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ASAF FRIEDMAN, *Art and Architecture of the Synagogue in Byzantine Palaestina*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2019. XIX, 174 pp. – ISBN: 1-5275-327-6 (\$119.95).

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FRIEDMAN’S *Art and Architecture of the Synagogue in Byzantine Palaestina* calls for a reassessment of Greco-Roman figurative and geometric artistic motifs in Byzantine-era Palestinian synagogues. Rather than characterize such visual arts as “mere decoration” (p. XVII), as previous scholars have done, FRIEDMAN contends that the mosaic images in twelve fourth to seventh-century Palestinian synagogues constitute a visual language that followed literal and figurative readings of traditional literary sources, such as the Mishnah and the Talmud. More specifically, FRIEDMAN argues that such a visual language offered the “inward introspection and outward scrutiny” that defined the coming to be of the late-antique Jewish communities of Palestine (p. 159).

FRIEDMAN’S text consists of two parts. The first section examines the context of these late-antique synagogues, particularly the intellectual background of Jewish discourse on idolatry found in Rabbinic thought, Jewish exegesis, and Jewish mysticism. FRIEDMAN’S discussion of Greco-Roman visual motifs as meaningful symbols – rather than mere decorations – comes primarily in chapter three, where he discusses a common tripartite panel floor design consisting of Jewish symbols, depictions of biblical narratives, and zodiac signs. In this chapter, FRIEDMAN argues that the threat posed by pagan images was overcome by their purposeful placement on the synagogue floor, thus enabling the faithful to trample upon pagan belief in a kinetic declaration of Jewish rectitude. One does wonder, however, what it then meant for a Jew to walk on Jewish symbols and biblical narratives. Surely this could not have been understood to be similarly destructive. More discussion of this tension between diverse symbols and shared movement might have brought forth further insight regarding Jewish identity.

Part two then takes the reader through a detailed description of each of the twelve synagogues, setting forth both their architectural layout and their mosaic details. The synagogues that FRIEDMAN discusses are located

throughout the Byzantine region of Palestine, in places such as Scythopolis (modern-day Beit She'an), Galilee, the Hebron Hills, and Mount Carmel. FRIEDMAN discusses the synagogue mosaics structurally, moving from the narthex into the nave and into the aisles. In each case, he examines the vegetal, geometric, and narrative components of these programs. As mentioned above, FRIEDMAN's discussion focuses primarily on the tripartite floor panels. At the synagogue of Hammath Tiberias, for example, FRIEDMAN draws the reader's attention to the image of the sun god Helios in the central panel. While FRIEDMAN's discussion of this scene suggests the importance of the sun god, a more sustained analysis putting that image in dialogue with the menorahs in the southern panel and the two lions in the northern panel would have further indicated the syncretic construction of Jewish identity.

The greatest strength of this book is in its careful detailing of the mosaic images across all twelve of these late-antique Palestinian synagogues. It is clear that the author wishes to introduce this Jewish visual language into larger art historical discussions of late-antique Mediterranean art. FRIEDMAN situates the Jewish artistic vocabulary of Palestine within the broader context of Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greco-Roman, and Sasanian symbols, stating that all such influences came to bear on the synagogues of Palestine. However, FRIEDMAN never fully returns to this important point. Indeed, shortcomings throughout the text – analytical, structural, and stylistic – ultimately impede the clarity of the work's art historical intervention in the field.

Throughout both part one and part two, the discussion of the intellectual meaning and symbolism of figural and geometric designs in these Palestinian synagogues is not as sustained as the reader requires to fully follow the author's argument. For example, a longer treatment of the textual sources that are said to have informed Jewish visual language, as well as a deeper analysis of how the Jewish mosaics fit into the wider visual syncretism found in the Mediterranean environment, would have more fully shown the way visual culture can work in dialogue with literary sources to construct a unified identity across media. Furthermore, FRIEDMAN does not fully come back to his tantalizing thesis of the role played by Jewish visual language in the "becoming" of Jewish communities. Upon finishing the conclusion, the reader is still left wondering exactly what the Jews were "becoming", and against whom such "becoming" took place.

In terms of structure, a discussion of the twelve synagogues in question

woven more seamlessly into the analysis presented in part one would have allowed for greater understanding of the way in which each synagogue participates in this dialogue between Jewish art and text, and between pagan symbols and Jewish symbols. However, the current two-part structure leads to the second part being unclear in its discursive connections with the arguments presented in the first.

Finally, as regards style, the short and frequent subsections break the sustained flow of the argument. Smaller hurdles, such as frequent typos and syntactical errors, complicate the text for the reader. Finally, one longs to see photos of the actual synagogue mosaics. Instead, there are only architectural plans and digital reconstructions of the mosaic images. At a few moments in part one, FRIEDMAN points in the direction of Jewish ritual, claiming that the mosaics were but one aspect of a larger performative context. I would have enjoyed further discussion of Jewish ritual inside the synagogue. Photos of the actual mosaics would better capture the glitter and gleam of the diverse glass colors and would have aided in this investigation of ritual performance and phenomenology.

*Art and Architecture of the Synagogue in Byzantine Palaestina* offers an overview of twelve synagogues, their mosaic images, and a discussion of how such figural and geometric visual motifs functioned beyond “mere decoration”. Ultimately, the reader is left longing for greater analysis of the Jewish visual language of “becoming”, but, especially for readers unfamiliar with specifically Jewish late-antique Mediterranean art, the reader appreciates this introduction into this artistic community.

#### **Keywords**

architecture; Byzantine Palaestina; Jewish art; mosaics; synagogue