



Case Study

Volume 14 Issue 2 - January 2025
DOI: 10.19080/GJAA.2025.14.555882

Glob J Arch & Anthropol

Copyright © All rights are reserved by Albert Levy

The Worship Spaces of Judaism: from The Temple to The Synagogue. Continuity and Rupture



Albert Levy*

Architect, Doctor in urban studies, Associate researcher, Université Paris Nanterre, France

Submission: January 2, 2025; **Published:** January 31, 2025

***Corresponding author:** Albert Levy, Architect, Doctor in urban studies, Associate researcher, Université Paris Nanterre, UMR CNRS LAVUE 7218 Laboratory, France

Abstract

Judaism, the inventor of monotheism, would experience two distinct forms of religious spatial organization to promote the encounter and communication between the faithful and the divine, the Temple and then the synagogue. They represent two major periods of Jewish history, before and after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD. We will analyze these two Jewish religious spaces, paradoxically antagonistic, to show the elements of continuity between them, by emphasizing the influence of the spatial structure of polytheistic places of worship on the Temple and the subsequent impacts that the synagogue may have had later on other monotheistic places of worship. We will point out a second recent transformation, linked to the use of one of its major archaeological remains, the Western Wall of the Esplanade of the Mosques/Temple Mount, also called the Wailing Wall, which became a new important place of worship, the Kotel, with its dual religious and political identity significance.

Keywords: Judaism; Polytheism; Place of Worship; Temple; Synagogue; Religious Device

The two periods of Judaism and of their place of worship

Ancient period: the Temple

During the first ancient period of Judaism, roughly, from 970 BC to 70 AD, the main religious space is the Temple of Jerusalem: first the Temple of Solomon (970 to 587 BC) and second the Temple of Herod (20 BC to 70 AD) [1]. According to the Bible there was also an intermediate Temple, smaller, built by Zerubbabel on his return from exile in Babylon in 520 BC. With the start of the Judaism, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans, from 70 AD and the scattering of the Jewish people, a new religious space will develop in exile, in a completely divergent way, creating a new religious revolutionary spatial figure, at that time, the synagogue [2].

We start from the premise that monotheism, with its invisible and unrepresentable God, excludes the existence and possibility of any sanctuary to house and venerate Him. The construction of the Temple of Jerusalem therefore raises a certain number of questions in relation to the radical nature of the principles of Judaism, the inventor of monotheism [3] which prohibits any divine representation, where the very name of God remains ineffable (YHVH, « He who is »), and where the idea of building any sacred space to house God is incongruous and unthinkable.

King Solomon, who had decided to build this house of God (« *I plan therefore to build a house in honor of the Lord, my God, according to what he said to David, my father* »), was aware of the impropriety of his project and the transgression that it represented. He explained his embarrassment by addressing the Lord: « *Lord, God of Israel ! There is no power equal to you, neither in heaven above, nor on earth below,... But does God truly reside on earth ? When the heaven and all the heavens cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have just built for you !* ». For Solomon, this house for God could only be a simple place of communication with Him, a place of meeting between God and his people: « *You will nevertheless receive, Eternal, my God, the prayer and the supplications of your servant... Yes, You will hear the supplications of your servant and of your people Israel, made in this place; from heaven where You reside, you will hear and forgive* [4] ».

The Temple presents, in fact, a paradoxical spatial structure that brings it closer, in a certain way, to the spatial organization of pagan polytheistic temples conceived as houses where the divine resides, a real constructed space, a dwelling of the divine, specially designed and arranged for him. While the God of the Jews cannot have, in principle, any material or plastic representation, what was then found in the dwelling built for Him ? What was put inside the Temple ? The Holy of Holies, the most sacred room of

the Temple, housed, in fact, the Ark of the Covenant, a chest that contained the Tablets of the Law, which God had given to Moses at Sinai, as well as, according to tradition, the text of the Torah written by Moses. It was therefore not a divinity (statue or any other representation) that was idolized, but a revealed sacred text, symbol of the Covenant between God and his people, that was venerated. This Ark, as we know, accompanied the Jewish people in their migrations in the desert, during the exodus, until their settlement and the creation of a Jewish Kingdom.

After the destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, the Ark of the Covenant had disappeared and the Holy of Holies remained, in the Second Temple of Herod (20 BC), empty,

without the lost sacred chest: it was unthinkable and sacrilegious, at that time, to reproduce another Ark and its contents above all, forbidden to recopy the revealed sacred texts. The hyper-holiness of this space was underlined and reinforced by its isolation achieved through a series of successive protective barriers from the impure profane exterior space: a series of successive thresholds to cross to reach the Holy of Holies, the last room which contained the Ark, referring to a hierarchy of purity of spaces and the actors who occupy them, in the manner of the Egyptian temple with its sacred chamber located at the back of the place of worship, where the visible God was housed, as in the Temple of Horus, at Edfu, which housed, in the Holy of Holies, the solar god represented by a statue of a falcon (237 to 57 BC) (Figure 1).

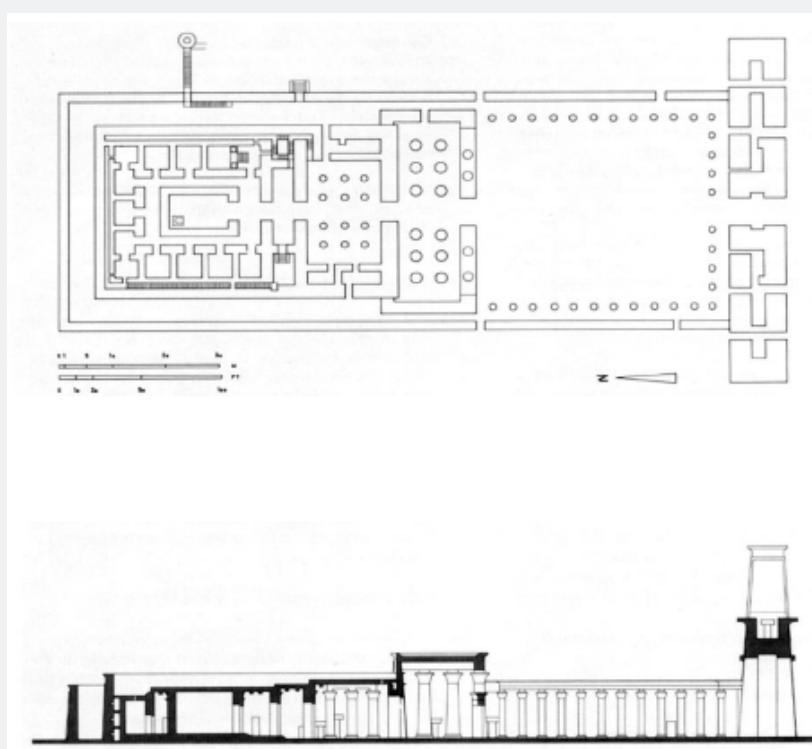


Figure 1: Egyptian temple of Horus, Edfu (237 to 57 BC).

Another characteristic that brought the Temple of Jerusalem closer to the polytheistic spatial arrangement was its type of « strong » mediation. Indeed, following the conception of the place of worship as the abode of the divine, the residence of God, a privileged and exclusive mediation was established with a caste of hereditary priests (Cohanim) and their servants (Levites), having their own space from which they officiate (Courtyard of the Priests), possessing special prerogatives (only the high priest could, for example, enter the Holy of Holies of the Temple, once a year, on Yom Kippur). We find, in fact, this type of « strong » mediation in the Egyptian polytheistic temple where only

appointed priests, true religious officials, could serve the divinity, the faithful being totally excluded from the temple, the same goes for the Greek polytheistic temple, the abode of the divinities. Another important analogy, the worship practiced in the Jewish temple was also of a sacrificial nature, with an altar in front of the sanctuary, to make offerings to God (Figure 2).

As a result of this strong mediation, the faithful were located in a separate space, men and women separated for reasons of purity, as well as people suffering from diseases (leprosy), penitents, all considered impure [5] and kept at a distance for this reason. The

access of the faithful to the Temple, limited, at the beginning, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, selected from among the most pious,

will be expanded and the 24 "regions" of the country will be able to send delegates to attend the religious ceremony.

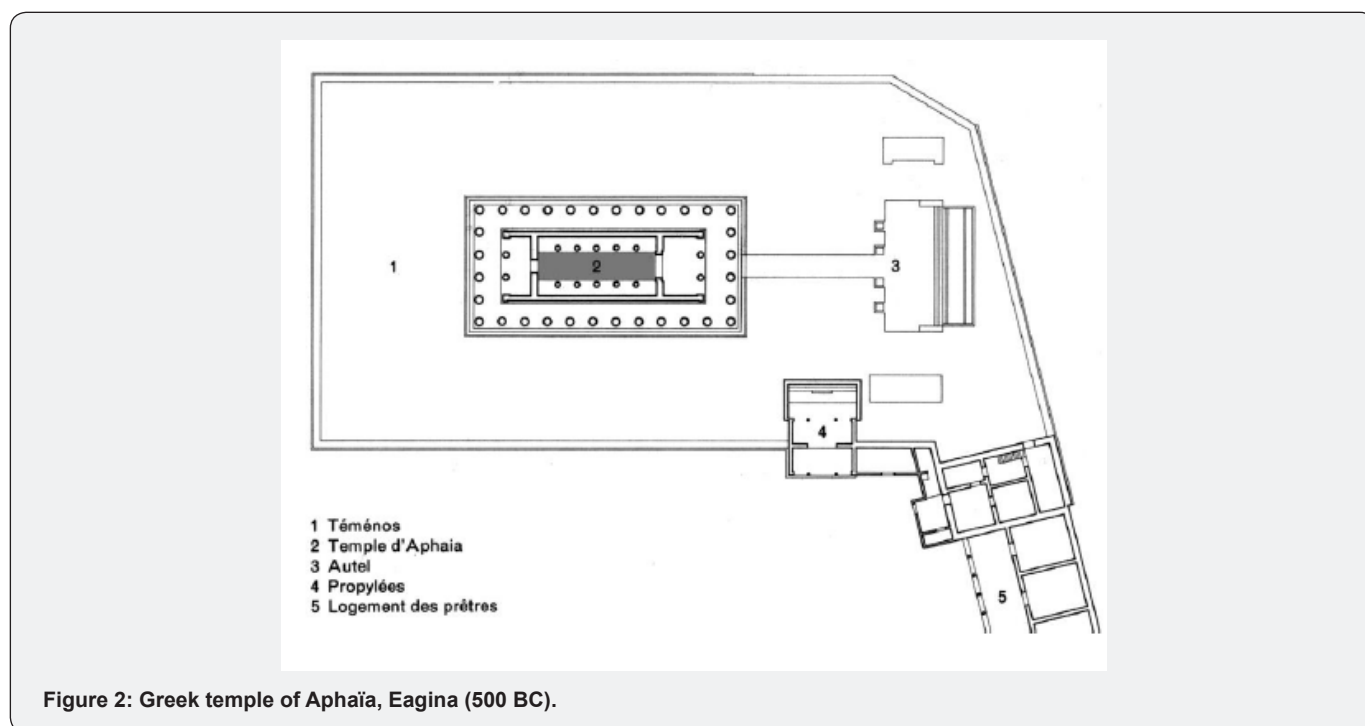


Figure 2: Greek temple of Aphaia, Egina (500 BC).

To translate this hierarchy of spaces according to their degree of purity, the Temple presented a succession of courts: the Court of the Gentiles outside the Temple (for non-Jews) isolated by a barrier (Soreg) which surrounded it (forbidden to any non-Jew to enter). One entered through the Corinthian Gate (Beautiful Gate) into the Court of the Women (where there were also, in the four corners of the court, the stores for wood and oil used in the sacrifices ceremonies, as well as the room of the Nazirites) separated by a wall from the space of the men. The Gate of Nicanor, accessible by a staircase of 15 steps, gave access to the Court of the Priests and to the space reserved for the faithful, men, located on the other side against the wall. In this Courtyard of the Priests, the altar stood facing the sanctuary, or dwelling of God. It was also raised with a 12-step staircase and divided into three parts: the vestibule (Ulam), the Holy (Hékal) - which contained the incense Altar, the candle stick (Menorah) and the Shewbread - and, separated by a curtain, the Holy of Holies (Debir) where the Ark of the Covenant was placed [6] (before its disappearance). The hierarchy of spaces, which expressed the hierarchy of purity of the actors, was therefore translated horizontally by successive barriers (walls with doors), and vertically by a series of terraces (courtyard with stairs), the Holy of Holies being located at the end of the route in the highest position. Divine dwelling, « strong » mediation, more or less limited access for the faithful, sacrificial ritual, the Jewish Temple therefore seemed by its characteristics, its spatial organization, its liturgical functioning, to be close to the

polytheistic pagan temple [7]. The difference – and it is significant – lay in the absence of any divine representation, of any visible divine figure in the Temple: it was through a sacred text enclosed in the Ark housed in the Holy of Holies that the divine presence was manifested.

This was therefore, roughly, the first sacred spatial device of the Temple which organized, in ancient Judaism, the communication of the Hebrew people with their God. To understand this temple, its particularities, its layout and its spatial distribution, we make the hypothesis that it had been influenced by the polytheistic temples of that time and of that region (pagan Egyptian, Canaanite, Syrian temples, etc.). Furthermore, as we know, it reproduced the device of the Tabernacle, the sanctuary tent which sheltered the Ark and which the Hebrews carried with them, during their migration in the Sinai desert, after the exodus from Egypt, until their settlement in Canaan. The function of the Temple, by its centrality and its uniqueness, was also political: to legitimize royal power, to unify the Kingdom and to create social bonds. According to its etymology, the word religion refers to two main meanings: *relegere*, « to take up again », « to reread », and *religare*, « to connect ». Taken in this second sense, « to connect », it can be understood in two ways: horizontally, religion is the link, the cement which promotes the formation of a community of a society, it connects men between them by ensuring the cohesion and the coherence of the group; vertically, religion connects the here below and the beyond, the human and the divine, the dead and the living, the

earth and the sky. These two directions of connecting are related to each other: it is by a common convergent vertical connection towards the same transcendence, that a religious community is constituted, conversely the existence of a community of faithful

and solid community links are necessary for the existence of a religion. Both connections were clearly present in ancient Judaism (Figure 3).

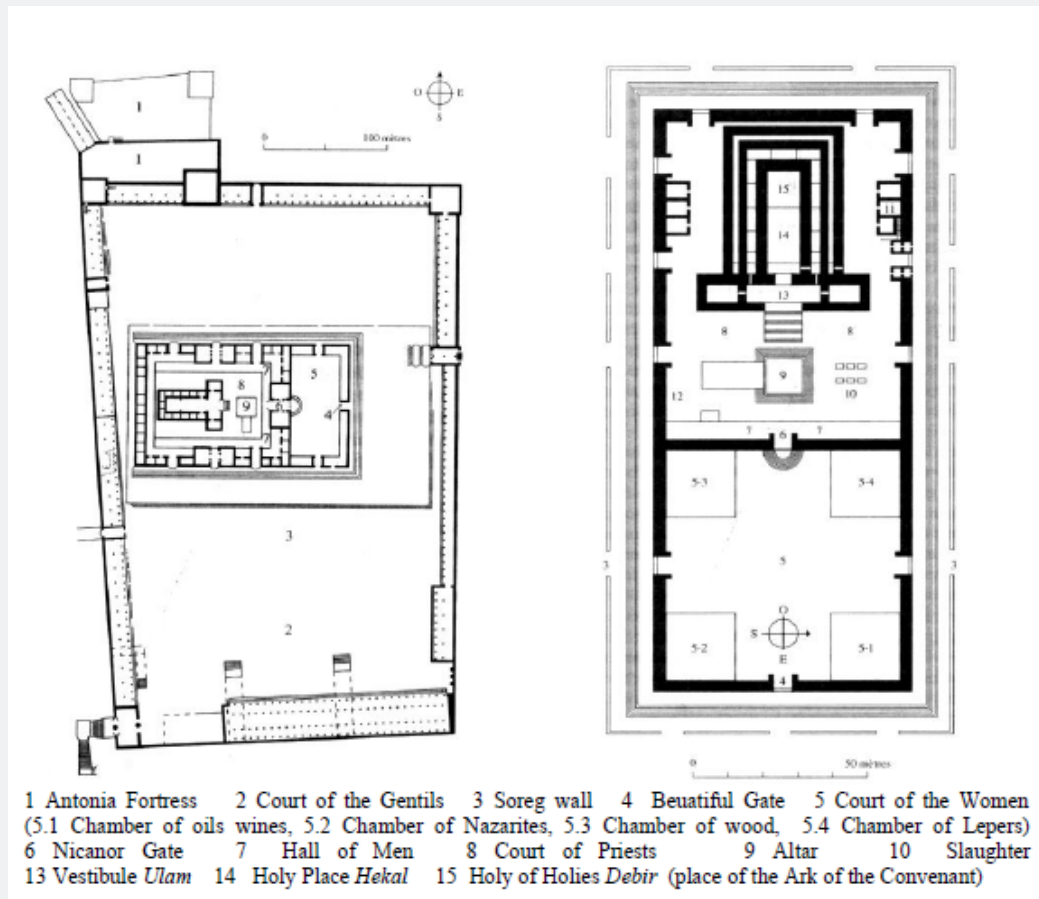


Figure 3: Herod's Temple, Second Temple of Jerusalem, (20 BC, destroyed in 70 AD).

The diaspora era: the synagogue

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD by Rome, the end of the Jewish Kingdom of Judea and the forced dispersion of the Hebrew people from their land, ancient Judaism disappeared. It would change in nature, becoming Rabbinic Judaism which, in this new condition in the diaspora, would have to invent a new space for communication with the divine, a new place of worship, the synagogue. It had already been experienced during the Babylonian exile between 586-538 BC and in the Holy Land during the Hellenistic and Roman period (synagogues of Capernaum, Beit Alpha, Ostia in Italy, etc.). Its purpose was to help the Jewish people resist in exile and survive in the diaspora by preserving their religious identity, despite the vicissitudes. This spatial arrangement of the synagogue has remained stable from the High Middle Ages to the present day, it has not changed despite the

centuries, only the architecture, the style, the decor, have changed according to the geographical context and the period (we can see it in the Ben Ezra synagogues of Cairo from the 11th century, of Old - New of Prague from the 13th, of Carpentras in France which dates from the 14th century). What was left of all the spatial structure of the Temple ?

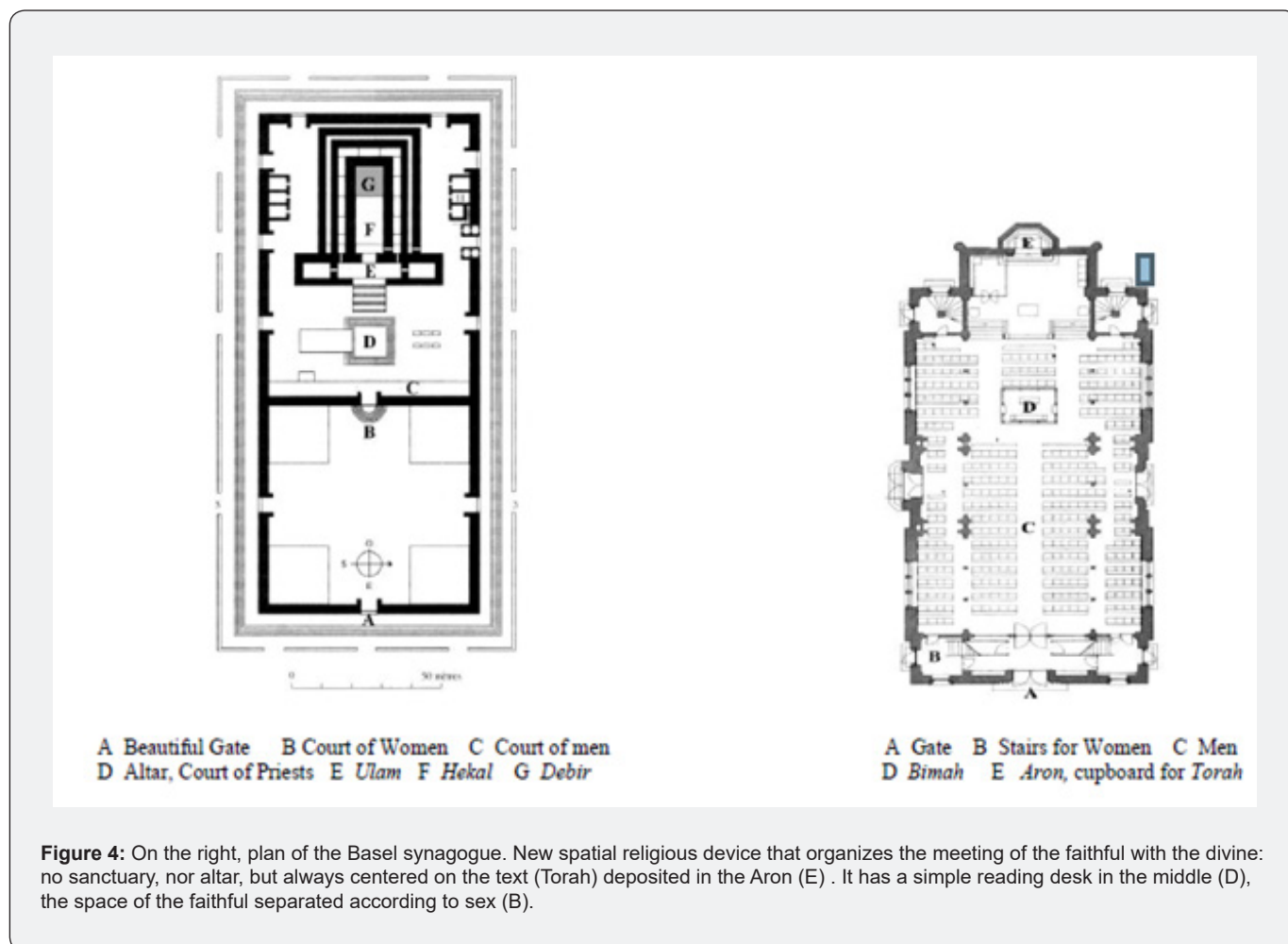
The old abandoned sacrificial cult is now replaced by a liturgical cult entirely centered on reading (of the Torah) and prayer: it becomes individual (at home) and collective (in the synagogue) communication with the divine, through prayer, and democratically open to all [8]. The ancient spaces of the Temple are thus completely turned upside down: there is no longer, now, a forbidden divine space where God resides (Holy of Holies), but only a simple cupboard (called « aron », tabernacle or ark), richly decorated and hidden by a curtain, raised by a few steps

and installed against the wall facing Jerusalem, or placed in a niche, an apse (the first synagogues often used a basilica plan). It encloses the Rolls of the Torah, the reproduction of which is now authorized (carried out by designated scribes): the Rolls of the Pentateuch constitute the only index of holiness in the synagogue. At the top of the cupboard, one often finds the Tablets of the Law, and placed next to it, a Menorah, a seven-branched candelabra, another souvenir of the Temple. A lit « eternal light » placed also nearby symbolizes the eternal hope of the return to the Temple of Jerusalem.

No divine space, thus no space of exclusive mediation privileged by a caste of priests, but only, in the center, a reading desk on a raised platform (« Bimah »), where any faithful can come to read the sacred text: the new mediator, the Rabbi, is of the « weak médiation » type, able to be replaced by anyone, the office can be led now by any faithful who has the capacity. The space of the faithful, around or facing the Bimah, is without any separation, to facilitate reading and listening. But, more than a physical material space, it is first and foremost a number of faithful that is necessary, a quorum of ten Jews (« Minyan ») that is required, able to meet anywhere, to allow, through collective prayer, the existence of the synagogue: the importance of the

physical space is thus reduced. However, the division between men and women, which was found in the Temple, is maintained (separated by a partition in the same room or on different floors). This last characteristic, separation of the sexes [9], with that of the presence of the sacred text confirming the centrality of the « Book » in Judaism, with the polarization of the place of worship and its liturgy on the sacred cupboard (Ark) are the main aspects that remain as signs of the ancient device of the Temple that connect it to the synagogue: its space and the totally recast liturgical practice are revolutionary for the time.

No more privileged and exclusive mediation, the modalities of communication of the faithful with the divine are completely reversed compared to those of the Temple: it is direct and open to all the faithful with a « weak » mediation. This new religious space will have an impact on other monotheistic religions spaces that will come later, such as the Protestant church that emerged with the Reformation, or the Mosque that was born with Islam: two places of worship also conceived as simple meeting places for the faithfuls to communicate with their God through prayer, without a divine sanctuary or « strong » privileged médiation [10] (Figures 4 & 5).



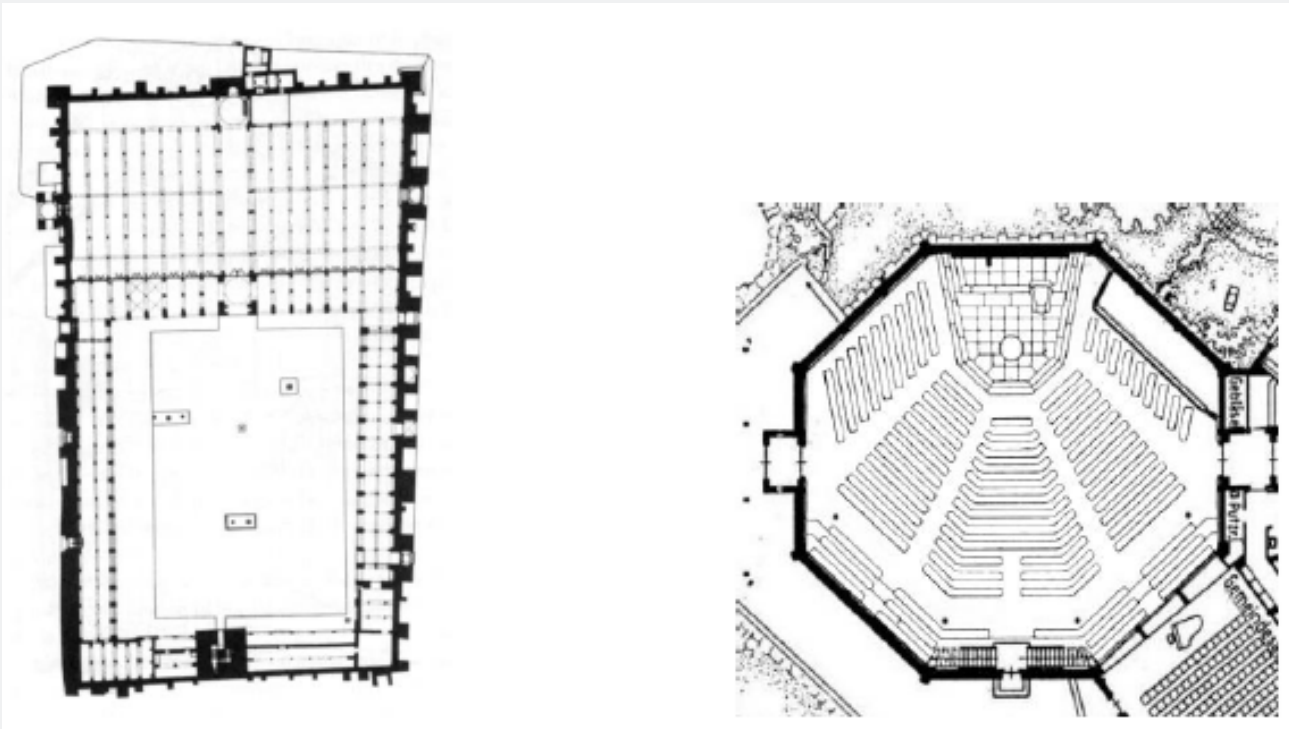


Figure 5: Kerouan mosque in Tunisia, Protestant church in Zurich Places of whoreshipe inspired by the synagogue as simple meeting rooms of he faithful.

Mutation of Judaism and spatial transformations of the Temple

In addition to this first major transformation, the Temple will undergo a second decisive transformation which will create a new place of worship, in Jerusalem, the Kotel.

First transformation: from the Temple to the synagogue

Comparing the two periods of Judaism before and after the

destruction of the Temple, corresponding respectively to ancient Judaism and rabbinic Judaism, two historical states of Judaism, we see that the spatial arrangements of the Temple of Jerusalem and the synagogue are symmetrically reversed. Starting from the three actors and their respective spaces, which constitute any place of worship and its distribution - space of the divine, space of the mediator, space of the faithful - the spatial transformations of these spaces from one state of Judaism to another, can be described as follows: (Table 1)

Table 1: First transformation: from the Temple to the synagogue.

	Temple	Synagogue
Space of the divine	real	virtual
Space of the mediator	present strong mediation	absent weak mediation
Space of the faithful	present separated from the divine space limited segregate	present unified with the divine space no limited segregate

The space of the divine (sanctuary) no longer has a place in the synagogue: from being real in the Temple (God is in the Holy of the Holies), it becomes virtual in the synagogue (God is nowhere and everywhere). The space of the mediator, consequently, from being « présent », becomes « absent »: no more caste of priests (« strong » mediation) replaced by rabbis (« weak » médiation). The space of the faithful is no longer separated from the space of the divine (which is « virtual ») nor from the space of the mediator (which has become, as we said, « weak »), then no spatial division

inside the place of worship, but it remains segregated by gender, men and women separated into two distinct spaces.

Despite this profound spatial transformation, we witnessed signs of the ancient Temple remain in the new place of worship, the synagogue: the cupboard, Aron, hidden behind a curtain, oriented towards Jerusalem, containing the Rolls of the Torah, whose polarity, in this new place of worship, refers directly to the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies of the Temple, the

main element of the place of worship in ancient Judaism. Similarly, a reproduction of the Tablets of the Law arranged at the top of the cupboard, and the candelabra, also present in the sanctuary, placed next to it. The gender division of space of the faithful between men/women, but whose access is no longer limited now, is also another remnant of the old arrangement of the Temple. An « Eternal light », lit near the cupboard, evokes the hope of returning to the Temple, functions as another symbol of remembrance. These are the main elements of the Temple which persist in the synagogue as signs of this ancient place of worship. Prayer is also entirely centered on the memory (Zakhor) of Jerusalem and its lost Temple, which the annual reading of the Torah recalls in a cyclical manner (its reading is repeated each year). From ancient Judaism, therefore, the idea of the Alliance sealed by Moses persists in the synagogue, through the text of the Torah. New texts, resulting from its interpretation and its commentaries by the rabbis, like the Talmud [11], are added to regulate customs and ritual and codify the new relationship of the faithful and the connection of the Jewish people with its God (613 commandments of which 365 are prohibited) [12].

Second transformation: from the Temple to the Kotel

A second transformation of the Temple, with the creation of a new original place of worship will emerge on the religious

Jewish stage. This involves the use of an archaeological vestige of the Temple, the western remaining wall of the Esplanade of the Mosques / Esplanade of the Temple, to set up a particular place of worship, both Jewish and universal, and also becoming a historical heritage monument bearing Israeli national identity [13].

In the 16th century, the Ottomans allowed Jews to come and pray in front of the wall of the Esplanade of the Mosques, calling it the Wailing Wall because of the tears and cries shed by believers over the loss of the Temple. With the rebirth of the Hebrew State in 1948 and the return of many Jews to Israel, the synagogue remains the main place of worship. After the Six-Day War and the conquest of Jerusalem East in 1967, with the reunification of the city, the significance of the Wall will change becoming not only a reminder of ancient Judaism, a central element of Jewish religious identity, but also a monument of Israeli heritage and national identity, the Kotel. Archaeological remains of the Second Temple of Herod, western part of the retaining wall that surrounded the Temple Mount (and then the Esplanade of the Mosques, after the Muslim occupation in the 7th century), became the Western Wall, the Kotel, a major sign of the existence of the destroyed Temple and a major witness of the Jewish past on this land. To enhance its value and create a meeting and celebration space, a square was cleared facing the Wall by razing the so-called Magrebin quarter that adjoined it (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Kotel, Western Wall, a new Jewish place of worship in Jerusalem.

A new place of worship was thus founded, outside and uncovered, separated into two distinct zones for men and women, without a mediator or specific liturgy or sanctuary. It is a holy place of pilgrimage and prayer, a place of communication with the divine where everyone, of all religions, all faiths - this is its universal character - can come and meditate and deposit, on a

piece of paper, their message addressed to God, between the blocks of stone of the wall - messages that are not then destroyed after but buried in a reserved place. Hence, in this new context, some other radical Jews dream of rebuilding a Third Temple on the Esplanade of the Mosques: a crazy messianic project whose political risks are incalculable.

References

1. Schmidt F (1994) *La pensée du Temple. De Jerusalem in Qumran*, Seuil. S ed-Rajna G, Jewish Art, PUF, (1985) "The Temple of Jerusalem". *Le Monde de la Bible*, n°113, 1998.
2. Levy A (2003) *Les machines à faire-croire. Formes et fonctionnement de la spatialité religieuse*, *Anthropos/Economica*.
3. J Bottero (1992) *Naissance de Dieu, La Bible et les historiens*, Gallimard.
4. *The Bible*, Kings 4-5-6-7-8, Editions Colbo, (1989).
5. On the notion of purity in religion, and Judaism in particular, see Douglas M (1966) *De la Souillure, Essai sur la notion de pollution et tabou*, *La Découverte*, 2005.
6. This spatial tripartition of the sanctuary was found in the Syrian polytheistic temples of Taynat, leading archaeologists to say that the Jewish Temple was inspired by it, but with a totally different content.
7. Recent archaeological discoveries confirmed this influence: Margueron JC (1985) "The Syrian Temple: Prototype of the Temple of Solomon", in *Le Grand Atlas de l'Archéologie, Encyclopaedia Universalis*. Margueron wrote after the discovery of the temples of Taynat in northern Syria: "Understanding that the Temple of Jerusalem is based on a religious logic that is at least two thousand years old at the time is one of the archaeological conquests of the last decade." Op.cit.
8. Hayoun MR (1994) *La Liturgie juive*, PUF, D Jarassé, *L'Age d'or des synagogues*, Herscher, 1991; "Le patrimoine juif français", in *Monuments historiques*, n°191.
9. Reform Judaism, also called Liberal Judaism, will abolish this gender separation and even accept women as rabbis.
10. I have shown the influence of the Torah on the other sacred texts of monotheism, the New Testament for Christians and the Koran for Muslims: Levy A, « Les Machines à faire croire, Véridiction du discours religieux », In: Hebert L, Guillemette L (2009) *Intertextualité, Interdiscursivité et Intermédialité*, Les Presses de l'Université de Laval, Québec. Compared to the Catholic church, the Protestant church has undergone a transformation more or less identical to that of the synagogue in relation to the Temple : no more sanctuary to house God, no more representation of God, no more « strong » mediation (papacy and Vatican), no more space separated from the faithful.
11. Developed during the exile in Babylon, then after the destruction of the Temple, the Talmud is a collection of teachings and commentaries on the Torah. It includes the Mishna, a compilation of oral traditions, setting out the religious festivals, the law, etc., the Gemara, a set of more developed commentaries divided into Halachah (law, customs, morality) and Haggadah, a narrative part of the Talmud which takes up, by simplifying them, the biblical stories: the Talmud is at the source of the "rabbinization" of Judaism. On this subject Hayoun MR, Strack HL, Stemberger G (1986) *Introduction au Talmud et au Midrash*, Cerf; Ouaknin MA (1993) *Le livre brûlé. Lire le Talmud*, Seuil.
12. Douglas M (1999) *Anthropologie de la Bible, Lecture du Lévitique*, Bayard, 2005.
13. Rosner C (2023) *Digging the Homeland Land, A History of Archaeology in Palestine*, CNRS Editions, Israel. Finkelstein I (2008) *Un Archéologue au pays de la Bible*, Bayard Editions.



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
DOI: 10.19080/GJAA.2025.14.555882

Your next submission with Juniper Publishers will reach you the below assets

- Quality Editorial service
- Swift Peer Review
- Reprints availability
- E-prints Service
- Manuscript Podcast for convenient understanding
- Global attainment for your research
- Manuscript accessibility in different formats
(Pdf, E-pub, Full Text, Audio)
- Unceasing customer service

Track the below URL for one-step submission

<https://juniperpublishers.com/online-submission.php>