

Review: Michael Kaniel, *Judaism*, Blandford Press, Poole, Dorset, 1979

Pages: 160

Religious Trinkets for the Beholding

The author has collated some beautiful examples of temple, feast day, and Torah objects.

These are excellent cultural and archaeological evidences of the history of the Jewish people stretching back to Moses, witnesses to the truth of the Old Testament.

The book would suit those interested in art history rather than Judaism as a religion, although the two are intertwined.

There is a palpable thread of vanity, that the Jews through precious artworks attempted to build a relationship with God:

“When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good *is there* to the owners thereof, saving the beholding *of them* with their eyes?”

Ecclesiastes 5.11

I) Judaism and Art (pp. 2-11)

Ancient synagogue mosaics, have been uncovered (e.g., Bet Alpha in northern Israel in 1928), and Dura Europos in Syria (1932).

Maimonides created the *Code of the Jewish Law* in the 11thC in Spain.

Byzantine synagogues often had pagan symbolism on their mosaic floors (e.g. goddesses).

The Temple artist Bezalel (Hb. “in the shadow of God”) was filled with “the spirit of God, with wisdom, with insight and with knowledge in every craft.”

In Jewish lore God is referred to as the Supreme Artist who first designed the world.

Japheth means beauty.

There are 613 *mitsvot* in the Old Testament.

II) Jewish Art in Antiquity (pp. 12-20)

The Dura Europos was built AD244-5 in Syria. On its columns seven-branched *menoriot* are depicted.

The First Temple took six and a half years, 30,000 Israelites, 150,000 Canaanites, and 3,300 supervisors to build.

The Second Temple was completed 515BC and Cyrus returned the vessels.

In 167BC Antiochus IV took away the vessels and converted the temple to Zeus worship. The Hasmonean family (Mattathias and five sons) revolted and the Greco-Syrians driven out in 165BC.

Herod, the “Great Builder” (73-4BC) doubled the Temple Mount area, raised the sanctuary forty cubits and broadened it by thirty. He placed a golden Roman eagle atop one of the Temple gates for Rome.

III) The Synagogue in Antiquity (pp. 21-30)

Bet Haknesset means synagogue (“House of Assembly”).

In AD70 there were said to be at least 394 synagogues.

The first one was said to have been built in Babylon during the exile.

The earliest datable archaeological remains of a synagogue are from Alexandria, Egypt during Ptolemy III (247-221BC).

The Capernaum synagogue had a Star of David on an internal frieze.

At Ostia, Rome, a 1stC synagogue has been discovered.

Galilee had over a hundred synagogues after the Bar Kochba revolt of AD132-5AD against Rome.

Mosaic floors had zodiac signs with constellation names inscribed and a chariot and sun at the centre, also personifications of the four seasons at corners.

In 1966, Gaza, a large 6thC mosaic floor of David playing the harp was found in a synagogue.

IV) Early Funeral Art (pp. 31-34)

Jewish catacombs have been discovered in Rome under the Appian Way; symbolised with the shofar, lulav, and circumcision knife.

V) Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts (pp. 35-49)

A *genizah* is the place of scroll concealment, literally meaning “treasury”.

Twenty-four cartloads of Jewish books were burnt in Paris on June 17, 1242.

The *Halacha* (‘Jewish Law’) prohibits any form of Biblical adornment for scrolls.

A Torah found with God’s name written in gold was to be hidden.

The ‘Letter of Aristeas’ (2ndC BC) was supposedly all written in gold.

Micrography was laborious and painstaking art of ornamental minuscule Hebrew decoration.

Prayer books or *mahtsorim* were used for festivals.

Hebrew manuscript illumination schools are: Oriental, Spanish, Italian, and German.

The Kennicott Bible, now in the Bodleian, was completed 1475 in Corunna, NW Spain by Moses ibn Zabara.

There is the 1483 Lisbon Bible.

In the 14thC in Germany, Jews had to wear bell-shaped *Judenhut* (type of headgear).

VI) The Art of the Hebrew Printed Book (pp. 50-55)

Canon law forbade Christians taking interest on loans, Jews resorted to finance for their livelihood, serving as bankers and tax collectors.

Gutenberg borrowed money from the Jews through an associate to finance his moveable-type printing press, an invention which helped ensure Jewish literature preservation from fanatical burnings.

VII) The Sabbath in Jewish Art (pp. 58-87)

The *mitzvot* were designed to help man achieve a measure of godliness.

A special *Havdala* candle was used at the end of the day.

The Midrash was traditional non-Talmudic Biblical commentary and lore. It says the Talmud was made of white fire, engraved by black.

The sacred fire of the First Temple was said to have been of divine origin.

The menorah was the prime artistic symbol of Jewish religious life in home and synagogue.

Ner and *Or* are Hebrew metaphors for “life”.

A seven-branched stone menorah dated to AD 2ndC was discovered near Tiberias.

Meir means “enlighten” and was named after Rabbi Meir the 2ndC Talmudic sage and ‘miracle worker’.

The two Sabbath lights are said to represent either the two versions of the Fourth Commandment (in Exodus and Deuteronomy), or husband and wife.

Grape clusters appeared as expressly Jewish symbols on ancient coins under Herod Archelaus (4BC-AD6). Wine symbols were common during the AD132-135 Bar Kochba revolt.

Kiddush means “sanctification” and the ceremony dates to 3rd or 4thC BC. Kiddush Goblets are used. The *Havdala* Cup was an ordinary silver Kiddush cup. There is also a *Havdala* candle.

In Jewish tradition God gave Adam two stones which he rubbed together to produce fire.

VIII) Jerusalem and the Jewish Home (pp. 88-89)

David made the city his capital from the 10th C BC.

Observant Jews pray to Jerusalem thrice daily.

Mizrach means “east”.

The *Mezuzah* is a small hand-written parchment of Biblical verses.

IX) The Art of the Synagogue (pp. 90-105)

The Torah was hand-written with a quill in plain black ink using traditional, unpunctuated letters, either on parchment or clean-animal leather skin.

Scrolls would measure 15cm in width by several metres in length. It was covered in a sheath of velvet called the *Torah Mantle*. A Torah crown surmounted the scroll (designs included a Lion of Judah holding three bells).

Rimonim are pomegranates.

There are also Torah-shields, usually mimicking the High Priest's breastplate.

A *tik*, also *nartik* is a hinged, contoured wood case adorned with silver and velvet.

The *Shulhan Aruch* is the Code of Jewish Law.

X) Art for the Jewish Year (pp. 106-125)

Men sometimes wore a High Holy Belt during Trumpets and Yom Kippur, separating the lower body half and its functions from the upper.

The Hagadah (Exodus story) has gone through 3,500 editions.

XI) The Lifecycle of Jewish Tradition (pp. 126-141)

Amulets bearing the name of God or protective angels were worn by many Jews for illness prevention and general protection.

Bar Mitzvah means "Son of the Covenant", and is the age (13) that the commandments must begin to be observed.

T'fillin are phylacteries.

Every person is expected to marry with the unmarried state considered repugnant in Judaism, especially for a rabbi.

A *ketubah* is a kind of marriage contract the man gives to his wife with stated acts he will perform, the first kind of womens' rights charter.

The 3rd to 2ndC BC Tobit refers to a *ketunah*, and the earliest discovered 5thC BC in Aswan, Egypt.

Every Jewish community had a *Hevra Kadisha* ("sacred society") to arrange matters of death and burial.

Alms boxes are popular at funerals as based on Proverbs 10.2 it is thought giving alms delivers from death.

Aryen is "lion".

Zvi is "stag".

Z'ev is "wolf".

XIII) The Synagogue (pp. 142-153)

The Torah Ark is set at the front of the building in the Jerusalem-oriented wall.

The oldest known synagogue in Europe is in Worms, built 1034.

Pius IV in 1569 expelled all Jews from the Papal States.

In 1648, Ukraine, the Cossack massacres killed 300,000 Jews.