

International Colloquium on Rabbis and Synagogues in the Mediterranean Context: A Summary

Carlos Santos Carretero
csantoscarretero@gmail.com

On 9 and 10 February 2015, the University of Granada hosted the International Colloquium on Rabbis and Synagogues in the Mediterranean Context. The event was organized by Lorena Miralles Maciá, Carmen Caballero Navas and Daniel Muñoz Garrido and received support from the University of Granada, The Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv), the Spanish Association of Hebrew and Jewish Studies (AEEHJ in its Spanish acronym), the research project Language and Literature of Rabbinic and Medieval Judaism (FFI2013-43813-P, funded by the State Secretariat for Research, Development and Innovation – Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness), the Regional Government of Andalusia and the Euro-Arab Foundation for Higher Studies (in whose Granada headquarters the colloquium was held). The colloquium was open to all (prior notification of attendance was the only requirement) so that anybody interested in the world of Hebrew and Jewish studies could attend as long as space was available, regardless of whether or not they were affiliated with an institution of higher learning.

The colloquium featured presentations and discussions by some of the most renowned international specialists in the field of Hebrew and Jewish studies from a variety of institutions: the University of Granada (Spain), the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), the Nahmanides Institute for Jewish Studies of Girona (Spain), the University of Murcia (Spain), the Archaeological and Ethnological Museum of Cordoba (Spain), the University of Seville (Spain), the University of Vienna (Austria), Bucknell University (United States), the Freie Universität Berlin (Germany), Ariel University (Israel), Tel Aviv University (Israel) and the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership in Chicago (United States).

The symposium topics were discussed against the backdrop of the figures of the rabbi and synagogue in their various dimensions: as a place of wisdom, reading, reflection and commentary on the biblical text; as a historical-archaeological site in contact with other cultures and religions (both the ancient and medieval worlds); the role of women in the synagogue liturgy; and, of course, the Jewish art produced as a result of cultural dialogues with Christians and Muslims during the Middle Ages.

The warm welcome from the organizers was followed by the presentation of the colloquium by Lola Ferre Cano, Vice-Rector for Graduate and Postgraduate Education at the University of Granada and Professor of Hebrew at that university. Her words were endorsed by Inmaculada Marrero, Executive Secretary of the Euro-Arab Foundation for Higher Studies. This foundation did not only provide the site for the colloquium but also facilitated the roundtable discussions.

The first session on 9 February, entitled *Literature, Synagogue and Sages*, featured presentations by Elvira Martín Contreras (CSIC), Lorena Miralles Maciá (UGR) and Aurora Salvatierra Ossorio (UGR) and was moderated by Carmen Caballero Navas with Lola Ferre Cano as the respondent.

In her discussion titled *Which Biblical Text Was Used in the Ancient Synagogue?*, Elvira Martín Contreras presented the various existing theories regarding the question of which biblical text was used during the rabbinic period. The contended standardization of the biblical text and first Tiberian codices, of course, was a process that spanned almost eight centuries and the last word has not yet been said on the subject. Continuing along these lines, in her talk (titled *Leviticus Rabbah and the Synagogue: Reflections for a Future Study*) Lorena Miralles Maciá considered the role of the Midrash in understanding the synagogue. She presented the problems surrounding the information on the synagogue transmitted by the text and discussed the question of how best to address the controversial topic of the synagogue sermon in relation to the Midrash as it is known today. Finally, Aurora Salvatierra Ossorio presented a paper titled *The “Rabbis” of Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera*. A series of works attributed to this philosopher, poet and commentator introduce a whole host of personages who embody paradigms of teachers and sages and are criticized, tolerated or defended. On to them were projected thoughts and ideals that were the subject of discussion and controversy in their time. Virtuous sages, teachers who were connoisseurs of the sacred texts and scholars of Aristotle debated and defended their positions in works like the *Iggeret ha-musar*, *Iggeret havikkua* and *Sefer ha-mebaqqesh*. These models were not always exclusive or corresponded to a “single discourse”. They revealed not only the certainties but also the questions inherent in the evolution of traditional forms of Jewish leadership.

The second roundtable, on *Ancient Synagogues and Cultural Influences*, was moderated by Daniel Muñoz Garrido with José Fernández Ubiña as respondent and featured Günter Stemberger (University of Vienna), Puri Ubric Rabaneda (UGR) and Rikva Ulmer (Bucknell University). Günter Stemberger discussed the rich mosaics in Palestinian synagogues and their complex historical and cultural context in *Mosaics of Palestinian Synagogues and their Cultural Background: Rabbinic, Hellenistic or What Else?* Except for the piyyutim and rabbinic texts, there are no extant examples of Hebrew literature from Late Antiquity. However, the connection between the art in these mosaics—which include zodiac representations and other apparently “non-Jewish” elements in the remains of quite a few synagogues—and ancient Greek culture and Christian art are

equally important. The presence of these themes is a demonstration of the convergence of cultures and ideas in this historical period.

In *Rabbis and Synagogues in Ancient Sepharad and their Influence on Spanish Christianity*, Puri Ubric Rabaneda discussed the literary, epigraphic and archaeological evidence that has come down from rabbis and synagogues in ancient Hispania that evince their interaction with the Hispano-Roman world and their subsequent encounter with the Church. This gave rise to new ideological and material conceptions that affected both the perception of the synagogue and the Jewish communities of the time. Finally, Rikva Ulmer looked at the topic of the Egyptian influence on mosaics in synagogues and other buildings in Israel. During her talk on *A God with Breasts: Egyptian Motifs in Late Antique Synagogue Mosaics and Rabbinic Texts*, she demonstrated how the rabbis reinforced Jewish identity by taking and reinterpreting icons from ancient Egyptian religion and tradition. For the rabbis, this appropriation was intended to show the superiority of the religion of Israel. These diverse Egyptian cultural icons transferred to the Jewish art world included the figure of the “god with breasts”, a re-elaboration of the ambiguous Egyptian Nile god of floods.

The afternoon session, *Synagogues, Rabbis and Women*, featured presentations by Tal Ilan (Freie Universität Berlin), Olga Ruiz Morell (UGR) and Carmen Caballero Navas (UGR). The roundtable moderator was Lorena Mirallés Maciá and Silvia Planas Marcé served as respondent. Tal Ilan spoke on *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue Revisited*, discussing new advances in the study of women as leaders in synagogues and evaluating Bernadette Brooten’s theory and research. These arguments are supported by several inscriptions surrounding the figure of the woman as the central element of synagogue organization, throwing more light on a series of feminist studies underway since the 1980s.

Olga Ruiz Morell presented *I Know I Am Not Required to, But...May I? Women's Spaces in the Synagogue of the Sages*, a talk that analysed the relations between the sages and the synagogue liturgy with respect to women and the scope of their competencies and prohibitions (irrespective of what truly occurred on a daily basis in the early centuries of the Common Era). This third and final 9 February session concluded with Carmen Caballero Navas and her talk on *Women in the Synagogue. Rabbinic Authority, Women's Religiosity and Discourses on the Female Body in the Middle Ages*, in which she proposed that women in the synagogue be interpreted from a new perspective. The presentation analysed some of the arguments used by two important Sephardic rabbis, Maimonides and Nahmanides, to conceptualize the female body as imperfect and put forth two cardinal ideas in misogynist Jewish medieval literature: the need to distance woman from the sacred and their incapacity to study the Torah. As a counterpoint to these ideas, she also presented a series of different sources that allow the participation of women in the synagogue, some of their customs, rites and practices to be visualized and interpreted.

The 10 February session began with the roundtable on *Medieval Synagogues (Archaeology and History)* and featured renowned specialists from Spain and Israel, whose talks focused on the different sites where synagogues were located in the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages. The participants were María José Lloveras (independent researcher), José Ángel González Ballesteros (University of Murcia), David Casutto (School of Architecture, Ariel University) and Óscar Gil Delgado (University of Seville). On this occasion, Puri Ubric Rabaneda served as moderator and María Dolores Baena (Archaeological and Ethnological Museum of Cordoba) was the respondent.

In her talk on *The Medieval Synagogue in Besalú: Documents, Archaeological Remains and Interpretation*, María José Lloveras presented the current results of an in-depth study of the archaeological remains found at the Besalú synagogue (Girona), whose mikveh was discovered in 1964. This confirmed theories about the existence of a Jewish community in this location and its relations with neighbouring communities. Intensive work done by the University of Girona and the Besalú Town Council has confirmed the existence of this synagogue and even recovered the urban structure of “Jewish Besalú”.

José Ángel González Ballesteros followed with a talk in the same vein on *Initial Approaches to Late Medieval Jewish Household Items from Lorca Castle (Murcia) in the So-Called “Synagogue Complex”*. Various archaeological studies have described and identified a series of dwellings located next to Lorca Castle as the Jewish quarter in this town. This identification is based on one of the domestic units whose spatial design is closely related to similar designs of buildings used as synagogues. This suggests that it may have been used with that purpose. The archaeological excavations also recovered ceramic, glass and metal pieces belonging to the inhabitants of this late medieval Jewish quarter.

The ideological and material reconstruction of medieval synagogues in the Iberian Peninsula is a highly complicated task due to the scarcity of material remains. These difficulties were discussed by David Casutto in his presentation on *The Interior Design and Layout of Synagogues in the Iberian Peninsula Based on the Appearance of Synagogues in the Sephardi Diaspora after the Expulsion from Spain*, which suggested a new way to approach the study of Iberian synagogues. Since the remains are so few (only the El Transito Synagogue in Toledo and the Synagogue of Tomar in Portugal are “fully” preserved) and the *responsas* do not shed much light in this respect, the importance of the synagogues erected during the Sephardi diaspora must be reconsidered. These buildings, scattered across Europe, Asia and the Americas, suggest a set of conclusions that may give some idea about the liturgical customs, furnishings and structure of the synagogues in two countries that simultaneously lost almost all of their Jewish activity. Óscar Gil Delgado, a scholar of the plans for the Santa Maria la Blanca Church in Seville, closed the session with his talk on *A Synagogue Revealed in Seville*, in which he discussed the fact that for years it was believed that there were no remains of the temples on which the current Santa Maria la Blanca Church (a mosque converted into a

synagogue) was built. Fortunately, documents and graphic analyses of the remains have made it possible to re-establish the configuration of the building in its state before 1248 as a mosque, its reuse as a synagogue until the mid-fourteenth century and its use as a Grand Synagogue until 1391.

The last session of the colloquium focused on the topic of *Art and the Synagogue* and featured Julie A. Harris (Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership, Chicago), Miguel Ángel Espinosa Villegas (UGR) and Daniel Muñoz Garrido (UGR) as speakers. The moderator was, once again, Carmen Caballero Navas and the respondent was Antonio Peláez Rovira (UGR).

During the lecture *Parchment Witness/Parchment Proxy: Rabbis and Synagogues in the Iberian Illuminated Haggadot*, Julie A. Harris took a new look at the images of rabbis and synagogues in haggadot from the Iberian Peninsula, viewing them as art in dialogue with other synagogue elements, rather than mere pictorial evidence of medieval Jewish life. In *The Sephardim in Europe: The Definition, Identity and Transmission of Hispanic Jewishness in Synagogue Art*, Miguel Ángel Espinosa Villegas discussed the relation between the personality and definition of Sephardicness with the synagogue, trying to understand the cultural, social and historical circumstances that lay behind a specific style of art or image and how “Iberian synagogue art” appeared in northern Europe and the Ottoman Empire, slowly becoming a pastiche used to define and merge all things considered “Sephardic Jewish”.

Daniel Muñoz Garrido closed the session on art in the synagogue with his presentation on *A Minbar for the Rabbi: Religious Sermons and Art in the Lorca Synagogue* in which he showed how cultural dialogues between Jews, Christians and Muslims manifested themselves in art. One example of this is the “teva” structure found in the rediscovered synagogue in Lorca. This structure, which has elements that connect it to a mosque minbar and even a fifteenth-century church pulpit, was quite possibly the fruit of artistic and cultural relation.

Over the course of two days, the *International Colloquium on Rabbis and Synagogues in the Mediterranean Context*, its organizers and participants presented information to satisfy the interest of any Jewish culture enthusiast. Although synagogues and rabbis may be uniquely religious figures for laypeople, the lectures and discussions in the colloquium fully showed how both figures played a crucial role not only for Jewish communities around the world, but also for the history of the medieval and ancient Mediterranean world. Whether in terms of faith, society, literature, art or history, synagogues and rabbis constituted the axes around which Jewish life in the diaspora turned. This particular colloquium, featuring renowned experts from around the world, has contributed to our understanding of the sages of the past and their context, a significant achievement in 2015, the year in which the Cordoba synagogue celebrates its 700th anniversary.