

THE EARLY SYNAGOGUE

By HELEN ROSENAU

Before the synagogue came into existence the Jewish worship was held in the Temple. Therefore the question of the relationship between temple and synagogue worship is of primary importance for Jewish religious development.

The First Jewish Temple retained some forms of the pagan temples but instead of having a statue—an image of a god in its cella—it contained the Mercy Seat, and the Second Temple was empty. These facts show how the ideas of the unity and universality of God were gaining ground and were less and less attached to one particular place of worship. It is therefore not surprising that the Jews developed a new type of place worship—though the questions when and where cannot be strictly answered.¹

Many theories have been advanced; one, that the synagogue had its origin outside Judaea—another, that it was an outcome of the Temple worship in Jerusalem. These two theories do not contradict each other, for the synagogue, fully developed both as regards liturgy and architecture, must have been the result of different trends of development.²

An explicit clue to the relation of the synagogue and the Temple is also given in the Mishnah when it is stated that 'the minister of the synagogue used to take a scroll of the Law and give it to the chief of the synagogue, and the chief of the synagogue gave it to

¹ The term "Men of the Great Synagogue" is used in relation to those who received the Law from Moses and the Prophets as the Mishnah says (H. Danby: *The Mishnah*, Oxford 1933, Aboth I, 1, p. 446), and has no connection with architecture.

² S. Krauss, *Synagogale Altertümern* (Berlin-Wien 1922), p. 52 ff.; I. Elbogen: *Der juedische Gottesdienst* (Frankfurt 1924), p. 444; W. O. F. Oesterley and J. H. Bose, *Religion and worship of the Synagogue* (London, 1911), p. 359 ff.; R. Krautheimer, *Mittelalterliche Synagogen* (Berlin 1927), p. 37 ff.

the Prefect, and the Prefect gave it to the High Priest.'¹

Other Talmudic precepts also point to the religious significance of the synagogue: it may be converted into a school, but not into any other type of building. The synagogue prayers include part of the Temple worship—some prayers for instance in the mussaph service and the blessing of the priests.²

The close relationship between Temple and synagogue is also expressed in the Tosefta Megillah (iv, 22), where it is stated that entrances to synagogues are to be made in the east side. This is in accordance with the Temple tradition.

These facts disprove the theory stressing the secular character of the synagogue and claiming that it derives its origin from the town hall, the place of assembly.³

It is therefore not surprising that the building in Delos, similar to a town hall and regarded as a synagogue, has been proved by B. D. Mazur not to be Jewish but to belong to another monotheistic cult.⁴

Against the contention of the secular character of the synagogue it can be further said that learning as such is not necessarily secular: in antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages the quest after God was a predominant idea, so that learning was not contradictory but supplementary to worship.

That prayer was considered to be more valuable than sacrifice has been expressed by Jews already before the destruction of the Temple. The importance of prayer is stressed by Hosea vi, 6. and in Daniel iv. 24; v. 70. In the Talmudic period such references are abundant like those by Rabbi Nathan, in the book of Aboth and also in the writings of Jesus Sirach before the destruction of the Temple.⁵

¹ The Mishnah, *op. cit.*, Yoma, 7, 1, p. 170, cp. also Sotah, 6, 7, p. 301. The term actually used in the Hebrew text is פּרֶפֶט; the indefinite term of the translation 'Prefect' is somewhat misleading. The parallelism between Temple and synagogue is stressed by the fact that two officials of the Temple and two officials of the synagogue are mentioned.

² Elbogen *op. cit.* p. 115 ff. and *passim*; Krauss, *op. cit.* p. 304.

³ Krautheimer, *op. cit.* p. 47 f., note 30.

⁴ Belle D. Mazur, *Studies on Jewry in Greece* (Athens 1935), i, 15 ff.

⁵ A. Marmorstein in *Revue des Études Juives*, 71, 1920, p. 190 ff.

That synagogues existed not only in Palestine but also in the diaspora is clear from ancient texts. The synagogue in Alexandria is fully described in the Talmud, and Philo mentions many synagogues.¹

That Philo insists on the blending of Jewish religion and Greek philosophy is well known. Therefore some of his sayings such as that 'the Jewish prayer houses are nothing else but schools of learning'² must not be taken too literally but as an adaptation to Greek ideas, although the general trend of Judaism with its strong respect for the study of the Law was not in contradiction with his aims. That the synagogue was considered a holy building is clear from the inscription 'sancta sinagoga' on the mosaic pavement in Hammam-Lif (Pl. vi), and from an inscription in Stobi where it is called 'αγιος τοπος.'³ An Aramaic inscription from Na'aran expresses the same idea, calling the synagogue קרישה.⁴ The fact that the inscription from Ophel does not use the term 'holy' and as this expression has so far not been found in other early texts, it is safe to assume that the element of sanctity was developed gradually. The religious importance of the synagogue in Hammam-Lif is also stressed by the mosaic pavement which includes the inscription, in two symbolic scenes, the lower one showing the 'well of life,' the upper one traces of water and land, symbolic animals, the sign of the sun and rays impossible to define owing to their fragmentary character.

Because art is a synthesis of content and form the artistic realisation of the synagogue, being a new architectural form for a new religious development, is of lasting importance, not only for the history of Judaism but also for the history of the church. That in Jerash (cp. p. 70) the foundations of the synagogue are actually used to build the walls of the church is no isolated fact but a general symbol. Whereas the

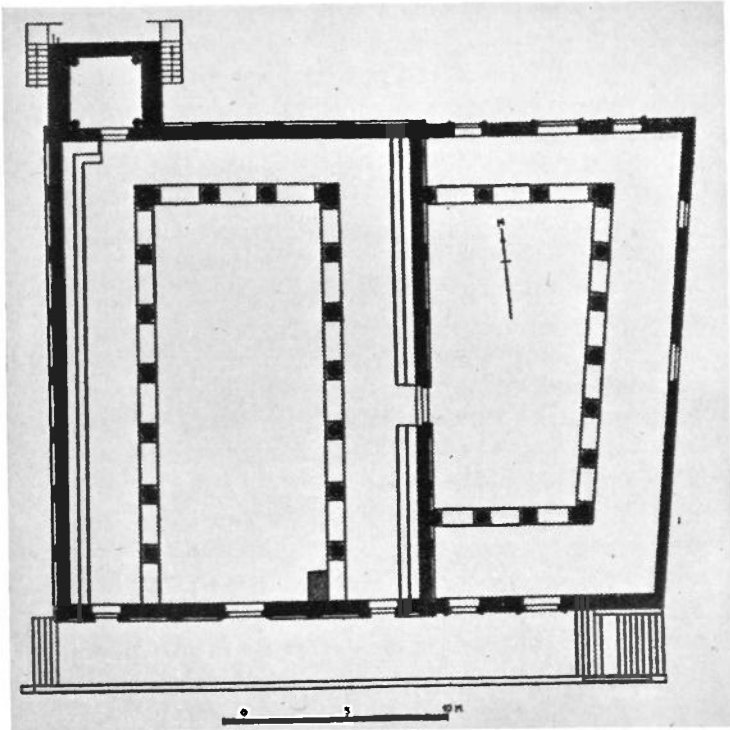
¹ Krauss, *op. cit.* p. 261 ff. Cp. Sukkah, iv, 6. Cp. also above note.

² Vita Mosis, iii, 27. Cp. S. Dubnow, *Weltgeschichte des juedischen Volkes*, ii, p. 338, note 1.

³ *Revue Archeologique*, 1884, iii, p. 273 ff. *Revue des Etudes Juives* xiii, 1886, p. 45 ff., p. 217 ff. Starinar

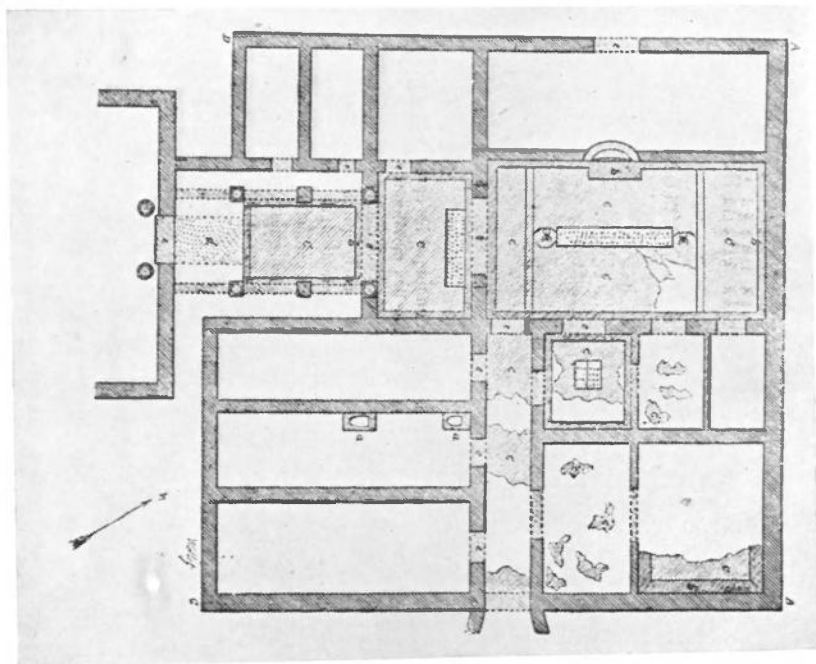
vii, 1932, p. 81 ff., p. 135. Cp. the writer's article in *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement*, 68, 1936, p. 162; *Art Bulletin*, 18 (1936), 541 ff.

⁴ Cp. E. L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece*, London 1934, p. 73, p. 79 f.



CAPERNAUM : GROUND PLAN

(From E. L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece*)



HAMMAM-LIF : GROUND PLAN

(From *Revue archéologique*, 3rd series, iii, 1884)

church in its future evolution developed a centralised and hierarchial order, the cult of saints, the Jewish development of the synagogue was first stimulated and then hampered by the diaspora, the dispersion of the Jews: the centralisation in Jerusalem, Javne and Sephoris declined more and more after the destruction of the Temple.¹

It may be said that the Jews who developed the first types of synagogue achieved a work of religious and artistic importance. But as the social position of the Jews deteriorated in early Christian times, and in the early Middle Ages actually declined, it is not surprising that there is no intrinsic development of the synagogue in the strict sense of the word. The pressure from outside, which did not make itself felt strongly under the liberal administration of the first centuries A.D. when Alexander Severus was the founder and donor of synagogues, became more and more poignant in the Middle Ages.² The 'development' of the synagogue is therefore not inherent but an adaptation to forces of environment. Here lies the main problem of Jewish history not only in art but in every aspect of life.

The same is clear in considering the iconographic tradition, the forms being borrowed from hellenistic art, the iconography being a Jewish creation. The stress laid on architectural and abstract representation (as seen in the Temple pictures in Dura and in Jewish gold glasses) is also apparent from the architectural references in the Talmud.³ Therefore in the field of synagogue architecture and of architectural representation lie the forces of Jewish artistic tradition, as the writer will endeavour to show in a future study. How this tradition was affected by influences from outside is the problem set by late Antiquity and the

¹ Cp. K. L. Schmidt, *Die Kirche des Urchristentums* (Tuebingen 1927). J. Parkes, *The Conflict of the Synagogue and the Church* (London 1934), p. 5 ff.

² P. J. B. Frey, *Corpus inscriptionum Judaicarum* (Citta di Vaticano 1936), p. lxxix f., treats the donation of a synagogue by Alexander Severus

in Arca of Liban. The inscription of Kaisun has no bearing on the synagogue. Frey, p. lxxxii, note 2. On socially important donors cp. Krauss, especially p. 226.

³ Krauss *passim*. *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement*, as cited, p. 157 ff.

Middle Ages and, in modification, also by modern times.

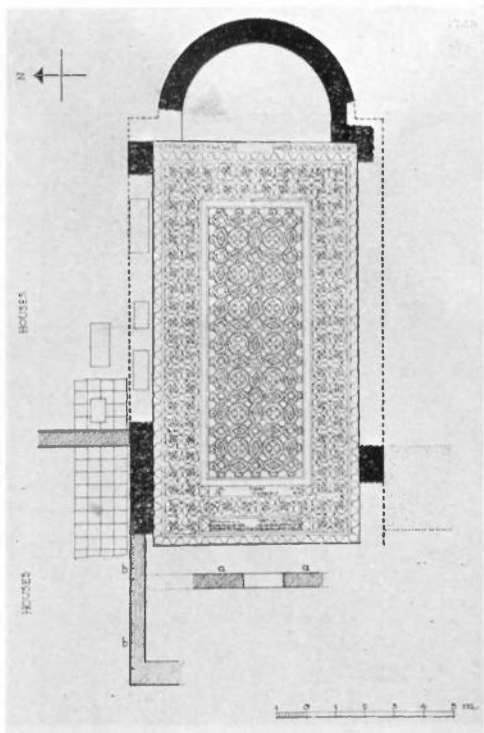
An attempt has been made to explain the character of the synagogue. What was its form? Amongst the earliest types extant in Galilee the nave with two aisles, galleries, and without protruding apse is frequent. The best specimen of this architecture is to be found in Capernaum and to this a whole group of buildings conform (Pl. i). They have three doors in the wall directed towards Jerusalem and they possess no fixed place for the Holy Shrine, the receptacle for the Scrolls. The date of these buildings can only be ascertained by stylistic comparisons which reveal their similarity in details with dated buildings of about 200 A.D.¹ (Pls. iii B, iv). The relation between the synagogue and Temple is also clear by the additions of courts to the synagogue, at the side in Capernaum, before the façade in Kefr Birim (Pl. v B). In view of the fact that the synagogues of the Capernaum type possess no niche and have a primitive orientation of the doors towards the Temple, it is not impossible that the walls and ground-plan of Capernaum belong to an earlier date than the ornamental details. As the place is, however, now completely in ruins this question cannot be satisfactorily solved. So much can be said in any case: the Capernaum group represents an early type, where the sacred character is not yet expressed in architecture.²

The opinion held by Kohl-Watzinger, that the synagogues of the Capernaum group were built under the influence of Septimius Severus and Caracalla, is hardly supported by facts. The structural ornaments mainly show Jewish symbols, the form of the buildings is generally found in late Hellenistic art and in no way is any direct relation to the Roman Emperors expressed. Moreover gifts by Emperors or Kings to

¹ Kohl-Watzinger, *Antike Synagogen in Galilaea* (Leipzig 1916), specially p. 204 ff.; E. Weigand in *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 29, 1914, p. 37 ff. The inscription at Kaisun has no connection with a synagogue and whether the legendary 'Antonius' was the

Emperor Caracalla is unknown. Even if he was he would only have been the donor of the candlestick, not of the synagogue.

² Cp. the writer's article in *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, xvi, 1936, p. 33 ff.



A. AEGINA : GROUND PLAN.

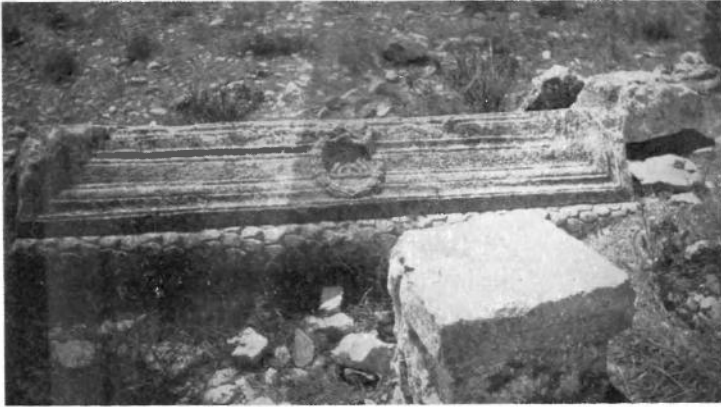
(From B. D. Mazur, *Studies on Jewry in Greece*)

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B. CAPERNAUM: VIEW OF THE REMAINS OF
THE WOMEN'S GALLERY

PLATE III.



A. NEBRATEIN : LINTEL

(Ph. Department of Antiquities, Palestine)



B. CHORAZIN : DETAILS

the Jewish community were carefully recorded,¹ and no trace of such records relating to the Galilean synagogues has so far been found.

The ground-plans of the Capernaum group are rectangular, the doors being on the breadth of the building. In Capernaum, remains of a stone cupboard have been found on the same side which must have been the place of the Scrolls.²

Another type has been revealed by excavations in Dura-Europos and Hammam-Lif (Pl. ii). These synagogues have no galleries and their plans are developed on width. The first synagogue in Dura had no niche, whereas in the second building there the main alteration was the addition of the niche as a receptacle for the Scrolls on the length of the building. The same arrangement as in the second synagogue in Dura obtained in Hammam-Lif.³ The orientation of these buildings was towards the West, in this respect copying the Temple. Hence the sacred elements in the architecture of the synagogue have gained in importance. The last step in this development, which has not ceased to exert influence in modern times, is the synagogue, orientated towards Jerusalem with its niche, and developed on length.

In Elche in Spain, in Aegina in Greece and in numerous places in Palestine such as Jerash, Na'aran, Beth Alpha and El Hammeh, ground-plans of this basilican type have been found (Pl. iii A). These plans are developed on length and have the niche for the Scrolls. The earliest example of this type so far known may belong to the third century.⁴ In Aegina the traces of the pulpit are clearly seen before the niche, directed towards Jerusalem.⁵

The synagogues so far mentioned are buildings of

¹ Krauss, specially p. 199 ff., p. 415. The mentioning of the candlestick given by 'Antonius' rather implies that there were no more important gifts.

² Kohl-Watzinger, p. 36.

³ Cp. p. 70, note 2. *American Journal of Archaeology* 29, 1936, p. 63 ff. *Revue Biblique* 45, 1936, p. 72 ff., *The Archaeological Journal* xciii, 1936, p. 51 ff.

⁴ *Bulletin Hispanique de Bordeaux* viii, 1907, p. 333 ff., p. 110 ff.; *Marmorstein, op. cit.*; Sukenik passim; Mazur, *op. cit.*

⁵ It is worth noting that the synagogue of the Chinese Jews in Khai-Fang-Fu was directed towards the west, i.e. towards Jerusalem, and the same arrangement is found in India.

medium size and this was generally the case. Exceptions, however, existed in Antioch, Tiberias and Alexandria which are called three 'diplostoon.' What this term means is clear from the description of the synagogue in Alexandria, which possessed a 'stoa in a stoa.' This, from the nomenclature of Vitruvius, is a building with double aisles. It is worth noting that this arrangement also obtains in the thirteenth-century synagogue of Santa Maria la Blanca in Toledo, revealing the strength of antique tradition in Spain. In the middle of the diplostoon of Alexandria there was a *במה*, a pulpit from which a man gave the sign to the congregation to say "Amen." Such an arrangement was not general as this pulpit is specially mentioned in the Talmud. It can easily be explained by the largeness of the building and its double row of columns which obstructed the view of the congregation.¹

That the centre of the synagogue was generally meant to be seen is also apparent from the distribution of the mosaics which, as Beth Alpha shows, includes the middle part and therefore was not intended to be covered by a pulpit.

An unusual type of synagogue architecture is the one derived from burial places. This type has not survived but is known from a long description of the synagogue of the Maccabees which was a circular building and, like many other synagogues, was adapted as a church by the Christians.² It is therefore not impossible that the round sepulchre churches of Christianity may have been built under some Jewish influence. In liturgy this relation is clear as the Maccabees were inserted in the list of Christian martyrs.

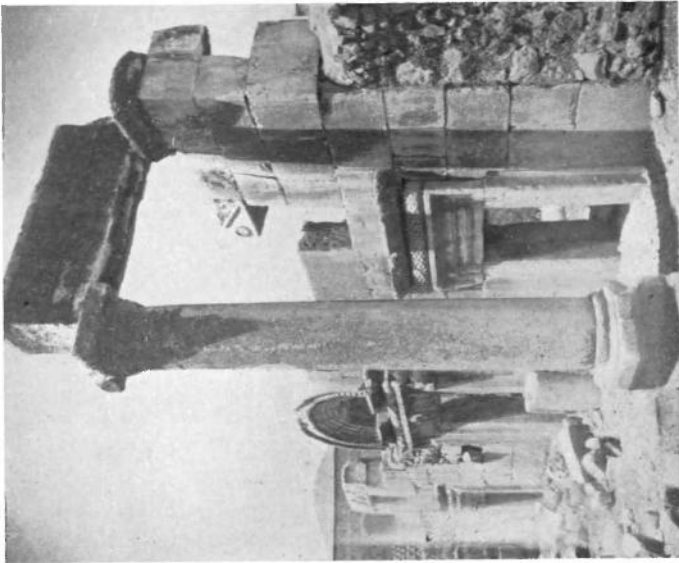
It may be noted that Krautheimer's idea of the central bema being a 'secular' element is refuted by the Christian type of central churches where the altar stood in the middle.³

The synagogue of Antiquity has developed a basilican type with niche, galleries and forecourts.

¹ Der Morgen, 11, 1935, p. 59 ff. Vitruvius Pollio, *De architectura*, iii, applies his definition to temples: it can equally be adapted to other types of buildings as represented by the stoa.

² S. Obermann in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1931, p. 250-65.

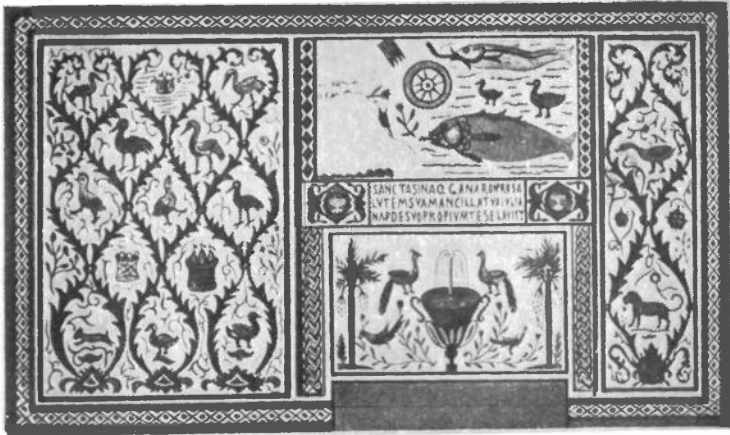
³ P. 64, note 2.



B. KEFR BIRUM : FAÇADE



A. CHORAZIN : 'SEAT OF MOSES'



HAMMAM-LIF : MOSAIC

(From *Revue archeologique*, 3rd series, iii, 1884)

This type had few modifications. Contrary to the development of the church which was influenced by changes of liturgy such as the cults of the martyrs and the development of the hierarchy the synagogue underwent few alterations. Whereas the church was strongly centralised by the growing influence of the Pope and the Synods the centre at Jerusalem declined in importance and the Patriarchs who changed their place of residence from Jerusalem to Javne, and from Javne to Sephoris had no possibility of enforcing their rule. Local schools of architecture developed in different parts of the diaspora. In Dura the architectural forms were simple, as painting was a part of the artistic scheme, including animated representations.

On the other hand in Aegina and Elche the pattern of the mosaic pavement was purely ornamental, a fact which implies that the prohibition of pictorial representation had not utterly died out.

In Galilee sculpture was the chief ornament of synagogue architecture. It is not only found representing niches, the lamp-stand with seven branches (Pl. iv A) and other Jewish symbols but even animated beings are seen as, for instance, lions in Capernaum and Kefr Birim. It is true that these lions have a symbolic significance expressing strength, the symbolic side being particularly strong in Jewish art. However, on a higher level of the buildings friezes can be found inserting human and animal motives. As they are purely ornamental and not describing any particular scene their importance ought not to be stressed in undue way. In Chorazin the niche, which is not found in the ground-plan, appears in the decoration (Pl. iv B). This popular motive is first found in Jewish art in Capernaum and is in pagan architecture specially noticeable in Baalbek.

As stated above, the niche was not only an ornament but also an architectural feature of the synagogue.¹ This motive must have influenced the

¹ The niche of the mosque in Beyrouth (Cp. *Revue Biblique* 43, 1934, p. 108 f.) did not necessarily, as stated here, belong to a synagogue, as the niche was a popular motive in

late Antiquity. The inscription on the niche giving the beginning of Psalm xxix. 3, is of a later date than the niche itself.

apse of the Christian church and the mihrab of the mosque as both types of building developed their tradition in relation to the Jewish background.

Another feature of the synagogue of Antiquity is the 'seat of Moses' which is to be found in El Hammeh and Chorazin¹ (Pl. v A). The need of the church in respect to liturgy was too different to adopt this seat of the preacher. Its place was taken by the bishop's seat surrounded by his clergy. In the mosque, however, Jewish influence can be felt in the mimbar, the seat of the teacher who, like in the primitive Jewish tradition, sits when preaching.

Jewish influence on some aspects of Christian and Mohammedan art can therefore be claimed.

It may be seen from the above that the problem of synagogue architecture deserves study, not only from the Jewish but also from a general historical point of view. Many monographs exist on Jewish religious architecture. But a comparative and comprehensive history of the main trends of architectural development is lacking, a fact which means a serious gap in archaeological knowledge.²

But even so the study of Jewish art seems to imply that it is not so much the outcome of a national but of a religious spirit (Pl. vi), as its driving force has not been the development of form, but the influence of liturgy on patterns adapted from environments.

¹ As in Delos no synagogue has so far been discovered, Sukenik's statement about the seat of Moses there (p. 61) needs correction.

² The writer of the present article hopes to cover this ground in a later study.