CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY THROUGH ART: JEWISH ART AS A MINORITY CULTURE IN BYZANTIUM

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This paper will focus on the role played by visual art in constructing the ethnic and religious identity of the Jewish community as a minority group in Byzantium. A cultural identity, in the full sense of the term, is not only how a person sees himself, but also how he perceives himself in relation to others. Jewish art took into account the contact with others in fostering the internal dialogue among members of the community, and therefore in order to understand its development in the Byzantine period, it should be examined against the background of contemporary Christian art with which it had a profound and multidimensional dialogue.

The complex interrelationship between Jewish and Christian art in early Byzantium was dynamic and under constant renegotiation. The Jewish response to Christian art was ambivalent and not always consistent. One can point to processes of assimilation to the predominant architecture and art, but one also takes note of the segregation from it. The interactions between Jewish art and Christian art were of a dialectic nature and affected both sides. At times the relationships bore the character of a polemic, either overt or covert, but there were cases when they bore testimony to a similar mentality and a large shared inventory of images.

In characterizing these mutual relationships, we must employ a varied vocabulary that ranges, on the one hand, from acculturation and assimilation, through the borrowing and adaptation of ideas, models, and motifs taken from the majority culture to differentiation reflected through the use of an exclusive set of symbols and the omission of others, on the other. In examining the visual dialogues between Judaism and Christianity, we must pay careful attention to the multiple voices in each of them.

The interaction between Judaism and Christianity in early Byzantine art has become an issue of enormous scholarly interest in recent years. The basis for this approach to Jewish art was laid in Kurt Weitzmann and Herbert Kessler’s joint research of the paintings in the synagogue
at Dura-Europos, where one can discern a polemical dialogue with Christian art and pagan cults,\(^1\) and is also evident in Elisheva Revel-Neher’s studies.\(^2\) Zeev Weiss’s majestic volume on the Sepphoris synagogue\(^3\) and Steven Fine’s thought-provoking book, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, have also made important contributions to the topic.\(^4\)

The locus of my study is Jewish art of the early Byzantine period in Palaestina and Arabia, which is better represented in archaeological discoveries than that of the Diaspora. By contrast to the wealth of information concerning Jewish art from the fourth to eighth centuries, we know almost nothing, if anything at all, about Jewish art in Middle and Late Byzantium.

It is not my intention to provide a full and comprehensive survey of the artistic finds, as they have already been dealt with in various general studies.\(^5\) I wish to draw attention to some methodological aspects and to focus on a number of principal subjects which, in my view, heighten our understanding of the dialogue between Jewish and Christian art in Byzantium. The subjects under discussion deal with the changes of attitudes toward figurative art, the difficulties arising from the fact that the two rival faiths share a common sacred text, their different sentiments regarding the Temple in Jerusalem, and their approach to the classic pagan artistic legacy. Finally, I will relate to the subject of exclusive symbols.

This paper relates to the works of art as historical documents. A careful examination of them and their inclusion in the scientific discourse makes a richer perception of the past possible. Sometimes the art confirms the textual evidence and at others times contradicts it. This lack of agreement obliges us to assume that the historical picture

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\(^4\) S. Fine, *Art & Judaism in the Greco—Roman World; Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* (Cambridge, 2005).