

Art, History and the Historiography of Judaism in Roman Antiquity



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Art, History and the Historiography of Judaism in Roman Antiquity

By
Steven Fine



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Cover image: Model of the Beth Alpha synagogue, 1972 (courtesy of Yeshiva University Museum).

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TRANSLITERATION AND ABBREVIATIONS

Transliterations of Hebrew and of Jewish Aramaic dialects follow the “general” system used by the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972, 1:71) with the exceptions that the letter *tsadi* is transliterated with “ts” and *qof* is transliterated with a “q.” Abbreviations have been kept to a minimum, so that the broadest range of readers might navigate this volume with ease. The following abbreviations are used for primary sources that are frequently cited:

- Ant.* Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, unless otherwise noted is cited from *The Complete Works*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, R. Marcus, A. Wikgren, and L. Feldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930–1965), vols. 4–9.
- b. Babylonian Talmud, ed. Venice: Daniel Bomberg, 1521, unless otherwise noted.
- IJO Kleinasien* Walter Ameling, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, vol. 2, *Kleinasien* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).
- IJO Syria and Cyprus* David Noy and Hanswulf Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, vol. 3, *Syria and Cyprus* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).
- m. Mishnah. Unless otherwise noted, cited according to ed. Ch. Albeck (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1953).
- t. Tosefta. Unless otherwise noted, cited through tractate Baba Batra according to ed. S. Lieberman (2nd ed.; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), and from Sanhedrin on according to ed. M. S. Zuckerman (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1970).
- War* Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*. Unless otherwise noted, cited from *The Complete Works*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927–1928), vols. 1–3.
- y. Jerusalem (or Palestinian) Talmud, cited from *Talmud Yerushalmi: According to Ms. Or 4720 (Scal.3)* (Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 2005).

PREFACE

The essays assembled in this volume each touch on the relationship between texts and artifacts for the interpretation of ancient history—in our case, the Jewish experience under Rome and New Rome, leading up to the Islamic transformation of the eastern Mediterranean world during the seventh and eighth centuries. Some of the essays are new, the result of recent research and thinking. In some cases, I have returned to studies first conceived near the beginning of my career, revisiting old friends and seeing them through what I hope are more mature eyes. Most were written during the decade since I completed research for *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* in 2002 (it was published by Cambridge University Press in 2005 and somewhat revised in 2010), and particularly in response to that book and its reception. Some reviewers of *Art and Judaism* suggested that additional discussion of my methodology might be in order. I gladly take up their advice and introduce this volume with just that. Each essay begins with an “iconic” artifact that serves as an organizing vehicle for the entire piece—a lens through which to view the complex relationship between “things,” “words,” and their modern interpreters.

I am most grateful to my colleagues, Joseph Angel and Jess Olson, for encouraging me to take on this project, and to Jennifer Pavelko, my ever-creative editor at Brill, for supporting it from its inception. As always, the people of E. J. Brill have been a delight to work with. I especially thank Katelyn Chin, Julia Berick, and Rachel Crofut for seeing this volume through the press with such diligence, and Gene McGarry—who saved me from innumerable errors. The publishers of the original versions of essays included in this volume have been most generous in allowing me to reprint and expand upon my earlier studies, and I thank them very much.¹

¹ Chapter 1, “See, I Have Called the *Renowned* Name of Bezalel, Son of Uri . . .’: Josephus’s Portrayal of the Biblical ‘Architect,’” is updated from an earlier version that appeared in *The Temple of Jerusalem: From Moses to the Messiah: Studies in Honor of Professor Louis H. Feldman*, ed. Steven Fine (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 27–44.

Chapter 2, “A Note on Ossuary Burial and the Resurrection of the Dead in First-Century Jerusalem,” is updated from an earlier version that appeared in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 51 (2000): 69–76, Reprinted by permission.

Jesse Abelman of the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies at Yeshiva University helped with all technical aspects of this project with good cheer and good sense. The Yeshiva University Center for Israel Studies funded Jesse's work, which was critical to the project.

This volume, like most of what I do, exists in no small part thanks to my wife, Leah Bierman Fine, and is enriched by our most important project, our sons Elisha and Koby. I am pleased to dedicate *Art, History and the Historiography of Judaism in Roman Antiquity* to my friend and mentor, Sylvia Axelrod Herskowitz. Sylvia was the founding director and for decades the guiding light of Yeshiva University Museum. One of the great Jewish museum professionals of our time, she retired in 2009 after an amazingly productive career in museology. I first came to know Sylvia Herskowitz in 1989, when she called me in Jerusalem and asked if I—a mere graduate student at the time—might be available to curate an exhibition in Talmudic archaeology in New York. I jumped, and this encounter bloomed into our award-winning *Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the*

Chapter 4, “When I Went to Rome . . . There I Saw the Menorah: The Jerusalem Temple Implements in Rabbinic Memory, History, and Myth,” is updated from an earlier version that appeared in *The Archaeology of Difference: Gender, Ethnicity, Class and the “Other” in Antiquity: Studies in Honor of Eric M. Meyers*, ed. Douglas R. Edwards and C. Thomas McCollough (Boston: American Schools Of Oriental Research, 2007), 1:169–180.

Chapter 5, “Coloring the Temple: Polychromy and the Jerusalem Temple in Late Antiquity,” appears as “Babylonian Talmud *Sukkah* 51b/*Baba Batra* 4b: The Polychromy of Herod's Temple,” in *Talmuda de-Eretz Israel: Archaeology and the Rabbis in Late Antique Palestine*, ed. Steven Fine and Aaron Koller (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

Chapter 6, “Jewish Identity at the Cusp of Empires: The Jews of Dura Europos between Rome and Persia,” is updated from an earlier version that appeared in *Cultural Identity and the Peoples of the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Erich S. Gruen (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011), 289–306. Reprinted by permission.

Chapter 8, “Furnishing God's Study House: An Exercise in Rabbinic Imagination,” is based largely upon my “‘Chancel’ Screens in Late Antique Palestinian Synagogues: A Source from the Cairo Genizah,” in *Religious and Ethnic Communities in Later Roman Palestine*, ed. Hayim Lapin, *Studies and Texts in Jewish History and Culture* 5 (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 1999), 67–85. Reprinted by permission.

Chapter 10, “Between Liturgy and Social History: Priestly Power in Late Antique Palestinian Synagogues?,” is revised from an earlier version that appeared in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 56, no. 1 (2005): 1–9. Reprinted by permission.

Chapter 11, “The Menorah and the Cross: Historiographic Reflections on a Recent Discovery from Laodicea on the Lycus,” is slightly updated from the version that appeared in *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations in Honor of David Berger*, ed. Elisheva Carlebach and Jacob J. Schacter (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 31–50.

Chapter 12, “Jews and Judaism under *Byzantium and Islam*,” is slightly updated from the version that appeared in *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition (7th–9th Century)*, ed. Helen Evans with Brandie Ratliff (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012), 102–106, copyright © 2012 by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Reprinted by permission.

Synagogue in the Ancient World (1997). From that project to the present, Sylvia has supported my work—and my dreams—in every way. This volume is for Sylvia, with love.

Steven Fine

Erev Shavuot, 5772

May 25, 2012

INTRODUCTION

Historians who always insist on the need to reconstruct the *Sitz in Leben* of the phenomena they treat should apply their professional insights to themselves as well.

—Amos Funkenstein, “Jewish History Among the Thorns” (1995)¹



Figure 1. Jacob Binder, *The Talmudist*, Boston, 1919 (courtesy of Milton Freeman).

¹ Amos Funkenstein, “Jewish History among the Thorns,” in *Thinking Impossibilities: The Intellectual Legacy of Amos Funkenstein*, ed. E. A. Westman and D. Biale (University of Toronto Press, 2008), 311, a revised translation of an article that appeared in Hebrew in *Zion* 60 (1995), 335–347.

In 1926, at the height of the “Roaring Twenties,” the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, received with great fanfare a large oil painting first known as *The Old Talmudist*, and then as *The Talmudist* (painted in 1919, Figure 1).² This painting was the creation of Jacob Binder (1887–1987), a local Jewish artist and a student/associate of prominent American artists Joseph De Camp and John Singer Sargent. Binder was an unlikely artist to be so honored. A naturalized American and a Boston portraitist trained in the art academies of Vilna and Petrograd, Binder painted *The Talmudist* based upon sittings of recent Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe in the Dorchester and Roxbury sections of Boston. This large canvas presents an aging European Jew, bedecked in a flowing white *tallit*, a silver collar adorning the prayer shawl. His head rests on his arm in a contemplative mode common to late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century portraiture as he pores over a page of Talmud in a traditional manner. In the background, a bookcase is stuffed with the large tomes of the Babylonian Talmud.

The Talmudist was more than just a somewhat early example of a genre of nostalgia painting that was later to cover the walls of many American Jewish homes. It was to become the cause célèbre of the *Boston Jewish Advocate*, the local Jewish weekly, in its fight for Jewish cultural position in the deeply competitive yet entrenched world of Boston society. The publisher, Alexander Brin, made the donation of this painting to the museum a major communal project, enlisting prominent community leaders, scholars, and the general population—both Jews and, to some extent, non-Jews. The donation of *The Talmudist* was presented as nothing less than a communal obligation, a response to a supposedly anti-Semitic painting that drew on traditional medieval Christian themes of “Ecclesia” and a broken “Synagoga” by Sargent at the Boston Public Library (Figure 2). It was to be a statement of Jews having “made it” in America. Jews were outraged by the Sargent painting, even while the artist, a Brahmin himself, was apparently clueless regarding the affront.³ *The Talmudist* was a conscious attempt to buy and assert a place in the inner sanctum of Boston’s cultural elite, the Museum of Fine Arts. Truth be told, according to museum records, *The Talmudist* has never been publicly exhibited at the MFA. This says much about the unequal relationship between the established museum on the Fenway—which as a result of the Sargent

² Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 26.201. Dimensions: 107 × 101.92 cm.

³ Sally M. Promey, *Painting Religion in Public: John Singer Sargent’s “Triumph of Religion” at the Boston Public Library* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).



Figure 2. John Singer Sargent, “Synagoga,” detail from *Triumph of Religion*, Boston Public Library, 1919 (courtesy of the Boston Public Library).

incident probably could not afford *not* to accept the painting—and the Americanizing Jewish community. To the Jewish donors, this painting, by now long forgotten, was of great importance. It was construed as a cultural icon, as a way for new generations of American Jews to remember “a world passed by.” Some of the donors to this project will be well known to readers of this volume. They included, most prominently, Harvard’s Harry

Austryn Wolfson, holder of the recently endowed Nathan Littauer Professorship of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy (1925), the first such position in an American university. This donation was touted in a headline on September 30, 1926: “Professor Wolfson Contributes to ‘The Talmudist’ Fund.” The article reported that Wolfson “is glad to be numbered among the benefactors and public spirited men and women who are seeking to represent this distinguished portrait as a gift on the part of the Jewish community to the famous Art Museum in the Fenway.”⁴ For the Jews of Boston, Wolfson symbolized their own transition from the world of *The Old Talmudist* to their new American identities.⁵ He was the academic trophy of an emerging Jewish community as it developed a new American-Jewish synthesis, one that was purveyed by the *Jewish Advocate*. This identity was “modern,” insofar as it was benignly respectful to an increasingly distant tradition; it was Hebraist, Zionist, and above all, Americanist. Another contributor was Samuel Neusner, then of the *Jewish Advocate’s* Western Massachusetts edition, and soon the father of a child who would develop as a preeminent historian of ancient Judaism, Jacob Neusner (b. 1932).⁶ My family too had a part in this project—a then-unidentified model for the painting was one Joseph Freeman, a poor carpenter and recent immigrant, and my great-grandfather (Figure 3).⁷

This may seem a strange place to begin a book on Jewish art in antiquity, except that it isn’t. The image of *The Talmudist* appeared shortly thereafter in the book review section of the *Boston Evening Transcript*, illustrating

⁴ “Professor Wolfson Contributes to ‘The Talmudist’ Fund,” *The Jewish Advocate* (Boston), September 30, 1926, 1. No document relating to this event is preserved in Wolfson’s archive at Harvard, though invitations to a number of art exhibits by Jewish artists are preserved.

⁵ Leo W. Schwarz, *Wolfson of Harvard: Portrait of a Scholar* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1978), especially Isadore Twersky’s “Harry Wolfson, in Appreciation,” which introduces this volume (xiii–xxvii).

⁶ “Additional Contributions Received for Binder Find,” *The Jewish Advocate*, August 5, 1926, 2. For an interview with Jacob Neusner about his father, see “Samuel Neusner: The Ledger’s Founding Father,” *The Jewish Ledger* (Hartford, CT), October 21, 2009, <http://www.jewishledger.com/articles/2009/10/21/news/news04.txt> (accessed May, 2012).

⁷ *Jewish Advocate*, January 10, 1944, 10 (<http://www.dorchesteratheneum.org/page.php?id=654>), cited by Richard Heath, *Synagogues of Dorchester* (Dorchester, MA: Dorchester Athaenaeum, 2004), frontispiece. See also Zu Freeman, “When Grandpa Saw the Light,” *Yankee Magazine* 51, no. 11 (1987): 48–49. Actually, Freeman was my step-grandfather, marrying my great grandmother, Jane Yum Aarons, after the death of her first husband Louis Aarons in 1912, and raising my paternal grandmother, Kate Aarons Fine (Milton Freeman and Leonard Fine, “Aarons Family Tree,” unpublished).



Figure 3. Joseph Freeman, a model for Jacob Binder's *The Talmudist*, ca. 1923 (courtesy of Milton Freeman).

a volume that is of more than passing interest.⁸ Above the almost melodramatic image of *The Talmudist* is the title “Judaism in the First Centuries,” which begins a review of George Foot Moore’s legendary—and still very useful—volume of the same name.⁹ The lines between talmudic times and the early twentieth century were blurred by an editor’s choice of illustration. Moore, like his contemporaries, read the ancient rabbis through the lens of their own world, as many (especially Samuel Neusner’s son, Jacob) have detailed. *The Talmudist*—particularly as it appears in the

⁸ Sidney Homer, “Judaism in the First Centuries,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, April 16, 1927, book section, 3.

⁹ See George F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927–1930). A full intellectual biography of Moore is a desideratum. In the meantime, see F. S. Lusby and Steven Fine, “George Foot Moore,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. L. Jones (New York: Macmillan, 2005), 9:6176–77.

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