I began researching ancient synagogue architecture nearly fifty years ago for a doctoral dissertation that initially was to focus on what the architectural form or plan of the synagogue could tell us about its possible function or functions. I thus began my effort to track down as much information as was available on the ancient synagogue and quickly became aware of the dating controversies discussed in my introduction to the Handbook of Synagogue Architecture. It also became apparent that much of the evidence on excavated synagogue sites was either not published or not easily accessible. Few sites had final reports written and other data were scattered in various publications or still in the possession of archaeologists. As a result of this effort, and out of frustration, I realized I must change the focus of my dissertation. A more valuable tool would be an inventory or corpus of all known or suspected synagogue sites in what was Roman and Byzantine Palestine, including pertinent data and a bibliography for each site. It was this type of reliable documentation that was most needed in order to arrive at a sound analysis of all available evidence unclouded by various religious and political loyalties that often influence scholarly interpretation. I also became increasing aware of the importance of what I describe in the Handbook as historical geography, the study of each synagogue site within its geographic region and in relation to its neighboring religious, economic, and social institutions, a methodology that has become increasingly important in the study of religion. My hope was that the publication of the Handbook, a distillation of my thesis, would provide “a research tool for archaeology, history and religious studies.”

The Handbook of Synagogue Architecture was published in 1982. Many new synagogue sites have been uncovered since that date and numerous volumes and papers published on the topic. In an ideal world of publishing a second volume documenting the new sites, including similar detailed information as in the initial volume, would be commissioned. In addition, data on sites in the initial volume would be updated, and its introduction would
take into account the latest theories regarding the synagogue and the spirited discussions they have initiated. But since the ideal world of publishing does not exist, it is my hope that the digital edition of the *Handbook* will stimulate young scholars to further address some of the issues I mention in my Preface, including the need to further "our knowledge of the extent and depth of Greco-Roman influence in the Middle East, particularly its impact on ordinary people...and the intermingling of cultures..."\(^3\) Furthermore, I hope it encourages further investigation of the "reciprocal relationship between church and synagogue architecture," and I would add, the Roman temples that co-existed with them. As I cautioned then, I do so now, such a study would "require a willingness to approach complex and often contradictory [and I would now add controversial] material in an objective manner, free of preconceived notions."\(^4\)

Although it has been over a century since Kohl and Watzinger\(^5\) published their landmark volume on synagogues in the Galilee, the study of ancient synagogue art and architecture, its origin, dates, form, function, and other issues only now emerging, remains in its infancy when compared to the extensive research on Roman and early Christian art and architecture. Fresh new insights and avenues of research in the study of the ancient synagogue will enlighten and expand our understanding of its important role in the development of the form and function of buildings designed for congregational worship observed by the three Abrahamic faiths – synagogue, church, and mosque.

Notes


3 Ibid., p. x

4 *Handbook*, p. xi