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Romanesque Beyond Christianity: Jewish Ritual Baths in Germany in the 12th and 13th Centuries*

Abstract: This article examines Jewish Christian relations in the High Middle Ages through the prism of religious architecture and ritual, focusing on the architecture of Jewish ritual baths from the Rhineland region in Germany. I argue that the baths of Speyer, Worms, Friedberg, Offenburg and Cologne were designed to maximize the experiential power of ritual immersion and arouse symbolic associations to support the ceremony. Architectural details such as unusual depth, ornament, lighting schemes and monumentality contributed to a spectrum of immersion ceremonies described in contemporary sources. These are contextualized in concurrent developments in Christian religious architecture and ceremonial use of architectural space.

Key words: Ritual baths, ritual immersion, Romanesque architecture, Jewish architecture, religious ritual.

Introduction

Jewish ritual immersion (*tevila*) is a religious ceremony conducted by submerging the entire naked body in water that is neither drawn, nor collected through other human effort.[1] Full-body ritual immersion was intended to counter impurities outlined in Leviticus 11–15.[2] Such impurity was

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1   Mishna, Tractate Mikva'ot, 1:7; Arnost Zvi Ehrman, "Mikva'ot," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, vol. 14 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007) 224.

2   Lev 11:32, 40; 14:8, 9, 47; 15:5 ff.; 16:26, 28; Num 19:7, 8, 19. For purification in the Bible, see I. Epstein, "Mikwaoth," in *The Mishnah Translated into English with Notes, Glossary and Indices*, trans. M. H. Segal (London: Soncino, 1948) 417; Rachel Biale,