THE CODEX BARBARUS SCALIGERI, THE CHRISTIAN TOPOGRAPHY, AND THE QUESTION OF JEWISH MODELS OF EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

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In her three important books, as in her other studies of Judaism and medieval manuscript illumination, Elisheva Revel-Neher has provided a broad and sturdy foundation for understanding the ways in which Jewish art may have provided a basis for the Christian tradition.¹ With exceptional intellectual delicacy, she has eschewed any simple explanation, proposing, instead, that the relationship between Jewish and Christian biblical art was both complex and interactive. She sums up this view at the end of Le témoignage de l’absence:

Ainsi, le peintre des manuscrits bibliques byzantins copie-t-il ses modèles juifs dont la silhouette s’affirme de plus en plus sur le fond de l’iconographie de Byzance. Formes et traditions formelles s’imbriquent, s’interchangent et se déplacent, dans l’ombre de ces modèles. Mais c’est la signification qui détermine l’impact de l’image, à Byzance comme dans le monde juif. Le message iconographique des objets du Sanctuaire parle le langage de la vérité théologique.²

With these words, Revel-Neher tackled the question all scholars face when dealing with the issue of Jewish sources for the Christian artistic tradition, even and especially as more evidence is unearthed in Israel. My contribution in honor of her retirement from the Hebrew University’s Department of Art History is therefore but a footnote to her magnificent work—an effort to light a flickering candle in the Jewish ombre that seems to overshadow the illustrations of the enigmatic treatise known as the Christian Topography that is at the heart of much of Revel-Neher’s own scholarship.

Commonly ascribed to Cosmas Indicopleustes, but recently attributed to Constantine of Antioch, the Christian Topography was, from

² Revel-Neher (1998), 123.
its inception in the mid-sixth century, intended to be illustrated;\(^3\) and
the four surviving Middle Byzantine manuscripts certainly preserve
many of the essential characteristics of the original pictorial system.\(^4\)
As Revel-Neher has shown, the vestiges of the lost late antique model
include specific Jewish elements in the Byzantine copies, including,
most notably, the characteristic form of the Tabernacle that serves as
the schematic basis of Constantine of Antioch's theological specula-
tions. Revel-Neher demonstrated that the slightly trapezoidal “outer
courtyard” capped by an arched “Sancta Sanctorum,” representing the
sacred structure underlying Constantine's treatise, owes much to Jewish
representations of the \textit{Aron ha-Kodesh} (Ark of the Covenant). Just as
important, however, the diagram of the Tabernacle acquired its own
distinct meaning in the new Christian context—in fact, a subversive
one. The authoritative silhouette taken over from Jewish art provides
a schema that, in an act of supersession, is literally “fleshed out” by
Christian figures painted on top of it.\(^5\)

In other miniatures, a putative reliance on Jewish sources is less eas-
ily understood. Why would the original illuminator of the \textit{Christian
Topography} have consulted a Jewish model for the Sacrifice of Isaac,
for instance, a subject that by the sixth century was ubiquitous in the
Christian world?\(^6\) Yet, the depiction in the manuscripts of the \textit{Christian
Topography} (e.g., Florence, Bibl. Med. Laur., Cod. Plut. IX. 28, fol. 132v;
Fig. 1) includes all three distinctive digressions from the biblical text
found in earlier and contemporary Jewish representations: the Hand
symbolizing God's voice, the ram tethered to the bush, and Isaac bound
with his hands tied behind his back.\(^7\) Inspired by the midrashic tradition,
the last (as well as the Hand) appears in the sixth-century mosaic at

\(^3\) Cf. Wolsa-Conus (1968–73); Wolska-Conus (1990); Revel-Neher (1995). These
views greatly complicate, though do not entirely subvert, the powerful claims made
in Weitzmann (1971).

\(^4\) Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cod. gr. 699; Stornajolo (1908); Sinai, St.
Catherine's Monastery, Cod. gr. 1186; Weitzmann and Galavaris (1990); Florence, Bib-
lioteca Medicea Laurenziana, MS. Plut. IX.28; Smyrna (Izmir), Evangelical School, B.8
(destroyed); Strzygowski (1899) and Bernabö (1998).

\(^5\) See my own elaboration of Revel-Neher's ideas in Kessler (1990/91), Kessler (1993),
Kessler (1994).

\(^6\) Augustine chided Faustus for ignoring the fact that the sacrifice of Isaac “is repeated
in so many tongues and portrayed in so many places;” \textit{Contra Faustum Manichaeum},
22.73 (\textit{PL} 42:446).

\(^7\) Weitzmann and Bernabö (1999), 87.