SACRED SPACE IN DIASPORA JUDAISM

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Many if not all diaspora Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman periods shared the reverence felt by their Palestinian co-religionists for the Temple in Jerusalem.[1] It is highly likely, though not strictly provable, that they also espoused explicitly or implicitly the belief to be found in a variety of Palestinian Jewish texts that the world is divided into a series of concentric circles in which the sanctity of places diminished with distance from the Temple. The most sacred place on earth according to this view was the Holy of Holies, into which no-one could enter except the High Priest, whose own access was permitted only once a year after elaborate precautions to avoid sacrilegious pollution. Next in sanctity came the court of the priests, then the courts of Israel, of women, and of gentiles. Even less sacred than any of these courts were the regions of Jerusalem which lay outside the Temple precincts. Jerusalem, the holy city, was more sacred than the rest of the land of Israel, but Israel had greater sanctity than the diaspora.[2] The theological explanation of this preeminence of the Jerusalem Temple as sacred place was straightforward. It was in the Holy of Holies that the divinity specially dwelt: the emptiness of the innermost shrine signified not the absence of the deity but the inability of humans to portray him. When the Romans succeeded in capturing the Temple they did so only because its divine

1. See E.P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah* (1990), 283–308.
2. See J.N. Lightstone, *Society, the Sacred and Scripture in Ancient Judaism: a sociology of knowledge* (1988), 36. On the protection of sacred space from pollution, note Acts 21. 28–29 and *CIJ* II 1400 on the prevention of gentiles penetrating too far into the Temple.

resident left the building to its fate. A voice was heard in the sky above Jerusalem proclaiming "We are departing from this place" (Jos. *B.J.* 6. 300).

Whether diaspora Jews who espoused such notions might be expected to feel constantly or even occasionally concerned at their distance from the centre of holiness is dubious,[3] but it does seem hard to imagine such Jews positing with conviction that any place in their own vicinity could be holy in the same way that the Temple was. I intend in this paper to discuss how it came about that, despite this strong disincentive, some Jews in some places at some times apparently came to see their synagogues in precisely this way.[4]

The main function of synagogues in antiquity was as a meeting place where Jews could be taught the Torah: as Philo put it (*Leg.* 156), Jews have "houses of prayer for training themselves on the sabbath in their ancestral philosophy". Josephus believed that regular weekly reading of the Law was so integral a part of Judaism that it must have been instituted by Moses (*C.Ap.* 2. 175). But neither writer implied that such a role rendered the site of this activity sacred. The Torah could be read almost anywhere. So, for example, Ezra's legendary public reading of the Law to all the people is said by Nehemiah to have taken place "in the street before the water-gate" (Nehemiah 8. 1–2).

The second main function of synagogues, as the site of communal prayer, might seem more likely to cast a holy aura upon the building or place where it occurred. That such communal worship was a central feature of synagogue ritual, at least in parts of the diaspora, seems fairly certain from the standard term *proseuche* used for synagogues in Egypt in the Hellenistic period. But in Israel certainly, and in the diaspora probably, prayer did not require a designated building to be efficacious,

3. Sanders, *Jewish Law*, 258–271.

4. For a more extensive treatment of other aspects of the notion of sanctity in diaspora Judaism, see the interesting study by J.N. Lightstone, *The Commerce of the Sacred* (1984).

so there was no reason for such a building when it existed to be reckoned sacred.[5]

Rather less directly, the permanent presence in synagogues of Torah scrolls might perhaps be expected to import a special aura into such buildings if I am right to argue, as I have done elsewhere, that Jews sometimes treated such scrolls as sacred objects analogous to pagan idols.[6] Pagans could certainly treat Jews' scrolls in this way: thus the soldier who deliberately destroyed a scroll in Judaea in the fifties C.E. was publicly executed by the Roman governor Cumanus for the sacrilege (Jos. *B.J.* 2. 228–231), and the author of the Letter of Aristeas (which narrated in romantic form the origin of the Septuagint) invented for his readers a striking vignette in which Ptolemy Philadelphus greeted the arrival of the scrolls and translators from Jerusalem by bowing down seven times before the copies of the Torah. Similar Jewish attitudes are harder to document – unsurprisingly given Jewish aversion to anything smacking of idolatry – but it seems to me possible that the strange notion in rabbinic texts that scrolls of scripture when correctly written on parchment "defile the hands" reflects the same attitude (cf. *m. Yadaim* 4:6). In the late fourth century John Chrysostom, bishop of Antioch, was aware of, but did not share the notion that sacred books might sanctify the building that housed them. He told a story in one of his bitter sermons "against the Jews" about a Christian woman who had been forced into a synagogue by another Christian in order to take a business oath; John remarked grumpily that some Christians assumed wrongly that synagogues are appropriate places for such proceedings because of the presence of sacred books (*Adv. Judaeos* 1.3.3). Nothing quite so explicit can be found in Jewish

5. See M. Hengel, 'Proseuche und Synagoge', in *Tradition und Glaube: Festgabe für K.G. Kuhn* (1971), 157–184. Cf. the term ευξιον in CPJ 432. On liturgy, see J. Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud* (1977).
6. M. Goodman, 'Sacred scripture and "defiling the hands"', *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 (1990), 99–107.

sources although various rabbinic texts do imply that it is indeed from the scrolls that sanctity flows (e.g. *m. Megillah* 3.1).

If, despite the centrality in their world-view of the Jerusalem Temple, sanctity thus *could* be ascribed to synagogue buildings by diaspora Jews, that need not imply that sanctity *was* so ascribed. I intend in the pages which follow to examine the evidence for such ascriptions. Since it is reasonable to expect that the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem might have made some difference in this regard, I have chosen to present first the evidence for the period before 70 C.E. and then the material for late antiquity, although in fact far less difference emerges than might be predicted. Only when the evidence has been weighed will I turn to discuss the difficult issue of why diaspora Jews espoused the attitudes revealed.

From the period before 70 C.E. there is good evidence of impressive synagogue structures and fine decoration in diaspora synagogues. So, according to a reference by the second-century *tanna* R. Judah to a building apparently no longer extant, the great synagogue in Alexandria, which was shaped in the form of a double stoa "like a basilica" was a "glory to Israel" (*t. Sukkah* 4.6). According to Philo (*Leg.* 133) synagogues in the same city were hung with shields, gilded crowns and inscriptions. In the main Antioch synagogue, according to Josephus (*B.J.* 7.45), costly offerings were similarly displayed. Such expenditure on buildings need not imply a belief that the building itself is sacred, but at least in the case of the Antioch synagogue such an attitude was explicit, for Josephus (*ibid.*) described the place as a *hieron*, a term usually applied only to temples such as that in Jerusalem. This terminology was not just a quirk of Josephus' Greek, for Philo also at times implied the sanctity of synagogues by similar terms: in his description of the Essenes, Philo wrote that when they gather they come together to "sacred places which are called synagogues" (*Q.o.p.* 81).

Such terminology suggests that the distinction between the sanctity of the Jerusalem Temple and that of synagogues was not always precisely

observed by Jews. Josephus (*A.J.* 14. 260) told of the granting of a request by the city of Sardis to the local Jews in the first century B.C.E. after the Jews had asked to be permitted to continue to carry out sacrifices (*thusias*) in their specially designated place in the city; it is possible that this reference to sacrificial cult reflected a misunderstanding of Jewish religious practice by the city authorities, but, if so, it is worth noting that Josephus was not sufficiently taken aback to comment. Nor did the Jewish historian comment on the claim by Onias in the second century B.C.E. that the building of a new Temple for the Jews in Leontopolis in Egypt was desirable because the multiplicity of *hiera* (temples) in Egypt was contrary to Jewish customs and it was better to build just one *naos* (shrine) for them; it is hard to see what the *hiera* to which he referred could have been if they were not synagogues (Jos. *A.J.* 13. 66–7). Jews set up inscriptions in their *proseuchai* in Egypt in which the buildings might be designated as places of asylum (*CIJ* II 1449) and when gentiles tried to set up statues in Egyptian synagogues this was treated by Jews as sacrilege (Philo, *Leg.* 134).

All of which might seem to show beyond much doubt that some Jews even before 70 C.E. saw their synagogues as sacred places. But a story about an event in Caesarea Maritima in 66 C.E. may encourage caution in jumping to such a conclusion. For this purpose Caesarea may count as part of the diaspora, since the problem which arose came from the position of Jews as a minority in a gentile community in a fashion comparable to that in more strictly diaspora cities. According to Josephus (*B.J.* 2. 285–91), the Jews of Caesarea tried to buy land near the synagogue. The gentile owner of the land refused and some local youths compounded the Jews' discomfiture by sacrificing a cock in the alleyway in front of the building in mockery. Josephus recorded that this act was seen by the Jews as a pollution (*miasma*) of the place, but their consequent actions were curious. Rather than defend their holy site, as they did so bravely in the Jerusalem Temple four years later, the Caesarean Jews took up their scroll of the Torah and retreated with it to

a safe place some distance away. Their actions implied that for them it was not to the place but to the object of public liturgy that prime sanctity should be ascribed.

The evidence for the period after 70 C.E. is more extensive but differs little in its ambiguous import. A straightforward attribution to synagogues of the sanctity that the now defunct Jerusalem Temple had once had might have been possible but does not seem to have happened despite the celebrated comparison of synagogues to the "small sanctuary" of Ezekiel 11.16 found in *b. Megillah* 29a. Some rites previously confined to the Temple, such as the priestly blessing, were now practised outside the Jerusalem sanctuary, but the rabbinic texts which report this transfer do not presuppose any special building or place for such practices.[7] The most important elements of the Temple liturgy, libation and sacrifice, ceased altogether. It is worth recalling that Jewish hopes that the Temple would be rebuilt were by no means unreasonable before Constantine. Restoration of destroyed sanctuaries was normal custom in the pagan world and it was quite possible that later emperors might drop the special hostility to the Jewish cult which had been adopted by the Flavian dynasty for the purposes of Roman political propaganda.

Thus rabbinic texts are ambivalent about the sanctity of synagogues. On the one hand synagogues are definitely not temples – so, for instance, there is no evidence that there was ever a dedication ceremony to mark the erection of new synagogue buildings. On the other hand there are preserved in the Tosefta (*t. Megillah* 3 (2): 7) quite strict rules for correct conduct in synagogues, and Mishnaic injunctions in the names of R. Meir and R. Judah about the permitted uses of money raised by selling a synagogue site presupposed that such sites are at any rate special (*m. Megillah* 3: 2–3); but it is of course significant that such a site *could* be sold. Such texts might in theory apply only to rabbinic attitudes in the land of Israel, but the anonymous baraita

7. See J. Neusner, *A Life of Yohanan ben Zakkai*, 2nd ed. (1970), 205–210.

preserved in *b. Shabbat* 72b was presumably felt relevant by the Mesopotamian sages who redacted the Babylonian Talmud. According to this baraita, a Jew who bows down before a pagan shrine in the mistaken belief that it is a synagogue is not committing a sin. The significant fact here is that paying such respect to synagogues was apparently taken for granted.

Examination of the architectural forms of extant remains of diaspora synagogues provides no clearer indication of the sacred or profane status of such buildings in the eyes of local Jews who may or may not have shared the attitudes to be found in rabbinic texts. The most striking fact about such styles is their variety.[8] The hypothesis that common elements, such as the Torah shrine and the meeting hall, were the Jewish equivalents of the inner shrine and *pronaos* of a pagan temple is plausible but unprovable.[9] Whether the huge basilica in Sardis would have looked to a contemporary observer like a religious building depends somewhat on the date of the observation. If Helga Botermann is right to suggest that it might have become a synagogue only in the mid fourth century,[10] this transformation of a secular builidng will have coincided with the establishment of the basilica form as the most appropriate style of religious architecture for Christian churches.[11] Alternatively, large basilica-type buildings may have been found as meeting-places for Jews long before they were adopted by Christians if the tradition that this was the shape of the great Alexandrian synagogue was correctly transmitted in the Tosefta (*t. Sukkah* 4:6; see above).

8. See A.T. Kraabel, 'The diaspora synagogue: archaeological and epigraphic evidence since Sukenik', *ANRW* II 19 (1979), 477–510.
9. See G. Foerster in L.I. Levine, *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (1981), 48.
10. H. Botermann, 'Die Synagoge von Sardes: Eine Synagoge aus dem 4. Jahrhundert?', *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 81 (1990), 103–121.
11. J.B. Ward-Perkins, 'Constantine and the origins of the Christian basilica', *Papers of the British School in Rome* 22 (1954), 69–90.

The clearest evidence that some Jews treated synagogues as sacred space comes not from rabbinic discussions nor from the architecture of the synagogue buildings, but from the inscriptions found within those buildings. The adjective *hagiotatos*, "most holy", was applied to synagogues so regularly in inscriptions from the second or third centuries C.E. and after that it appears to have become a cliché. The usage is geographically widespread: it is found in Macedonia (Stobi), Asia Minor (Philadelphia and Hyllarima) and southern Palestine (Gaza).[12] How literally to take such ascriptions of sanctity is not entirely obvious from the Greek word alone. The meaning of many solemn words was debased in the late-Roman world, and *hagios* could be used as a polite epithet for bishops and even, in the medieval period, for emperors.[13] However, a fifth-century inscription from the Decapolis city of Gerasa lends support to a more literal reading. From this place comes an inscription on two pillars which reads ʿαγιο[τάτῳ] τόπῳ. ʾΑμήν. Σελά. ʾΕρήνη τῇ συναγωγῇ (Lifshitz, no. 78). The inscription provides a useful link with a large number of Aramaic texts from nearby synagogue sites in the land of Israel. In these inscriptions the term *atra kadisha* appears as a standard cliché.[14] It is asking too much of coincidence not to see the Greek *hagiotatos topos* as a direct equivalent. In that case it is likely that the Greek term was intended on these inscriptions to convey the force of the Aramaic *kadisha*, which retained its strong sense throughout antiquity.

What emerges from all this is that synagogues sites *could* be treated by diaspora Jews as holy but that attitudes varied. It seems clear that rabbinic sages lacked any coherent rationale for their attitudes; similarly

12. B. Lifshitz, *Donateurs et Fondateurs dans les Synagogues Juives* (Cahiers de la Revue Biblique, 7) (1967), nos. 10, 28, 32, 73a.

13. E.A. Sophocles, *Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods* (1990). s.v. ἅγιος.

14. J. Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic: the Aramaic and Hebrew inscriptions from ancient synagogues* (1978), nos. 16, 26, 46, 60, 64, 65 (in Hebrew).

and all the more so, it may be surmised, non-rabbinic Jews; thus whatever prompted the reverence revealed in the inscriptions was probably not legislation by any central authority. There is more evidence of attributions of sanctity in the period after 70 C.E. than in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, but that may reflect only the greater survival of diaspora inscriptions from the later era than from the earlier; thus it may be unwarranted to try to explain Jewish attitudes as a reaction to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. The causes of the phenomena I have described are likely to lie elsewhere, in more general, ill-defined religious instincts which by their very nature allowed for the ambiguity I have noted but also, precisely because such instincts often remained unstated, cannot be proven.

A number of such religious instincts, such as a human desire to designate as sacred some place close enough to the locus of secular activity for ordinary people to feel that sanctity is accessible to them, can reasonably be postulated. But in this paper I want to pursue just one of these possible explanations, both because it is generally overlooked and because, if I am right, the type of explanation offered may throw some light on the history of other aspects of diaspora Judaism. The factor on which I shall concentrate is the likely effect on diaspora Jews of the attitude to their synagogues espoused by their gentile neighbours.

Comments about synagogues in extant Greek and Latin pagan writings are rather sparse – a fact which, as will become clear, I think may be significant.[15] Pagans were fascinated by such Jewish peculiarities as the sabbath and dietary laws, but Jewish houses of worship apparently did not strike them as anything out of the ordinary. In some cases this may have been because synagogues were just seen

15. For a collection of the evidence and many interesting suggestions, see S.J.D. Cohen, 'Pagan and Christian evidence on the ancient synagogue', in L.I. Levine, ed., *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity* (1987), pp. 159–181. My arguments were formulated separately, but they may be seen as following on logically from the ideas on pages 163–165 of his article.

as meeting places: Augustus' decree on behalf of the Jews of Asia protected the scrolls and money they kept in their *sabbateion* but not the building itself (Jos. *A.J.* 16. 164). But more often the reason was that synagogues looked to pagans like a Jewish equivalent of pagan shrines. In the Hellenistic period the Seleucid kings donated gifts to hang on the walls of the Antioch synagogue (Jos. *B.J.* 7. 44) and the Ptolemaic kings awarded to at least one synagogue in Egypt the right of asylum (*CIJ* II 1449). In a legal deposition of 218 B.C.E. by a gentile woman whose cloak had been stolen, the guardian of the Jewish prayer-house *(proseuche)* was described as a *nakoros*, a title usually reserved for the warden of a religious sanctuary (*CPJ* 129). In the first century C.E. anti-Jewish rioters in Alexandria attacked the synagogues (Philo, *Flacc.* 41–3), an action which gentiles could see as equivalent to desecration of a sanctuary: according to Josephus (*A.J.* 19. 300–3, 305), when gentile youths in the land of Israel put a statue of Gaius in the synagogue of Dora, the Roman senator Petronius complained that by their behaviour they had "prevented the synagogue from existing", since "the emperor's statue would be better in his own shrine *(naos)* than in someone else's". When in the early second century C.E. Tacitus wrote that Jews have no images in their cities, *nedum templis* (Tac. *Hist.* 5.5.4), he may have intended to refer to synagogues by the plural *templa*. The right of asylum granted to an Egyptian synagogue by the Ptolemies (*CIJ* II 1449; see above) was confirmed according to an addendum in Latin by a king and queen *(rex et regina)*; it is likely that the monarchs in question were either the rulers of Palmyra in the mid third century C.E. or the last Ptolemaic dynasts in the first century B.C.E.

Christian writers from the third century onwards sometimes made similar assumptions. Tertullian in the early third century wrote that Jews pray by the sea shore on fast days, *templis omissis (De Jejuniis* 16, PL II 1028). John Chrysostom described how Christians took oaths in synagogues (see above) and how they sometimes slept overnight in the synagogue of Matrona at Daphne in their search for

health cures *(Adversus Iudaeos)* 1.3, *PG* XL 847–8.[16] In the sixth century Procopius described how the ancient shrine *(neos)* of the Jews of Boreon in North Africa was changed into a church by Justinian *(De Aed.* 6.2)

In accordance with this attitude Christian writers sometimes assumed that synagogues were administered by priests like pagan sanctuaries. Thus Epiphanius in the 370s told a story about events under Constantine in which it was presupposed that synagogues were under the immediate control of *archisynagogoi*, priests *(hiereis)*, elders and *hazzanim* (*Pan.* 30.11.4). A similar assumption is found in an imperial enactment of 330 C.E. by which Constantine released from *munera* the *hiereos* and *archisynagogos* and "all those others who administer the synagogues" (*C. Th.* 16.8.4). It is possible that these priests were simply *cohanim* whose public prominence was ensured simply by their role in the priestly blessing, but it is hard to see why such a minor function would merit tax exemption. It seems to me more likely that this is another aspect of Roman treatment of synagogues as temples.

The same attitude explains the belief of emperors from the fifth century onwards that synagogue buildings could easily be converted into churches. Thus Theodosius II laid down in 423 C.E. that Jewish communities should be granted compensation when their synagogues had been "seized or *ecclesiis vindicatae* or indeed consecrated to the venerable mysteries" (*C.Th.* 16.8.25). In 535 C.E., in less liberal times, Justinian decreed that "we do not grant that their synagogues should stand, but we wish them *ad ecclesiarum figuram ... reformari" (Novella* 37*)*; the use of the word *reformari* suggests that some architectural changes were deemed necessary.

In such legal stipulations by the state gentile attitudes to synagogues are seen at their clearest. Thus in about 370 C.E. the emperors Valentinian and Valens told the Master of the Offices that he should warn soldiers who occupied "synagogues of the Jewish law" in their

16. See R.L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews* (1983), 79–80.

search for lodging *(hospitium)* that they were required to vacate such premises. The emperors argued that such hospitality should be enjoyed in the houses of private people, not in "places of religions" *(religionum loca)*. This law, found in the Theodosian Code *(C.Th* 7.8.2*)* but repeated, therefore presumably still reckoned valid, in the sixth-century Justinianic Code (*C.J.* 1.9.4), presupposed that the state had a duty to protect synagogues as places sacred to Jews.[17] Evidence of intermittent state hostility to synagogues, from the instructions issued by Theodosius II to the patriarch Gamaliel to destroy all synagogues in unoccupied places (*C.Th.* 16.8.22) to Justinian's demand that all synagogues be changed into churches (see above), does not show that this assumption was not genuinely held, only that Christian emperors wavered in their willingness to appease or provoke Jewish religious susceptibilities.

The attitude of gentiles in the Roman empire to Jewish religious buildings revealed a tendency I have noted elsewhere to understand other societies and cultures in terms of their own.[18] Sacred space was a concept of great power and importance in the religious life of most inhabitants of the Roman world. The landscape was littered with altars to divinities. Each altar was reckoned more or less sacrosanct and most public religious activity consisted in processions to a sacred place or a dramatic ritual by a priest at such a place. Gentiles who came to Jerusalem found it quite natural to offer sacrifices to the Jewish God in the Temple, and the obvious way to express respect for Judaism in Rome in 139 B.C.E. was, according to Valerius Maximus (1.3.2), to

17. On this text see A.M. Rabello, "The legal condition of the Jews in the Roman empire', *ANRW* II 13 (1980), 723; A. Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (1987), no. 14.
18. M. Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea: the origins of the Jewish revolt against Rome, A.D. 66–70* (1987), 35.

set up altars in honour of the foreign deity.[19] For gentiles thus predisposed, synagogue ritual might seem to fit neatly into the standard pattern of temple rites, with chanting by crowds of worshippers in a fine ornamented building, an object extracted from an inner sanctum and carried in procession to a visible spot for a ritual act to be undertaken before it was returned to its sanctum. Synagogues differed only in that the object concerned was a scroll not an idol, and the act performed was a reading, not a sacrifice or libation. The term *hagios topos*, although not used in the inscriptions set up in their shrines in the same formulaic way it was used by Jews in synagogues, was quite intelligible to such pagans, and bore the clear implication that the place in question was sacred space.[20]

For pagan polytheists respect for the sacred places of the cults of other people was instinctive. The behaviour of Pliny the Younger when governor of Bithynia and Pontus may illustrate. When the inhabitants of a Bithynian city wanted to build on the site of a temple of the Phrygian Great Mother, Pliny (*Epp.* 10.50) wrote to the emperor Trajan to enquire whether he should prevent them. Trajan replied that there was no restriction on such building in Roman law, but what is significant is the fact that Pliny felt it necessary to ask. Polytheists knew that infringing the rights of any divinity is a dangerous game. The

19. See E. Bickerman, 'The altars of gentiles', in *Studies in Jewish and Christian History*, Vol. II (1980), 324–346. Note the story reported in *y. Megillah* 1.13, 72b about the Roman emperor "Antoninus" being helped by R. Judah haNasi to build an altar.

20. Apart from the Jewish uses of the collocation *hagios topos*, the phrase appears very occasionally in Christian inscriptions in reference to a church (e.g. R. Merkelbach, ed., *Die Inschriften von Assos* (1976), number 33), but nowhere (so far as I can discover) in pagan inscriptions. But note the use of the phrase in the story recounted by Plutarch (*Camillus* 31.3.7) about the attempts made by Roman senators to mollify the people by pointing out the *chorion hieron kai topon hagion* which Romulus or Numa had consecrated.

ambivalence of Christian legislation about synagogues was a product of the conflict between this instinctive pagan liberalism and the theologically motivated anti-Judaism which pervades much of the rhetoric of the legislation by Roman emperors of the fourth to sixth centuries C.E.

A useful parallel to pagan attitudes to synagogues may be found in pagan attitudes to Christian churches in the first four centuries C.E. Christian liturgy in the early years did not require special sacred places for its performance. Christians, much like Jews, met together to eat in company, hear readings from the scriptures and listen to sermons. For this purpose private houses sufficed. As congregations grew such houses might be adapted, with enlarged interior rooms or the erection of a platform for the clergy, and the "house of the Christians" might become an impressive hall and a local landmark, but before Constantine there was felt no need for a specifically religious architecture which might mark off churches from the secular world.[21] One result of this fact was a scarcity of comments in pagan authors about churches, as about synagogues.[22] Nonetheless the pagan philosopher Porphyry in the mid third century could refer scornfully to the "great buildings" of the Christians which "imitate the construction of temples" (*Adv. Christianos*, frag. 76). When the pagan Roman aristocracy, led by the emperor, began from the time of Constantine onwards to demonstrate, without much theological understanding, their adhesion to the imperially favoured cult of Christianity, they imported such pagan presuppositions into their disposition of their wealth in favour of the new religion. Instead of the erection of large public temples by which they had previously demonstrated their allegiance to the pagan gods, Roman aristocrats began to build the grand monumental basilica

21. See now L.M. White, *Building God's House in the Roman World: architectural adaptation among pagans, Jews and Christians* (1990).
22. On pagan views of Christianity in general, see R.L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (1984).

churches which quite rapidly because common despite the inappropiateness of this architectural form for Christian liturgy. Eusebius' description of the new church dedicated in Tyre by the young rich bishop Paulinus in 317 C.E. explicitly compared the building to the Jerusalem Temple in the days of Zerubbabel (Eus. *H.E.* 10.4.33–6): this was God's house on earth (*H.E.* 10.4.1–2) and, like that of pagan temples, its completion was celebrated with a great festival of dedication (*H.E.* 10.3.1). In 431 C.E. the emperor Theodosius, granting to churches rights of sanctuary, unselfconsciously referred to them as "temples of the Great God" (*C.Th.* 9.45.4).[23]

At this crucial stage in the argument, when I want to suggest the possible effect of such gentile perceptions of synagogues on the attitudes to their religious buildings of Jews themselves, I must confess that evidence fails. Nonetheless, some connection may plausibly be posited. It is quite possible that Jews first elected to imitate the customs and architecture of others and to see their buildings as holy, and that only then did pagans come to ascribe sanctity to Jewish synagogues. But it seems to me no less conceivable that the line of causation went in the opposite direction. If gentiles tended to assume that synagogues were sacred places, Jews might feel it wise to concur: on the most cynical level, this pagan attitude evidently helped to protect the synagogue site and to win exemption from liturgies for synagogue officials. More insidiously, if gentile neighbours treated the synagogue building as sacred it might become natural for Jews to copy their reverence even when they did not have any formal, legal reason within the Jewish religious system for such an attitude.

If there is any truth in this, it may be worth pondering similar factors in other aspects of Jewish history in the diaspora. It is inherently unlikely that diaspora Jews developed social or religious institutions

23. See now White, *Building God's House*, chapter 2 and *passim*. White argues (p. 136) that the church at Tyre was not a basilica but an elaborate hall with basilica-type features.

entirely regardless of comments made by their gentile compatriots. But, since it is also inherently unlikely that Jews would explicitly ascribe changes in their society to their reactions to such comments, the *demonstration* of the causal link between the development of diaspora Jewish customs and outsiders' views about those customs will always be formidable.