprus 30 n. 12
 - Cyril of Alexandria 113
 - Cyril of Jerusalem 351
 - Daniel 9, 65, 123, 128, 166, 167 n. 41, 168, 169, 170, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 305, 306, 307, 308
 - Book of 173 n. 61, 179, 303, 308, 333
 - Darius, King 177
 - Dasius (Martyr) 313, 314
 - David
 - And Goliath 58 n. 24, 123, 164, 179
 - House of 227, 229, 231
 - King 65, 68, 83, 111, 123, 131, 174, 177 n. 71, 178 n. 74, 180, 285 n. 12, 295, 296
 - Dead Sea Scrolls 155, 223
 - Decius 313, 328
 - Persecution 313
 - Defacement 19, 114, 243, 254
 - Deir ed-Derb 38 n. 42
 - Diaconikon* 159
 - Diadem 303, 316, 325 n. 10, 341 n. 58
 - Diaspora Jews 1, 6, 15, 16, 52, 106, 206
 - Diocaesarea (see also Sepphoris) 56
 - Diocletian 314
 - Persecution 313, 314, 328, 344
 - Dionysus 87, 88, 312, 342

- Dipinto* 238, 239, 240 n. 15, 241, 244, 245, 246 n. 49, 249
 Domitian 192
 Dor, Tel 29, 30 n. 11
 Doric
 – Column 34
 – Frieze 29, 34, 35, 36, 37 n. 41, 38, 42
 – Order 34
 Dura Europos 9, 57, 58, 99, 132, 142, 151, 158, 195, 240, 244, 247, 254, 255, 274
 – Baptistry 58 n. 24, 106
 – Christian Building 58, 61, 244, 264, 265
 – Mithraeum 58, 61, 245 n. 42, 265
 – Palace of the Dux 245, 246, 254
 – Priest's House 246
 – Synagogue 11, 15, 16, 19, 32 n. 21, 58, 60, 65, 78, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 106, 110, 111, 126, 127, 139, 141, 142, 143, 146, 147, 151, 159, 164, 167 n. 41, 170 n. 52, 194, 195, 237, 238, 239, 240, 242, 243, 244, 247, 251, 265, 286
 – Temple of Aphlad 244, 245, 246, 247, 254
 – Temple of Artemis Azzanathkona 245 n. 41
 – Temple of Palmyrene Gods 245, 247
 – Temple of Zeus Theos 265

 Easter 159 n. 11, 331
 Egeria 280, 293
 Egoz, Horvat 252
 'En Gedi 34 n. 29, 37 n. 41
 – Synagogue 126, 158 n. 8, 167, 169, 170
 'Eitun, Tell 252 n. 74, 253
Ekphrasis 100, 102, 110, 113, 126
 El-Gabal 223
 El Greco (Renaissance Painter) 92
 El Khirbeh 194, 195
 Elagabalus 59, 345
 Eleazar ha-Qallir 162 n. 25
 Elijah 174 n. 64, 349 n. 86
 – And the Prophets of Ba'al 142, 143, 286
 Elisha 349 n. 86
 Elonei Mamre, Church 126
 Emesa 223
 'En Nashut 123 n. 14, 175 n. 66, 175 n. 66
 'En Semsem/Samsam 65, 123 n. 14
 Ephesus 106, 330
 Ephrem the Syrian 142, 272
 Epiphanius 110, 322, 329, 339 n. 54, 346, 347
 Eschatology (see Apocalyptic Writing)
 Eshtemo'a 198, 199, 202
Etrog 8, 80
 Eucharist 125, 159 n. 16, 160, 290, 293
 Eucharius of Lyon 294
 Eudokia 295
 Eusebius 328 n. 20, 329
 Exile 309
 – Babylonian 203, 217
 Ezekiel (Prophet) 216, 227, 272

 Faunal Design 165
 Faustina (Wife of Antoninus Pius) 325
 Feast Day 170
 Felix, Antipope 309 n. 14
Ferculum 193
Fiscus 336 n. 48
 Fish 27 n. 2, 122, 146, 159, 160, 194, 267
 Folk Art 84, 90, 91
 Foundation Deposit 89
 Four Species 40, 124
 Fresco 27 n. 2, 98, 126, 127, 140, 158 n. 8
 Frontality 80, 84, 88
 Fructuosos, Bishop 312
 Funerary
 – Art 6, 8, 170, 207
 – Context 1, 19, 37, 42, 206, 207, 307
 – Rite 202

 Gadara 34 n. 31, 37 n. 39
 Gaia 222, 224 n. 70
 Galilean 41
 – Aristocracy 51, 53
 – Jewry 145
 – Synagogue 9, 90, 145
 Galilee 7, 14, 15, 16, 41, 52, 68, 127, 133, 141, 165, 248, 329
 – Christianization of 133 n. 48
 – Lower 145, 163
 – Upper 56, 145
 Gamaliel II, Rabban 51, 52, 53, 109, 326 n. 13
 Gamla 42
 Gammadia 32
 Gaul 87, 328 n. 18

- Gaza 232
 – Church of St. Sergius 110, 113, 126
 – Church of st. Stephen 126
 – Gates of 104, 123
 – Synagogue 65, 68, 111, 123
Gematria 271, 272
Genius 310, 311, 312, 313, 325
 Genizah 127, 139
 Gerasa , Synagogue 65, 122, 139
 Gerizim, Mount 34 n. 31
 Geta 56
 Gnosticism 225
 Golan 16
 – Synagogue 90
 Goodenough E. 6–9, 12, 27 n. 1, 28 n. 4, 32 n. 23, 37 n. 39, 41, 139 n. 1, 140, 163 n. 27, 171 n. 56, 174 n. 64, 181 n. 86, 202 n. 49, 204, 205 n. 67, 222, 226, 239 n. 9, 270, 286 n. 18,
 Graffiti 19, 29, 191, 192, 237–260, 263
 – Pictorial 19, 91, 237–243, 247, 248, 249, 253, 254, 255
 – Textual 240, 241, 249, 255 n. 81
 Grape Cluster 36, 37, 38, 167
 Great Persecution (see Diocletian, Persecution)
 Gregory the Great 4
 Gregory of Nazianzus 316
 Gregory of Nyssa 108, 109
 Gush Halav 15
- Hadatha, Khirbet el 292 n. 39
Hadit 115
 Hadrian 311, 343 n. 67, 346
 – Coin 53, 324 n. 8
 – Decree Against Circumcision 344
 Hagia Sophia 13, 288 n. 27, 294
 Hamam Khirbet 15, 18, 65, 104, 105, 111, 122, 123, 127 n. 31, 129, 130, 131, 132, 145, 146, 147, 148, 150, 151, 158 n. 10, 164, 167 n. 42, 169
 Haman 307
 Hammat Gader 33, 65, 66
 Hammat Tiberias 40 n. 52, 54, 56, 70, 79, 80, 82, 105, 114, 126, 128, 132, 155, 161 n. 22, 163, 165, 166, 170, 175, 176, 178, 198–201, 207, 213, 230, 231
 – “Synagogue of Severos” 111, 165, 166
- Hanan R. 340
 Hanania b. Yitzhaq R. 228 n. 103
 Hanina of Berat Hawran R. 340, 347 n. 80
 Hasmoneans 27 n. 1, 190
 – Revolt 326
 Hatra 246
 Hebron Hills 34, 68
 Hekhalot Literature 171
 Helena (Mother of Constantine) 351, 352
 Heliopolis 223
 Helios (see also Sol Invictus) 6, 8, 13, 50, 57, 65, 68 n. 35, 69, 71, 79, 141, 159, 166 n. 39, 171 n. 54, 174 n. 64, 179 n. 75, 213, 215, 219, 222–226, 228, 229, 231, 232
 Heracles 312, 342
 Hermaiscus 343
 Hermes 324
 Herod 27 n. 3, 29, 30, 33, 34, 42, 43, 52, 265, 296
 Herodium 27 n. 2, 30 n. 12, 33, 34, 40 n. 47
 – Mausoleum 40 n. 47
 Hiel of Bethel 142
 Hieroglyphs 270
 High Priest 34, 38, 129, 130, 157 n. 6, 190, 192, 196, 265 n. 11, 287
 Hinton Saint Mary, Mosaic (Southwest England) 174
 Hippolytus of Rome 179, 226, 264, 308 n. 9
 Hiyah bar Ba R. 335
 Holy of Holies 244, 287, 290
 Holy Sepulchre, Church 295, 334
 Homer 101, 102 n. 22
Horologium 158
 Horses 58, 146, 147, 216, 225, 231, 242, 243, 247
 Hoshaya R. 340, 345, 347
 Hunting Scene 42 n. 59, 58 n. 25, 169, 174 n. 64, 282, 283
 Huqoq 65, 104, 111, 122, 123, 129, 131, 132, 133, 169
 Hybridity 89, 216, 222
 Hygieia 52, 53
 Hypatius of Ephesus 110
Hypogea 59, 206

- Iconoclasm 17, 19
 Iliad 101
 Incense 110, 149, 190, 194, 196, 228, 244,
 287, 311, 313 n. 31, 314, 315 n. 42
 – Altar 189
 – Burning 314, 322, 328, 332, 335, 337,
 338
 – Shovel 8, 80, 124
 Inscription 11, 15, 56, 62, 80, 87 n. 39, 92
 n. 58, 105, 108, 114, 122, 126, 141, 158
 n. 8, 164 n. 31, 200, 237, 249 n. 58, 251,
 290, 291, 294
 – Aramaic 78, 168, 176 n. 69
 – Christian 176 n. 68, 263 n. 3
 – Greek 54, 59, 78, 98, 122, 160, 293
 – Hebrew 79, 168, 195
 – Dedicatory 78, 131, 280, 282, 297
 – Donor 7, 8, 165, 166, 174, 175, 176,
 177, 178, 214, 230, 282
 Ionic Column 34
 'Iraq Al- Amir 34 n. 31
 Isaac (Patriarch) 79, 122, 131, 168
 – Binding of 9, 65, 79, 89, 108, 122, 286
 Isaac R. 103
 Isaiah (Prophet) 125, 216, 279
 'Isfiya/Huseifa 82, 163, 166, 213 n. 1, 231
 Isi the Priest Biribbi R. 126
- Jacob (Patriarch) 131, 168, 229 n. 105
 Jason's Tomb 198
 Jerash (see Gerasa)
 Jeremiah (Prophet) 216
 Jericho 29, 30 n. 11, 198, 252
 – Synagogue 114
 Jerome 296 n. 55, 308, 312 n. 28, 315, 333
 Jerusalem 27 n. 2, 33, 34, 36 n. 34, 37
 n. 36, 40, 42, 52, 65, 66, 131, 165, 191,
 194, 195, 205, 216, 249, 251, 265, 272,
 280, 285, 293, 295, 296, 297, 298, 346
 – Christianization of 329, 334
 – Destruction of 50, 52, 193, 202
 – Jewish Quarter 192
 – Necropolis 34, 38
 – Talmud 18, 104, 106, 127
 – Upper City 30, 31, 32, 33, 43
 – Walls of 164, 285, 295, 296
 Jezreel Valley 78, 85
 John the Baptist 174 n. 64
 Jonah (Prophet) 109, 124, 125, 169 n. 48,
 179 n. 77, 180, 279
 Jordan
 – Rift 68
 – River 85, 174 n. 64
 Josiah 173 n. 61, 216
 Judaea 16, 27, 29, 37, 40, 42, 52, 165, 193
 Judah R. 327 n. 14
 Judas the Maccabean 203
 Judean Shefelah 252, 255, 256
 Julia Domna (Wife of Septimius Severus)
 56
 Julian, Emperor 232, 316
 Julian of Atramytion 110
 Jupiter 310, 321, 324, 346
 Justa Bar Shonem R. 228
 Justin, Emperor 78
 Justin Martyr 273
 Justinian 4 n. 18, 103, 294, 295, 296
- Kalendae Ianuariae 327, 331, 345
 Kur, Horbat 158 n. 8, 169 n. 46
- Laodicea 340
 Lavnin, Horvat 252
 Lawrence, Saint (Martyr) 182
 Lazarus 306
 – Resurrection of 180, 307
 Leda and the Swan 54
 Legio (Kefar 'Otnay) 160 n. 17
 Levi R. 228
Libelli 313
 Liberius, Pope 309
 Libra 81, 82
 Lintels 37 n. 41, 42, 178, 195, 202, 205,
 207
 Lions 78, 79, 80, 87, 124, 157, 165, 167
 n. 41, 169 n. 46, 170, 174–179, 182,
 251
 Literacy 3, 102 n. 24, 241 n. 20
 Liturgical Poetry 16, 121, 286
 Liturgy 5, 7, 10, 56, 71, 102, 128 n. 35,
 156, 157, 182, 290, 191, 193
 – Christian 157
 – Jewish 157
 Livy 109
Locus Sanctus 15, 293
 Lot (Biblical Figure) 282

- Lulav* 8, 80, 205
 Lucius Verus 324
- Maccabean Revolt (see Hasmonean Revolt)
 Machaerus 30 n. 12
 Macrinus, Coin 148
 Madaba 282
 – Church of the Apostles 292 n. 38
 – Map 147 n. 29, 293
 Magdala 32, 39, 40, 41, 42, 59, 98, 127, 158
 n. 8, 160 n. 17, 165, 167
 Ma'in 285
 Malalas John 295, 296, 332, 333
 Maon (Judea) 198, 199, 207
 Maon (Nirim) 206, 207
 Ma'oz Hayyim 126, 208
 Marcion 272, 273, 274
 Marcus Aurelius 324
 Marduk 52
 Maresha 34 n. 31, 35
 Mariamne (Wife of Herod) 265
 Mark the Deacon 329
 Martyrdom 314, 328, 344, 345, 351
 Martyrs 309, 317, 319, 344
 – Christian 18, 182, 305, 306, 310, 311,
 312, 313, 314, 329, 337, 343, 344
 Mary, Virgin 113, 347, 348, 350, 351
 – Dormition of 322, 349, 350
 Masada 30 n. 12, 31, 32, 34, 35, 38 n. 41
 Masu'ot Yitzhaq 65, 66
 Mattathias Antigonus 190, 191, 192
 – Coin 190, 191, 192, 197, 207
 Maximian 314
 Meir R. 323, 336 n. 48
 Menahem R. 229
 Menorah 8, 15, 16, 18, 29 n. 8, 39, 40, 50,
 56, 59, 62 n. 30, 64, 65, 66, 158 n. 10,
 189–211
 – Free Standing 202, 207
 – Stone Carved 198, 199, 200
 – Synagogue 198, 199, 200, 203, 205, 207,
 208
 – Tabernacle 189, 202, 203
 – Temple 189, 192, 196, 197, 202, 203,
 205, 206
Mensae Delphicae 190
 Mèrida, Mosaic (Spain) 87, 88, 92, 93
Merkavah (see also Chariot) 227
- Merot 65, 68, 83, 111, 112, 123, 126, 131,
 132, 133, 198, 199, 203
 Mesopotamia 42, 77
 Messiah 132, 174 n. 64, 227, 349 n. 86
 Messianic
 – Expectation 129 n. 39
 – Imagery 205
 – Longing 41 n. 52, 124
 – Orientation 51 n. 7
 – Symbolism 204, 205
 Messianism 51 n. 7
 Metatron 6, 171 n. 54, 174 n. 64
 Milan, St. Ambrose Basilica 303, 304, 317
 n. 51
 Military Dress/ Garb 249, 250, 303, 304
Minim 269 n. 26
 Mithraism 225
 Mithras 57, 58 n. 25, 59, 61, 63, 225, 232
 Mopsuestia 123
 Mordecai 104, 307
 Mosaic
 – Figurative 106, 114, 115, 139, 237 n. 1,
 266
 – Geometric 131, 167
 – Hellenistic 29, 30
 – Herodian 30, 42
 – Medallion 125, 131, 165, 167
 – North African 87, 292
 – Second Temple Period 27, 29, 98
 – Synagogue 4, 7, 9, 39, 40, 50, 65, 68, 75–
 96, 98, 104, 113, 122, 128, 130, 131, 133,
 139, 161, 163, 170, 182, 200, 201, 203,
 205, 207, 208, 213, 230, 231, 279, 297
 – Tripartite Division 128, 129, 131, 133,
 155, 158, 162, 174, 175, 182
 – Wall 110, 292 n. 39
 Mosaicist/ Mosaic Artist 2, 17, 18, 78, 80,
 82, 84, 85, 97, 109, 282, 289, 292, 295,
 297
 Moses 104, 149, 180, 181, 182, 219, 280,
 291, 293, 294, 298, 347 n. 80
 Mukhayyat, Khirbet 280, 285, 288, 289,
 292–296, 298
 – Church of the Holy Martyrs Lot and
 Procopius 280, 281, 283, 284, 291, 293,
 295, 297, 298
 – Church of St. George 295
 – Church of the Priest John 282, 295, 297

- Multiplication of the Bread, Miracle 159, 160
 Municipal Council 56
 Na'anah 202
 Na'aran 65, 79, 114, 123, 128, 132, 133, 139, 163, 165, 166, 167, 169, 175, 178, 200, 201, 213, 231
 Nabratein 199, 203
 Nahal Michmas Cave 198
 Nahum bar Simai R. 337, 338, 340
 Nathan R. 229
 Nea, Church 295
 Nebo Mt. (see also Khirbet Mukhayyat) 18, 280, 285, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 298
 – Monastery of Moses 125, 280, 289, 291, 293, 295
 Nebuchadnezzar 18, 179, 285, 303–309, 314, 315, 317, 319
Nefesh 249, 250, 252
 Nehemia 164
 Nilotic Scene 160, 282
 Nilus of Sinai 111, 126
 Nimrud 42 n. 59
 Noah and the Ark 9, 65, 122, 168
Nomina Sacra 271, 272, 273

 Oil Lamp 16, 32 n. 23, 33, 40, 65, 66, 158
 “Darom” 198
 – Herodian 40
 – Jerusalem Type 40 n. 49
 Olympiodorus, Praefect 111, 126
 Oral Tradition 142, 151
 Orientalization 57
 Orientalism 89
 Origen 56, 226, 270, 307
 Orpheus 56 n. 20, 123
 Ossuary 28, 32 n. 21, 34, 37 n. 36, 38, 40, 41, 42, 43, 50, 198, 249, 251, 252
 Ostia, Synagogue 15, 56 n. 18
 Oum Hartaine 293 n. 40
 Oxyrhynchus 343

 Paestum 253 n. 78
Paideia 92, 100, 181
 Palaestina Secunda 85
 Palestrina, Nile Mosaic 147 n. 30

 Palladium, Athenian 332
 Palmette 30, 31 n. 18
 Palmyra 59, 62, 246
 Pannonia, Synagogue 56 n. 18
 Paphos 292 n. 39
Parochet 189
 Parrhasios of Ephesos 97
 “Parting of the Ways” 268, 269 n. 26
 Paschal Chronicle 332 n. 34
 Patriarch 11, 57, 213, 214, 230, 231
 – House of 176
 Patriarchal Family 52, 166, 214 n. 13
 Patriarchate 51, 53
 Paulinus of Nola 108, 351
 Pausanias 36 n. 34
 Pegasus 174 n. 64
 Pella 97
Peshat 162, 163, 170, 171
 Peter 181, 264, 267, 319 n. 52, 350
 Petra 40 n. 47
 Pharaoh 104, 122, 147, 149, 164, 179
 Philo 6, 103, 194, 204, 215, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 228, 231, 233
 Philostorgius 332, 333, 337
 Pilgrimage 41, 160, 351
 Pisaurum 342
 Piyjut 128 n. 35, 132, 142, 215
 “Plebeian Art” 91
 Pliny the Elder 97
 Pliny the Younger 311, 312
 Plutarch 342, 343, 345, 348, 350
 Polemic, Judaeo-Christian (see also Controversy) 10, 132, 322, 329, 332, 334, 335, 337, 348
 Polycarp, Martyr 311
 Polytheism, Roman 224
 Pomegranate 33, 34, 143, 174 n. 64, 194
 Pompeii 255 n. 81
 – House of the Faun 98
 Portrait, Emperor's 303, 307, 309, 310, 311, 312, 314, 315, 317, 331
 Poseidon 52
 Prayer 13, 121, 128 n. 35, 174, 176 n. 70, 177, 216, 244, 282, 286, 287, 288, 289, 291, 296, 311, 314, 317, 348
 – Daily 157
 – Direction of 121
 – Hall 41, 121, 124, 130

- Table 197
- Priest 58, 105, 126, 128 n. 35, 157 n. 6, 196, 286, 287 n. 20, 288, 290, 296
- Priestly
 - Duty 206
 - Family 198
 - Symbol 207
- Procopius
 - Martyr 344
 - Of Caesarea 13, 295
 - Of Gaza 232
- Proklos, Son of Philosophos 51
- Proskynesis* 110, 114, 316
- Provincialism 75, 77, 78, 80, 85, 89, 91
- Ptolemy II 34
- Purity 33, 43, 50

- Qasrin 195
- Qatzion 56
- Qoshet, Horvat 198, 199, 207
- Quadriga* (see also Chariot) 79
- Qumran 171
- Qustul 32

- Ra/Re (Egyptian Deity) 223
- Rab (Third Century Rabbi) 228
- Ravenna 84, 174 n. 64, 279 n. 2
 - Mausoleum of Galla Placidia 182, 292 n. 39
 - San Vitale 180 n. 80
 - Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Basilica 32 n. 23
- Rebekka (Matriarch) 229
- Red Sea Crossing/Splitting 122, 147, 149, 151, 164, 347 n. 80
- Rehov, Synagogue 105, 114, 126, 158 n. 8, 240
- Resh Laqish 227
- Revelation 155, 171, 172, 174, 181, 182, 222
- Rimon, Horvat 126
- Ritual Bath/Miqveh 42, 50
- Roma (Goddess) 325 n. 9
- Rome 3, 16, 17, 54, 56, 57, 59, 62, 64, 65, 158, 168, 179, 193, 195, 202, 224, 232, 279 n. 2, 314, 322, 325, 331, 332, 335, 336, 337, 343
 - Arch of Titus 191, 192, 193, 195, 203
 - Basilica of Maxentius 314
 - Catacombs 15, 106, 122, 303, 317
 - Founding of 331
 - Mausoleum of the Julii 179 n. 75, 225
 - Santa Costanza 98, 181 n. 87
 - Saint Cosmas and Damian 181 n. 87
 - Santa Maria Maggiore 279 n. 3
 - Santa Pudenziana 319 n. 52
 - Santa Sabina 319 n. 52
 - Temple of Peace 203
- Romulus and Remus 325 n. 9
- Rosette 29–35, 37, 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, 88, 98, 165
- Rosh Hashanah 286
- Rudston, Roman Villa (England) 86, 87, 88, 89

- Sabbath 7, 157, 170, 208, 228 n. 103
- Saint-Roman-en-Gal, Mosaic (France) 87 n. 40
- Samaria 34 n. 31, 178 n. 74
- Samaritans 58 n. 24, 264, 340, 345
 - Synagogue 84, 92, 164 n. 31, 194, 195
- Samson 65, 104, 122, 123, 129, 146, 164, 179
- Sarah (Matriarch) 229
- Sarcophagus 2 n. 6, 7, 11 n. 67, 17, 34, 37, 38 n. 41, 42, 54, 59, 62, 159 n. 16, 169 n. 48, 178, 180 n. 80, 202, 204, 207, 237, 248, 255, 303, 304, 305, 311, 317 n. 51, 318
- Sardis 65, 200
 - Synagogue 15, 198, 199
- Saturnalia 158 n. 11, 327, 345
- Saul 242
- Sea of Galilee/Tiberias 39, 104, 159, 340, 347 n. 80
- Seal 42, 202, 267
 - Ring 33, 267
- Seasons 15, 65, 69, 79, 83, 163 n. 27, 173, 218, 219, 221, 224, 230
- Second Commandment 1, 28, 30, 99, 114, 265
- Sefer Ha-Razim* 215
- Sepphoris/Diocaesarea 16, 106, 122, 127, 133, 200, 231
 - Coin 52, 53, 56, 264 n. 9
 - House of Dionysus 106, 107

- Synagogue 40 n. 52, 65, 69 n. 36, 79, 113, 122, 123, 128, 129, 132, 143, 144, 161, 163–167, 169, 172, 194, 195, 200, 201, 213, 231, 287
- Septimius Severus 56
- Septuagint (see also LXX) 174, 181, 182
- Seven Species 34, 143,
- Shekbinah* 204, 228, 229
- Shellal 206
- Shema Kh. 15
- Shield of David 41 n. 56
- Shim'on Ben Gamliel R. 323, 324, 326, 336 n. 49
- Ship/Boat 125, 249, 253, 267
- Shmuel Son of Rabbi Yitshaq R. 340, 349
- Shofar* 40, 80, 124, 205, 286
- Showbread 8, 196
 - Table 34, 122, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 197, 202, 203, 206
- Side (Asia Minor) 200
- Sinai, Mt. 181
 - Monastery of St. Catherine 279 n. 2
- Sinaitic Script 270
- Skiagraphia* 97
- Sol Invictus (see also Helios) 57, 175, 179 n. 75, 224, 225, 230 n. 110, 232, 324 n. 8, 331, 338
- Soreg* (see also Chancel Screen) 158
- Sozomen 351
- Star
 - Of Bethlehem 342
 - Julian 342
- Staurogram* 272, 273
- Stone Door 248
- Stone Table 42, 194
- Stucco 37 n. 41, 41, 98
- Sun 18, 19, 69 n. 36, 159, 163 n. 27, 173, 175, 179, 204, 213
 - Chariot of 19, 215, 216, 218, 221, 222, 230
 - God 42, 222–226, 232
 - Imagery 155 n. 1, 216, 217, 218, 222, 225, 231
 - Worship 175 n. 64, 215, 216, 217, 220, 223, 224, 225, 228, 229
- Susiya 65, 105, 114, 123, 126, 132, 158 n. 8, 163, 165, 166, 169, 176, 198, 199, 201, 213 n. 1, 231
- Synagogue
 - Diaspora 15, 28, 56 n. 18, 68, 121 n. 3
 - Second Temple 15, 39, 59, 98, 103
- Syracuse 303, 317 n. 51
- Syria 42 n. 59, 78, 173 n. 61, 223, 240, 241, 254, 328
 - Province of 52, 54
- Syrian
 - Emperors 57
 - Gods 57, 223
- Tabernacle 122–125, 129, 132 n. 45, 171 n. 55, 189, 194, 195, 202, 203, 297
 - Vessel 65, 189
- Tabgha 159
- Tabula Ansata* 78
- Tallit* 32
- Tayibat al-Imam, Church (Syria) 292 n. 39
- Temple
 - Altar 37, 39, 125, 192, 284, 285
 - Cult 41 n. 52, 124, 167, 171 n. 55, 286, 297
 - Destruction 28, 32 n. 23, 39, 41, 44, 50, 202, 206, 207, 244, 265, 268, 288, 294
 - Façade 171 n. 55, 193, 200 n. 43
 - First (see also Solomonic) 173 n. 61, 216, 285
 - Herodian (see also Second Temple) 27 n. 3, 202, 285
 - Motif 128 n. 35, 181
 - Mount 38, 39, 326, 327, 334
 - Precinct 29, 40
 - Ritual 40 n. 51, 208, 217
 - Second (see also Herodian) 8, 18, 27 n. 1, 34, 37–41, 43, 50, 122, 124, 125, 126, 131, 132, 143, 147, 150, 193, 195–198, 202, 203, 205, 207, 217, 244, 269, 280, 287, 290, 293, 294, 295, 297
 - Service 40, 208
 - Solmon's/Solomonic (see also First) 34, 122 132 n. 45, 146, 164, 202, 290, 294
 - Vessels 29, 189, 191, 192, 193, 195, 202, 203, 206, 208
- Tertullian 266, 267, 272, 273, 307, 308, 310, 327 n. 14
- Tetrarchy 313 n. 35, 325 n. 10, 341 n. 58, 343, 344

- Theodosian Code 109, 326 n. 13, 330, 333, 334
- Theodosius I 57, 314, 316
- Theodosius II 109, 126 n. 24, 295, 317, 333 n. 39
- Theodotos Inscription 103
- Three Hebrew Youths 303, 304, 305, 306, 313, 333 n. 39
- Tiberias 16, 106, 129 n. 39, 133, 162 n. 25, 200, 339, 340, 343, 345, 346, 347
- Coin 52, 53, 264 n. 9
- Hadrianeum 346
- Titus 193, 324
- Toledot Yeshu* 181
- Tolentino, Cathedral of San Catervo (Italy) 303 n. 1, 318
- Tombs 15, 28, 29, 34, 37, 38, 42, 59, 62, 175 n. 66, 180, 198, 202, 205–208, 239, 248–251, 253, 307
- Tomb of Absalom 34, 40 n. 47
- Tomb of Bnei Hezir 34 n. 31
- Tomb of Queen Helena of Adiabene 36
- Tombstone 202, 207
- Torah 5, 19, 103, 155, 156, 168–175, 181, 182, 205, 207, 220, 222, 228, 229, 230, 270, 273
- Law 7, 32 n. 25
- Lectern 197
- Reading 4, 7, 39, 104, 160 n. 17, 162, 170
- Scroll 4, 5, 39, 98, 156, 168, 181, 199
- Tower of Babel 146
- Trajan 53, 311, 343
- Tree of Life 204, 205
- Trinity 306, 315
- Tripod Table 194, 195
- Tyche 52, 53
- Tyre 256
- Church 106
- Coin 52 n. 14, 148
- Temple of Melqart-Ba'al Šūr 148
- Tyrian Shekel 52
- Umm al-Rasas
- Church of the Lions 289 n. 39
- Church of St. Stephen 147 n. 28
- Umm el Umdan, Synagogue 98
- Uranos 222
- Valentinian III 317, 333 n. 39
- Vandalism (see Defacement)
- Venus 86, 87, 89
- Vespasian 203, 346
- Vigna Randanini, Sarcophagus 204
- Wall Painting 18, 27, 39, 64 n. 32, 97–118, 126, 147, 158 n. 8, 247, 266, 279, 303 n. 1
- Hellenistic 98
- Second Pompeian Style 98
- Synagogue 127, 142, 146, 151, 194, 243, 255
- Wine Making Scene 282, 283
- Wreath 36, 37, 52 n. 12, 166, 325, 341 n. 58
- Yannai (Poet) 286
- Yannai R. 229
- Yaphi'a/Japhia 163, 213 n. 1, 231
- Yaoz, Tel 34
- Yehudah Ha-Nasi/ Rabbi Judah I 11, 54, 56, 59, 200, 228, 229
- Yishmael R. 229
- Yodefath 127
- Yohanan R. 106, 127, 229, 266, 335 n. 44, 337, 340
- Yose R. 335
- Yose bar Halfota R. 340, 343, 344
- Zechariah (Prophet) 202, 203, 204
- Zeira R. 341, 348
- Zenobia 224
- Zeus 52, 53, 222, 246 n. 46
- Zeuxis of Herakleia 97
- Zincirli (Southern Turkey) 42 n. 59
- Zoar 15
- Zodiac 6, 7, 8, 13, 15, 18, 50, 56, 58 n. 25, 65, 68, 69, 70, 79, 81, 82, 111, 114, 128, 129, 131, 146, 155–186, 204, 213, 219, 224, 229 n. 106, 230, 231
- Zosimus 332, 333
- Zur Nathan 202