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As the title suggests, in this imposing work, Lee I. Levine of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem presents, through the prism of visual culture, a broad survey of Jewish history from biblical times (circa 1200 BCE) until the rise of Islam in the seventh century CE. In the preface, Levine surveys previous related research organized according to various methodological approaches to the history of Israelite-Jewish art and alerts the reader to the structure of his own discussion. The first four parts of his presentation proceed in chronological order, while the remaining two parts deal with art-historical and sociological issues. The detailed table of contents is available online at http://vufind.carli.illinois.edu/vf-uiuc/Record/uic_3133291/TOC.

Levine's achievement is a remarkable synthesis of a vast amount of previous scholarly research presented in a clear and concise way (see the extensive bibliography on pages 483-557), combined with his own often innovative, challenging, and sometimes debatable contributions to the ongoing discussion of various issues. For example, Levine argues energetically that Jewish art emerged in late antiquity, particularly in the fourth to seventh centuries, as a response to Byzantine Christianity.

Levine's discussion of the emergence of the menorah as a universal Jewish symbol may serve as an illustrative example of the success of his overall presentation. In the course of this discussion, Levine provides a “sampling” of twelve scholarly opinions ascribing various ideas or themes to the menorah. However, in his opinion, “instead of trying to posit one or more reasons for the menorah's popularity, it may be the better part of wisdom to try and elucidate the wider Byzantine context that provided the setting, opportunity, and most importantly, need for the widespread use in late antiquity of Jewish symbols in general, and the menorah in particular” (p. 343). Levine argues that “by the fourth century, the use of symbols was becoming more ubiquitous than ever before, and while Christianity spearheaded this development with all the imperial and ecclesiastical means at its disposal, Jews...
could hardly remain unaffected.” He goes on to argue convincingly that the popularity of the menora among Jews should be related to the “dramatic emergence of the cross in the fourth century as the main symbol of Christianity” (p. 345). His argument is reinforced by an illustrative example of his generally highly effective use of illustrations, specifically figure 118(2) on page 347, showing side by side a number of lamps from Jerusalem decorated with prominent symbols either of the cross or the menora.

In Levine’s view, the surprising use of pagan mythological imagery in Jewish art, particularly found in synagogues, is best understood as a reflection of the close association between the Patriarchate and the Jewish urban aristocracy and their acceptance of Greco-Roman culture. The majority of the rabbinic sages in the Talmudic period, however, were less accepting of Greco-Roman culture and particularly the use of pagan mythological imagery in visual art. Levine emphasizes what he sees as a “disconnect” between rabbinic tradition and archaeological finds (see especially chapter 20, “Art and the Rabbis”). This contention is particularly problematic for me; in my publications I have suggested comparisons between rabbinic traditions and a variety of artistic and archaeological artifacts.[1]

For example, in his discussion of the Tabernacle Menorah, especially as represented in the Hammat Tiberias synagogue mosaic, which dates from the fourth century, Levine refers to the depiction of the flames leaning in opposite directions, three from each side, toward the seventh central flame that points upward. He adds that this is “a pattern noted later on in the Bavli (Menaḥot 98b). Surely this does not mean that a fourth-century synagogue artist was influenced by a rabbinic dictum that is preserved only in a later and geographically distant source” (p. 421). However, it should be mentioned that the tradition referred to is cited there in the Babylonian Talmud as a Baraita (i.e., a Tannaitic tradition) (see also B. Megillah 21b): “For as it has been taught in a Baraita: ‘facing toward the front of the Menorah shall the seven flames cast light’ (Numbers 8:2)—this teaches that [the flames] would face toward the middle flame.” Moreover, an even fuller version of this rabbinic tradition is found in Sifre Zuta on Numbers 8:2 (ed. Horovitz, p. 255), which most scholars regard as a collection of Tannaitic traditions[2] (up to the first part of the third century): “And from where [do we know] that that all the flames were leaning toward the middle flame? Scripture teaches ‘facing toward the front of the Menorah’ (Numbers 8:2) ... Rabbi Shimon said: ‘When I went to Rome and saw there the Menorah. All the flames were leaning toward the middle flame’.”

Here we have a rabbinic midrashic tradition confirmed by visual testimony attributed to the second-century Palestinian sage, Rabbi Shimon (bar Yoḥai), whatever its historical validity, that seems clearly to predate the Hammat Tiberias synagogue mosaic and also seems roughly parallel in geographical provenance, Palestine in late antiquity. It certainly seems fair to assume that the rabbinic depiction of the Tabernacle Menorah may have been circulating, at least as oral tradition, in fourth-century Palestine.

Similarly, in his discussion of the zodiac signs and the figure of the god Helios found repeatedly in the Jewish art of late antiquity (chapter 16), Levine notes that “the zodiac signs are mentioned in a number of literary texts from roughly this period [i.e., the Byzantine period in Palestine]: scattered references in rabbinic literature (e.g., Tanḥuma, Vayeḥi 16, ed. Buber, p. 111a)” (p. 321n18).[3] Here we find a midrashic interpretation of Genesis 49:28: “‘All these are the tribes of Israel twelve’ ... the tribes—it goes on the order of the world, the day twelve hours, the night twelve hours, the year twelve months, the constellations/zodiac signs (mazalot) twelve. Therefore, all the tribes of Israel twelve.” However, a fuller and more informative passage is found elsewhere in
the Tanhuma-Yelammedenu literature: “Rabbi Ḥanina’ in the name of Rabbi Yosi bar Ḥanina’: What is the meaning of ‘and, behold, this day you are (hinkhem ha-yom) [as the stars of the heavens for a multitude]’ (Deuteronomy 1:10)? Your encampment [haniyyatkhem] this day is as the stars of the heavens ... just as the Holy One, blessed be He showed Abraham; that He showed him all the constellations/zodiac signs (mazalot) surrounding the Divine Presence (Shekhinah) ... the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, just as the constellations/zodiac signs surround Me, and My Presence [kevodi] is in the middle, so too your descendants will in the future multiply and encamp ensign by ensign and my Divine Presence will be in the middle, as it is said, ‘And the tent of meeting shall set forth, the camp of the Levites in the midst of the camps; as they encamped, so shall they set forth, [every] man in his place according to their ensigns’ (Numbers 2:17), that they were going and surrounding the Ark” (Deuteronomy Rabbah, ed. Lieberman, Devarim 16, p. 16). Rabbi Yosi bar Hanina’ was a second-generation Palestinian Amora, active in the second half of the third century. So, despite the fact that this rabbinic tradition has apparently only been preserved in what might be regarded as a postclassic rabbinic text, [4] it seems reasonable to assume that it may well have circulated orally in Palestine by the second half of the third century. Indeed, this passage lends support to the suggestion that the depictions of Helios (Sol Invictus) in the center of the zodiacs found in Byzantine Palestinian synagogues may have represented to those who constructed them and worshipped there some aspect of the Divine Presence of the Jewish God, as has been suggested by some scholars (Levine, p. 327n50).

Levine’s concluding remarks are instructive: “if we are to understand the circumstances of a given era in antiquity to the greatest extent possible, literary and archaeological evidence as well as both internal (Jewish) and external (non-Jewish) sources must be fully utilized and integrated” (p. 475).

Levine’s Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity is a major contribution to our understanding of Jewish history from biblical times to the rise of Islam from the perspective of Israelite-Jewish art. It is highly recommended for any library including Jewish studies research. It will provide a solid basis for ongoing scholarly discussion and debate and for teaching. Levine’s engaging way of presenting the vast amount of material included in this study makes it accessible to scholars, students, and interested laypeople.

Notes


[3]. The actual reference is on page 111a. See also Tanḥuma Printed Version, Vayeḥi 15.


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