Uzi Leibner/Catherine Hezser (Hrsgg.): Jewish Art in Its Late Antique Context. Stuttgart: Mohr Siebeck 2016 (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 163). IX, 381 S. € 159.00. ISBN: 978-3-16-154388-3.

Uzi Leibner's and Catherine Hezser's insightful volume entitled "Jewish Art in Its Late Antique Context" is the result of a British-Israeli conference held at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 2014. Its stated goal is to analyze Late Antique Jewish art in relation to its surrounding Greco-Roman and Christian cultures. While this approach is not entirely new, the contributions show that it is a very fruitful one that yields valuable insights into many as yet unsolved questions.

While images are an important part of any culture at any time, in Late Antiquity they gained a particularly striking presence and importance. Late antique Jewish visual culture illustrates this fact particularly well as it strikingly differs from the preceding Second Temple period and subsequent centuries by significantly widening its range of visual expressions. Rejecting the assumption that images in churches or synagogues were merely an educational device for the illiterate, Leibner's and Hezser's introduction emphasizes the power of images that was exploited by late antique Jews and Christians alike. This notion of images as educational tools represents a backward projection from the Middle Ages and underestimates the powers and abilities the images had.

Lee Levine's contribution targets that very question asking "Why did late antique art flourish"? While there is evidence for figural art between the ninth and seventh century BCE, it is virtually absent from the three centuries preceding the destruction of the Second Temple. Orit Peleg-Barkat examines the image production before and shortly after the destruction of the Temple, which is often neglected because of the general absence of figurative images. The most common geometrical motif during the late Second Temple period was the rosette. Peleg-Barkat argues that the rosette might have been read as a reference to the decoration of the Temple and acted as a visual means of self-identification for the Jewish people. Levine identifies the decline of the priestly leadership after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE as the cause behind the gradual changes in the visual culture. The first evidence for the rise of figurative imagery is documented in a Mishnaic report by Rabban Gamaliel II (c. 90–120 CE) and, in the second century, we

first encounter coins with emperors' portraits and pagan gods and their temples. These figurative coins, however, might be a result of the Roman administration's decision more than it was the will of the Jewish subjects. But the rise of images of the Menorah is an important sign of the Jewish community's push for more conspicuous visual representation. The image has its roots in the late Second Temple period and proliferated from the second century on.

The proliferation of images of the Menorah is one of the central themes also discussed by Rachel Hachlili. She asks why this motif became the most important Jewish symbol. Some early coins from the late Second Temple period (specifically of king Mattathias Antigonus) and the famous relief from the Arch of Titus still depict two competing images: the Menorah and the showbread table. The latter was situated in the Temple opposite the Menorah. It was used for the display of bread and was usually depicted as a rectangular table with two stacks of six loaves of bread on it. After 70 CE, however, the showbread table virtually disappeared from Jewish imagery. The reasons for this decision are not entirely clear. Hachlili analyzes the various associations images of the Menorah might have evoked, among them light references, allusions to the Temple Menorah, and to the Shekhinah, the invisible divine presence. It certainly was a symbol that was aesthetically more pleasing and less likely to be confused with sacrificial tables in other religions. Hachlili and Levine also suggest that one reason for the Menorah's popularity was the contemporary proliferation of images of the cross in Christian art.

This relationship between Jewish and Christian art is a further central theme in the volume and is addressed by several authors. In the introduction the editors paint the late antique Mediterranean as a region that possessed a shared field of available iconographic choices. Markus Vinzent goes one step further and argues not just for a shared culture between Jews and Christians, but for a *unified* culture up until the time of the Bar-Kokhba revolt in the mid-second century. He argues that there is no compelling evidence for the existence of Gospel texts before c. 150 CE; the Pauline letters for example do not make references to them. Therefore, Christian art would have been Jewish art. This theory has a particular appeal to scholars of early Christian art as it would explain the somewhat strange absence of distinguishable Christian images before 200 CE. Vinzent's solution – that the early Christians did not feel a need for their own motifs because they identified largely

with Jewish culture – finds a parallel in Paul Corby Finney's book on the emergence of Christian art not cited by Vinzent.[1] Finney argues that there was no distinct Christian art before 200 CE and that Christians were part of the larger Greco-Roman society and therefore used their images. Thus, Vinzent's and Finney's theories might be seen to complement each other. While Vinzent's research centers on the areas with larger Jewish populations in the Eastern Mediterranean Finney concentrates on the West and specifically on Rome. Many of the authors in this volume interpret the ensuing proliferation of Jewish art to the competition between Christians and Jews (e.g. Levine and Hachlili). Zeev Weiss argues that Jews tried to re-appropriate their own culture that was exploited by Christians (after the parting of their ways).

Another recurring theme in this volume is figural images on synagogue floors. Rina Talgam argues that the famous fresco decoration on the walls of the Dura Europos synagogue was an exception to the rule that figurative imagery on walls was rejected. While the archaeological evidence suggests that Jewish communities indeed preferred images on floors instead of walls, some of the authors in this volume question this narrative. The state of preservation of most excavated synagogues presents a methodological problem – hardly any standing walls are preserved, and the remnants of paint in the debris are too fragmented to say if it was part of a figural, geometric, or monochrome decoration. Sean Leatherbury, whose contribution centers on images of blood sacrifices in late antique churches, emphasizes that evidence for a non-figurative tradition on walls is too scant and Weiss, in his survey article on the surviving mosaic decorations, presents compelling evidence for the existence of painted synagogue walls (p. 127). Talgam claims that the images in early synagogues such as at Dura were used for teaching, for which she, however, does not provide any evidence. The reason she presents for why images were then moved to the floor is that they distracted the worshippers during service. She proves her claim by citing Christian *ekphraseis*, which demonstrate the "agitated character" of viewing in late antiquity (p. 110). While this is certainly true, the sense of motion late antique viewers experienced according to the sources was invariably mentioned in a very positive light. The thesis just outlined remains unconvincing, but Talgam offers another explanation of why Jews might have depicted images on floors: they wanted to preclude image worship (p. 110), which, of course,

1 P.C. Finney: The Invisible God. The Earliest Christians on Art. Oxford 1994.

still was not encouraged despite the proliferation of figurative images. This compelling idea, however, is not elaborated upon and the article, which feels unfocussed in places, would have profited greatly if this hypothesis had been explored in greater depth.

Several articles address one of the lasting conundrums in late antique Jewish art – the depictions of the zodiac with the sun at its center. It appears in several synagogues of the fifth and sixth centuries, most famously at Bet Alpha, Sepphoris, and Hammat Tiberias. Roland Deines' somewhat unfocussed article offers an explanation for the overall program of these synagogue floors. He starts out by making assumptions about the viewer experience in these spaces. Unfortunately, this section is dense with broad statements that do little to support his argument such as the following: "Human curiosity seems to lead inevitably to questioning why certain things are displayed in a church or synagogue and why they are depicted in the way they were. The answer to those questions might have changed over the course of time and moved away from the initial intention of those who commissioned the building" (p. 160). Nonetheless, he eventually does reach his more specific historical thesis, which is that the three-partite floors depict the cosmic order. The first panel near the door often depicts biblical scenes such as the Aqedah, the Binding of Isaac. This is followed by the central zodiac panel and the "symbolic panel" near the Torah wall (usually two Menorot framing an architectural façade along with the shofar, incense shovels, and other objects). Deines interprets these three panels as symbolic depictions of history, creation, and Torah. While the allusion to the cosmic order and creation, and the connection between the "symbolic panel" and the Jewish Temple (rather than just the Torah) seems likely, his interpretation of the panel nearest to the entrance is problematic. In the synagogue at Na'aran and Hammat Tiberias, these panels depicting biblical stories are missing. Deines interprets the large inscriptions flanked by two lions in these two synagogues and the one at Susiya as (idiosyncratic) depictions of Daniel in the lions' den (p. 175–179). According to Deines, the lions represent danger and promise and are to be read as anti-imperial: "The lions […] can therefore be understood as a reminder of the dangers of a hostile world, especially of a world that wants to suppress the Jewish religion." (p. 178) This hypothesis, however, seems to rather reflect our modern assessment than a historical reality and is neither supported by the inscriptions nor by the images.

Deines' conclusion is equally problematic. He posits that the flourishing of Jewish figurative floor mosaics resulted from the Jews feeling threatened by Christian depictions, specifically those depicting scrolls and books. Deines refers to images of the *traditio legis*, which show Christ between Peter and Paul handing a scroll to Peter, and the famous depiction of a cabinet with four books in the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna. He seems to believe that these images depict the Jewish Torah received by Moses on Sinai. But the images clearly indicate that they represent Christ's new Law, that is the four gospels. In Ravenna the books are inscribed with the names of the evangelists and the scroll in the *traditio legis* images sometimes bears an inscription identifying it as the Law given by the Lord (*Dominus legem dat*).[2]

Hezser's article sets out to clarify the motif at the core of the zodiac mosaics, which is the personification of the Sun usually shown on a quadriga. She argues against one single meaning, instead demonstrating that the image of the Sun could be associated with a plethora of meaning by visitors to these synagogues. In a similar vein, Levine highlights the fact that these motifs are "borrowed motifs" (p. 71) taken from the shared imagery of late antique Greco-Roman culture. These images in synagogues, thus, not only spoke to Jews but also to people from other denominations who visited the spaces. We can assume that in Late Antiquity people frequently visited the religious spaces of the others and imagery that spoke to a vast section of the population would have proved very useful. Hezser meticulously analyzes the connotations and possible meanings that were associated with sun symbolism. It emerges that Jewish culture exploited solar imagery and did not differ greatly from its surrounding Hellenic and Near Eastern cultures. Most famously, Philo of Alexandria espoused solar and light symbolism using light as a metaphor for God. This rhetoric was taken up by the Christian writers and would have been understood by Christian visitors to those synagogues. Hezser also writes that Christian imagery made similar use of solar motifs citing the fragmented mosaic in the Christian decoration of the tomb of the Giulii in the Vatican necropolis. This, however, is the only extant example of solar attributes being used to depict the Christian God. Therefore, while the Jewish images were certainly understood by Christians it is interesting to note that they did not choose to use it in their own art. The question of why specific images from the pool of available motifs were chosen or not chosen

2 For the *traditio legis* see most recently A. F. Bergmeier: The *Traditio Legis* in Late Antiquity and Its Afterlives in the Middle Ages. In: Gesta 56, 2017, 27–52.

– such as the Christians shied away from depicting the zodiac except in the monastery of Mary at Beth Shean – is an interesting question arising from this volume and prompting further discussions.

Hezser also emphasizes that knowledge about the cosmic order was common among late antique people, and astronomical depictions could frequently be found on walls and doorposts. This brings us to a last major point that emerges from the contributions of this volume, namely that the surviving floor mosaics represent the "vox populi" (Levine p. 71), imagery that was not dictated by the elite but rather represents the choices and interests of the people using these spaces. Karen Stern's article discusses graffiti, the most everyday of images. Leibner argues for the relevance of rabbinic sources for our understanding of late antique iconographies. He, however, cautions that we do not have to automatically assume that those sources directly influenced the images. Rather, they might represent two parallel expressions of available concepts that were initially transmitted orally before they were translated into images and (rabbinic) texts. Peter Stewart discusses the mosaic at Beth Alpha, which stands out because of its crude style. He emphasizes the need for a discussion of quality in art history, a subject often (unjustly) avoided by art historians. In doing so he argues that the Beth Alpha mosaics are actually a testament to the elevating and translation of everyday popular style – specifically the aesthetic of Coptic textiles – into monumental art.

In conclusion, this is a most useful volume for specialists and readers broadly interested in late antique Jewish art. Points of critique are few. The publication might have profited from a more careful evaluation of the articles' relationship to the stated subject. For example, it is not immediately clear why Robin Jensens' article on the three youths in the fiery furnace and the emperor's portrait – a thoroughly Christian iconography – has been selected to be part of the volume. However, it finds an echo in Holger Zellentin's article on rabbinic sources on the imperial cult. But overall, the book provides many new and important insights into long-standing questions surrounding Jewish images from the era that saw an unparalleled explosion of Jewish art. The volume's goal of demonstrating the interconnected nature of Jewish art with its late antique surrounding cultures has certainly been fulfilled. Thanks to this approach, the volume not only offers interesting new hypotheses on highly specialized research questions, it also presents in its entirety a compendium that is immensely useful as an introduction to Jewish art in Late

Antiquity. This is a result of carefully chosen contributions that – with few exceptions – talk to each other in a most productive way.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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