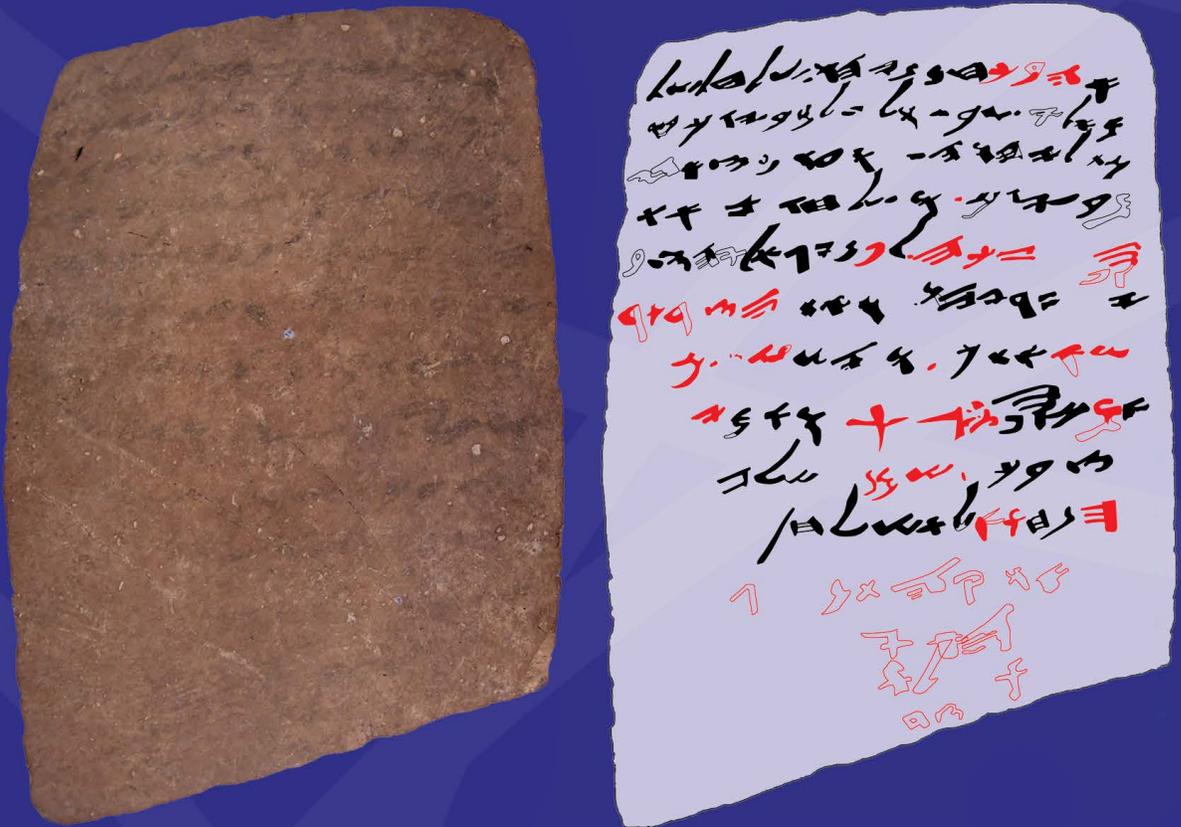


Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research



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UNEARTHING THE PAST SINCE 1900

Number 378 — November 2017



NUMBER 378 NOVEMBER 2017

Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research



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Ancient Synagogues—Archaeology and Art: New Discoveries and Current Research, by Rachel Hachlili. *Handbook of Oriental Studies 1, The Near and Middle East 105*. Leiden: Brill, 2013. xxxiv + 738 pp., 426 illustrations (including 64 color plates), 25 tables. Paper. €231.

Over the past 20 years, the study of ancient synagogues has blossomed into a vital subdiscipline within history, art history, and religious studies. Driven by archaeological discoveries and ongoing scholarly debates regarding their interpretation, several recent publications have been authored by leading scholars to organize their vast data (i.e., sites, finds, decoration, studies, etc.). Among these is Professor Rachel Hachlili's latest offering, *Ancient Synagogues—Archaeology and Art*, which can be considered a reflection of a career that spans over 40 years of research and teaching. It is not meant to be the "final word" on synagogues but a summary of recent developments up to 2013. Hachlili has, in the past, published many arguments about the growth and role of ancient synagogues; however, this work includes important previously unpublished data regarding her excavations. Her intended audience consists of graduate students and professional scholars, because she assumes her readers already have a solid understanding of biblical and ancient literature and archaeological methodology. With that said, the book appeals to a wide range of disciplines and provides definitions for technical terms.

As a "handbook," the volume is arranged thematically, and most of the 15 chapters can stand on their own as separate essays. Hachlili organized most chapters following this pattern: definition of terms, description of scholarly perspectives (i.e., recent historiography), outline of textual and archaeological evidence, and then her conclusions. Despite the density of the data, I found this format logical, clear, and enjoyable to read. The first half (chapters 1–5) forms the intellectual foundation for the subsequent chapters. Chapter 1 ("The Synagogue") describes their origins, based on textual and epigraphic evidence; she advocates for the "nuanced view" that the earliest synagogues developed from a variety of building types that served various functions.

Chapter 2 ("Second Temple Period Synagogues") introduces the reader to the earliest archaeological remains; while she recognizes that there is no firm epigraphic evidence to identify these assembly halls categorically as "synagogues," she accepts the ways their characteristics cumulatively form enough circumstantial evidence in favor of that classification. Surviving literary evidence indicates that Second Temple-period synagogues were ritualistic; by contrast, the archaeological evidence merely indicates that they were gathering spaces. Depending on the type of evidence from which scholars are drawing (historical or archaeological), they can derive different conclusions; Hachlili brilliantly shows that that these views are not mutually exclusive (pp. 49–54).

Chapter 3 ("Recently Excavated and Newly Published Synagogues") should have been titled "Second- to Seventh-Century Synagogues," which better describes its contents. Nevertheless, she supports the regional hypothesis that different typologies

arose in Galilee, Golan, and southern Judaea, indicating local and idiosyncratic development rather than an overarching schema or outside influence.

Chapter 4 ("Synagogue Architecture and Ornamentation") explores the spatial qualities and furnishings described in the previous chapter, attempting to strengthen her hypothesis of autochthonous development.

Chapter 5, "Synagogue Art, Significance and Impact," provides further treatment of sculptural reliefs and mosaics. In explaining the rise of figurative art, she concludes that pagan idolatry was no longer a threat, but rather "Jews needed to assert their own identity" (p. 284) apart from Christianity.

The second half delves deeper in analyzing different aspects of synagogal studies. Chapters 6 to 9 analyze the iconographical material (symbols, the menorah, Torah shrine, the four species of Sukkot, *shofar*, animals, plants, etc.), the calendrical zodiac, and biblical-narrative images.

Chapter 10 covers "Artists, Workshops and Repertoire," which is the book's most speculative section, postulating that Levantine workshops were segregated based on either ethnicity or religion, so that synagogue art should be considered products of Jewish artists. As such, any similarity with church decoration must be due to Jewish artists working for Christians who were, apparently, less discriminatory.

Chapters 11, 12, and 14 concern archaeological methodology (epigraphy, numismatics, and approaches to dating, respectively) and are insightful, since these are topics with which Hachlili has contended throughout her career.

Chapter 13 discusses the role of women in function and patronage, as well as their depiction within the synagogue. The final chapter provides a summary of the entire book, weaving the various threads of each chapter into a general narrative.

Hachlili does not shy away from weighing in on scholarly debates. Usually, she synthesizes, attempting to reconcile opposing theories. For example, one thesis holds that the synagogue came to represent (and so replace) the temple after it was destroyed in Jewish society, while an antithesis claims that there is no relationship between the two. In contrast, Hachlili maintains that the synagogue was never a substitute for the temple and had developed practices categorically distinct from sacrificial worship (pp. 5–6); nevertheless, eventually the key function of the synagogue's art and orientation was to commemorate the destroyed temple (p. 286). When discussing the temporal origins, she states that archaeology cannot conclusively prove that the synagogue was an architectural category until the 1st century A.D., but she also suggests that we should be open to the possibility that they developed earlier during the Hellenistic period, as epigraphic evidence indicates that synagogues were structural entities rather than mere ephemeral meeting places (pp. 9–10).

In a few instances, I found Hachlili's conclusions less convincing. In one case, she asserts that synagogue architecture was an "obvious . . . result of local improvisation" (p. 46), even though, as she presents it, the archaeological remains do not illustrate incremental development, which implies external influence. The omission of comparisons with similar designs of other cultures (i.e., Phoenician and Egyptian hypostyle halls

and Roman basilicas) leaves the reader questioning her inferences. In another case, she insists that the Torah shrine was the most important element of ancient synagogues (p. 162); yet that suggestion merely begs the question, since she also recognizes that 1st-century synagogues predate the systematic use of the Torah shrine (p. 50). In other words, the Torah shrine cannot be the central architectural element if it is absent in the formative period. Instead, the evidence, as she presents it, leaves the reader to ponder an alternative hypothesis: The Torah shrine emerged as one of several significant elements by the 4th century. Just how it developed remains uncertain (whether diachronically or synchronically), and several equally valid theories persist. I found her assertions provocative and intellectually stimulating, even when I drew different conclusions.

In its presentation, the book's texts and tables are well organized, while the illustrations are lacking—which is conspicuous in a book that focuses on art and architecture. I applaud the use of color images; however, they are useless if the color is faded, distorted by low-quality resolution, or if the image is too small for the reader to examine details.

Similarly, the architectural plans are small and stylistically inconsistent because they were compiled from a variety of sources. In the comparison charts, different scales are used for each synagogue, compromising their value (i.e., figs. III-33, IV-36). In other words, any comparison between two synagogues must take scale into account, since each design is inextricably determined by the size and elevation of the final structure, which is linked to cost (materials, labor, and time), and, in terms of archaeological analysis, these factors are used to assess social and cultural factors (i.e., hierarchy, wealth, technology, ritual, etc.).

In addition, Hachlili primarily analyzes two-dimensional ground plans and provides only a few elevations and reconstructions, rendering her architectural analysis somewhat incomplete. Even if three-dimensional reconstructions are speculative, they necessarily provide the reader a glimpse of the author's conceptual perspective; that is, archaeologists analyzing foundations do not just see the present pile of stones. Analysis must include imagining how the monument was *conceived* by the original builders and *perceived* by its ancient audience.

Comprehensive books usually overly generalize and, naturally, have lacunas. This book resists that characterization, since it touches on all the major themes while also providing specific and detailed content. Nevertheless, there are four areas that deserve comment. First, while it would hardly be appropriate to criticize this large book for not covering more topics, I must note, for the sake of future students, that there is room for further research. For example, Hachlili repeatedly mentions the relationship between the synagogue and non-Jewish architecture, especially Christian churches; yet she does not fully examine the possibilities of shared artistic traditions. Another significant subject that is missing is topography: Why were synagogues built in these locations? What was their relationship with surrounding buildings (urban context) and environment, and population settlement? What resources were needed (e.g., water for *miqva'ot*, quarries for stone, trade routes for imported

materials, forests for wood trusses)? Regarding artistic and architectural analysis, she omits discussions regarding color symbolism, sources of raw materials (quarries), projected costs, stereometrical and wood construction techniques, plumbing, and roofing design (including tiles).

Second, some of Hachlili's conclusions are unsatisfying, and there is room for future scholars to challenge or confirm them. For example, she asserts that synagogues contain Hellenistic-Roman motifs "divested of their original meaning" (p. 338). While this is a valid thesis, she provides neither proof nor explanation regarding how she formulated this sweeping generalization, and this allows the possibility of the alternative thesis (that non-Jewish ideas influenced Judaism).

Third, some passages are ambiguous. For instance, she claims that synagogues were not constructed according to "any stereotyped plan," but then she suggests they should be "classified in two distinct categories" (hall and basilica) (p. 220). Perhaps this is just an example of poor word choice, but it represents the way some of her sentences seem to contradict one another. In this case, if a synagogue can be classified, it must be conventional and, for any monument, architects must have a preconceived plan ("stereotype") in their minds prior to construction.

Finally, Hachlili is sometimes mistaken. For example, she describes basilica-style synagogues as "usually constructed out of concrete" (p. 220); obviously, she meant that basilica walls were built using the *opus reticulatum* technique (in which cement is sandwiched between stone masonry). She also states that the conch shell is a "uniquely Jewish symbol" (p. 285); however, *niche caps* are quite common and widespread throughout the Roman and Byzantine world—for example, several decorated the sidewalks of Pompeii, some examples decorate sarcophagi (Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican), and five reliefs adorned the forum in the Roman city of Kourion (Cyprus). It is important to emphasize that these criticisms should not overshadow the significant contributions of this book.

For me—an art historian whose expertise lies in the archaeology of late antiquity—this book has proven indispensable. Hachlili provides valuable summaries of complex debates, which are fully cited with commentary; an excellent organization of a vast amount of data that is easily referenced; and important new insights that stimulate contemplation. Her language is, for the most part, straightforward, fluid, and succinct. She has demonstrated that archaeology can shed light on synagogue practices and, thus, can elucidate rituals and liturgical development unrecorded in texts (pp. 44–49). Besides these, her excavation reports of Qaşrin and Qazion provide significant new data that are worth having in one volume (pp. 79–110, 617–77). In summary, all research libraries should own this book, and any scholar who is interested in the development of religion, architecture, and art should consider buying it.

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