AVRIL ALBA: *The Holocaust Memorial Museum: Sacred Secular Space*. Houndmills, U. K. and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; pp. xi + 252.

As we edge towards the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, some seventy or so years after the war's end, there is no shortage of Holocaust museums and memorials throughout the world. There is therefore also no shortage of texts which explore the meaning-making work that these memorials and museums undertake. With each additional text though, we are able to learn something new, and Avril Alba's intervention into this rich field offers a welcome and novel approach. In this innovative book, Alba embraces the sacred, presenting an exploration of the ways that the ideas contained in sacred texts inform three different memorial museums — the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D. C., the new Historical Museum at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, and the Sydney Jewish Museum — as well as the ways that these museums create new theologies.

Alba explains that “what this work seeks to establish is an understanding of how the Holocaust history and memory displayed in these institutions has a profoundly metahistorical or ‘sacred’ aspect — one that has been largely overlooked due to the empirical and supposedly ‘secular’ nature of both historical and museological enterprises” (p. 5). That is, in this book Alba is working to understand the role of the sacred, the spiritual, and the religious in the memories of the Holocaust which are being produced in these Holocaust museums. Through an exploration of the key figures involved in creating each museum, coupled with a dive into the museum archives which show the discussions which occurred in the various committees needed to establish the museums, Alba brings to life the complex process of establishing new museums. Throughout the book, she looks at archival documentation, as well as texts, interviews, speeches, visitor responses, and “museum displays and architecture” (p. 9). Via these sources, Alba takes her readers through the history of the development of each museum and its memorial intentions, offering a glimpse into the practices of museum-makers, and helping readers to understand in more depth the way that museological practices develop.

As a result, we get a sense of the disagreements and compromises that curators have made to the ideas of the Holocaust, of memory, of the sacred, and of victimhood and survivorhood which would be displayed. In every museum, there was always disagreement of some kind — while as visitors we may see a finished product, with a seemingly coherent message, Alba alerts us to the complexities of design, and to the ways in which different visions might be collapsed in the name of compromise.

But it is the sacred aspects of Holocaust memorialisation practices that are the key focus of *The Holocaust Memorial Museum*, with Alba considering “metahistory” alongside history in her analysis of the narratives and significations at play. Metahistory is used here “to refer to classical Jewish sacred narratives (biblical and rabbinic) and, in particular, the search for transcendent meaning in the past that they describe” (p. 197). Thus we are offered a biblical understanding of the Holocaust, with Alba showing a line between the events presented within the Bible and modern theological understandings of the Holocaust; we gain an understanding of the role of stories of Amalek within the context of Israeli narratives about the Holocaust; and we are shown the ways that the notion of the “redemptive sufferer,” a figure which has existed throughout Jewish biblical text, has been put to work in an

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi: [10.1111/1467-9809.12461](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12461)

Australian memorial context. Thus even though museums — as part of the Enlightenment project — are generally understood as secular spaces, this book argues that these museums produce a sacred knowledge. In doing so, Alba's "aim ... is not to offer theological reasons *for* the Holocaust but to isolate and examine the sacred meanings being ascribed to the Holocaust *after* the event" (p. 7).

Alongside this, Alba focuses throughout on how these museums and memorials imagine, and construct, the victims and survivors whose stories they tell. In the case of Israel's Holocaust Remembrance and Heroism Law — which inaugurated Yad Vashem — for instance, "the archetypal language ... emphasizes the *national* and *familial*, rather than the individual, identity of the victims." This accords, Alba makes clear, with "traditional" ideas of Jewish peoplehood (p. 90). Throughout she also deals with questions of how to "represent the unrepresentable" horrors of the Holocaust, demonstrates the ways in which the museums offer reflective spaces for survivors alongside their metahistorical and historical narratives, and explores the conflict with which each museum must grapple: how to balance representing the story of the Holocaust as either universal or particular.

In doing so, Alba presents her readers with a lucid and important text which demonstrates the particularity of each memorial approach to their national location — what fits in the U. S., is not what is created in Israel, nor what works in Australia — and thus the ways in which sacred texts take on new meaning in different locations. To use James E. Young's terminology, there is a 'nativisation' of Holocaust memory, which Alba demonstrates clearly throughout. While at times offering a critical edge, this book is predominantly a work of description rather than critique. We could note, for instance, that in the chapter on Yad Vashem — which, like the other chapters, locates the museum within its national memorial practices — Palestinians receive bare mention. Doing so in greater depth might have helped to enhance an understanding of the complexities of the memory-work Yad Vashem undertakes in its geographical, political, and religious, place: what does it mean, after all, to tell a Jewish national story of victimhood in that place, at this time?

Throughout this vital book Alba demonstrates that these museums, through their engagement with metahistory and the sacred, are productive of new meanings — they do not just reflect what has occurred in the text or in discussions, but they create new approaches and understandings. In this way, they also create new memories. In this vein, the book ends with a return to the idea of redemption for the Jewish people after the Holocaust, an idea which perhaps sits uneasily for many, and thus opens up a challenge for the secular historians amongst us — how can we understand Jewish Holocaust memory without an account of the sacred? In this significant work of memory and history, Avril Alba shows us in vivid detail why, and how, we cannot.

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Title:

The Holocaust Memorial Museum: Sacred Secular Space

Date:

2017-09-01

Citation:

Silverstein, J. (2017). The Holocaust Memorial Museum: Sacred Secular Space. JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS HISTORY, 41 (3), pp.419-421. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12461>.

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