Jewish Identity at the Limes:
The Jews of Dura Europos between Rome and Persia

Steven Fine,
Yeshiva University

I grew up with the J. Paul Getty Museum. Shortly after its opening, my entire high school class came up from San Diego, to experience what is now called the Getty Villa. Never mind the cloth wall paper and practically modern paintings and artifacts that were then upstairs. My eyes were firmly fixed upon the stoas, the wall paintings, gardens, and seemingly endless variety of Greek and Roman art. In short, I was entranced by the fantasy. At the same time, I was naggingly put off by the artifacts that I was looking at. Fascinating as they were, they were Roman, and "everyone knows" that the Romans destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem—and sent "us" into "exile"-- in Southern California. More than that, the Getty had an east-coast sense of itself that was alien to a San Diegan like me. I felt small and out of place—and even more so since I was surrounded by such evocative idolatry! Years later the "thesis" and the "antithesis" of my emotional responses to the Getty found their synthesis, when I began offering tours as a graduate student at USC, which I called "A Palestinian Rabbi in Caesar's Court: Exploring Jewish Archaeology at the J. P. Getty Museum." Popular with just the sorts of Jews (and Christians) who saw themselves as something between cultural proprietors and minority outsiders, my Getty tours of decades ago framed--and continue to frame—a piece of my inner world. All of this to say how happy I am to be here today, at a conference rescheduled, thanks to the thoughtfulness of Erich Gruen and the Getty, from its usual Friday-Saturday slot to Thursday-Friday so that I might attend. As I told my

students, with some glee, "The house of the father-in-law of Julius Caesar has moved its conference for the sake of the Jewish Sabbath"—synthesis indeed!

In the time allotted to me, my intention is to leave the shores of Malibu, and the house of Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus, and move just about as far east as one could in the Roman Empire, to a small city on a bluff overlooking the Euphrates River in eastern Syria (today the border between Syria and Iraq). Called Dura by the Persians, Europos by the Romans, this city was founded by the Seleucids in 303 BCE on the road between Antioch on the Orontes and Seleucia on the Tigris, captured from the Parthians in 165 CE and eventually destroyed by the Sassanian Persians around 256 in one of those periodic border wars that were so common on the Roman-Persian frontier. The neologism by which the site is known, Dura Europos, reflects the sense of synthesis asserted by the original French-American excavation team, who throughout their reports assert the composite identity of this city.

No Jewish monument from late antiquity has been more studied, interpreted, parsed and discussed than the synagogue at Dura Europos. From the moment of its discovery in 1932 to the present, the Dura synagogue has provoked intense excitement from art historians, archaeologists, religion scholars of various ilks, social historians, classicists, Talmudists and even liberal rabbis. Interpretations of this building have varied widely; from Dura as exemplar of "Hellenistic Judaism" to Dura as exemplar of "Rabbinic Judaism" to Dura as exemplar of "Non-Rabbinic Judaism" to the synagogue as forerunner and bedrock of the entire history of Christian art, categorized as the "Early Christian synagogue" par excellence—with an (un-) healthy dose of Orientalism thrown in for good measure. In all of these cases, Dura has been plugged in to various theories

of the history of Jews, Judaism, Christianity and art in the ancient world, and shown to exemplify each. The images have been formed and reformed into narrative presentations of these monistic interpretive stances—approaches that tell us far more about the interpreter than the interpreted. This phenomenon has been amply discussed by recent scholars of the post-modern bent, particularly Annabel Wharton, Margaret Olin and I dealt with it in my *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World.*[1]

The Dura synagogue is the most modeled ancient Jewish building of the latter 20th century—second to the Herodian Temple in Jerusalem-- with replicas displayed prominently in two New York museums, and a third in Tel Aviv. Two of these models are built at half scale. The models too reflect the instincts of their designers. Rachel Wischnitzer installed two at Yeshiva University Museum (1971), a half scale of the synagogue interior, and a smaller treatment of the building complex. In the smaller model (featured in Kurt Weitzmann's monumental Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition, *The Age of Spirituality* [1977/8]),[2] Wischnitzer treats the synagogue as an isolated and somewhat grand monument parallel to later monumental synagogues that she constructed at YUM, rather than the simple converted domus that it was. The 1990's Jewish Museum/New York depiction of the western wall of the synagogue exaggerates the female genitalia of the Daughter of Pharaoh (perhaps inadvertently reflecting the

---

[1]M. Olin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 127-56; A. Wharton, *Refiguring the Post Classical City: Dura Europos, Jerash, Jerusalem, and Ravenna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 15-23; S. Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005),

[2] K. Weitzmann, ed., *The Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), 392-3.

tastes of the museum's New York audience and benefactors), while in the installation in the Damascus Museum (and hence, inadvertently, in models dependant upon this installation) her body parts were flattened, her nudity somewhat erased. Largely off limits to the Jewish scholars who study it most, and exhibited in an unmarked area of the Damascus Museum, the Dura synagogue has been featured on Israeli postage stamps and has developed an aura far beyond its size. It is noteworthy that in its current proposal to develop an exhibition focusing on Dura, *On the Cusp of Empires: Jews, Romans and Persians in the Ancient World,* Yeshiva University Museum has encountered difficulties on the claim that the exhibition is "too Jewish." The Dura Europos synagogue is in some ways a hostage of the culture war that accompanies the military conflict in the Middle East. This small Jewish sanctuary has thus carried an incredible burden of meaning in our seventy-six year acquaintance with its beautiful wall paintings.

Modern interpretation and study of the Dura synagogue has created an incredibly useful and diverse literature that deals with virtually every aspect of the synagogue and its paintings. The masterful final report, edited by Carl Kraeling,[3] and the equally masterful first study of the building, by E.L. Sukenik,[4] set the materials and the basic archaeological and literary contexts of the building on sure footing.. All of the resources necessary for the interpretation of this building is well available, if somewhat balkanized. Thus, the Dura final reports often separate artistic analysis from the inscriptions and texts found in and near the synagogue. This is most pronounced in regard to the Dura Europos Hebrew prayer parchment was correctly understood by the authors of the Dura

[3] C. H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, with contributions by C. C. Torrey, C. B. Welles, and B. Geiger. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956).
[4] E. L. Sukenik, *The Synagogue of Dura-Europos and its Frescoes* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1947), in Hebrew.

preliminary report and by Sukenik, and how it was misunderstood by Kraeling, ignored by E. R. Goodenough, unknown to Joseph Gutmann, and essentially dropped out of the English language discussion of the synagogue-- exiled, as it were to a parchments and papyri volume of the Dura Europos final report.[5]

In this paper I will not focus upon grand themes in the history of Judaism, late antiquity or art history. Rather, my sights will be set on the local context—employing an interpretive stance that focuses first and foremost upon the Jews of Dura Europos and their building. This approach reflects post-modern concerns for what Clifford Geertz long ago called "thick description,"[6] that is, local interpretation, as a prerequisite to more global interpretation. My focus here will be set upon aspects of this early reception of the Dura paintings with an eye toward understanding the local Jewish community at Dura Europos that created, used, and through inscription and graffito gave verbal resonance to this ancient liturgical space.

Two groups of inscriptions were discovered in the Dura Europos synagogue. The first are a series of Greek and Aramaic inscriptions painted onto the paintings at or near the time of their completion. The second are Middle Persian (and Parthian) graffiti painted in a secondary manner.[7] These inscriptions tell us much about the early reception

---

[5] I discuss this phenomenon in *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World,* 31, 44-45. Unmentioned in Gutmann's writings, he admitted this problem in a phone conversation shortly before his death.

[6] C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1977).

[7] The most recent collection of these inscriptions is by D. Noy, and H. Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis III: Syria and Cyprus* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 133-212, who collate all earlier readings and hypotheses. All references to the inscriptions are to this volume. The Persian inscriptions are in need of reediting by an Iranist, a project that I hope to facilitate soon.

of the Dura Europos wall paintings, and what ancient viewers saw during the little over a decade of their ancient existence.

The Greek and Aramaic inscriptions of the Dura synagogue fall into two groups: dedicatory inscriptions and short labels that identify characters in the various scenes. There is no consistency in labeling—neither linguistically nor regarding which scenes are labeled and which not. This lack of methodical labeling has caused great consternation to modern scholars, allowing for all manner of learned (and sometimes learnedly quirky) interpretation. Thus, for example, the four wing panels above the Torah shrine contain images of four men, none of them labeled, are heavily discussed. Panels have received all manner of identifications—from Moses and Abraham (likely) to Jeremiah and Ezra (less likely, at least to my mind) and Rabban Gamaliel (not likely).[8] Some, like the image of the Ark of the Covenant destroying the Temple of Dagon, are little disputed even without labels. Others are heavily labeled. "Moses when he went up from Egypt and split the sea" appears, with variants, three times in Aramaic within a single panel that without question illustrates just that event. This panel is in the upper register of the synagogue, so the glossator did not write it there casually. Someone wanted to make very sure to hyper-identify the hero of the story—who appears three times-- as Moses. Was the glossator discomforted by the comic book-like narrative effect of Moses appearing three times, or was this multiplication taken as an opportunity for an act of pious labeling directed toward Jewish readers? We cannot know, but it is noteworthy

[8] For a list of scholarly identifications of the images of the Dura synagogue, see: J. Gutmann, "Early Synagogue and Jewish Catacomb Art and Its Relation to Christian Art," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römische Welt* 2.21.2 (Berlin and New York: Walther de Gruyter, 1984), 1313-1342.

that baby Moses, who appears two times in the lowest register and was thus accessible to even a short glossator, is unlabeled.

Significantly, "Moses when he went up from Egypt and split the sea" parallels Jewish Aramaic biblical paraphrases, *targumim* from both Babylonia and Palestine of roughly the same period, and so may reflect cognizance of that literary tradition. The majority of Aramaic inscriptions at Dura are from the synagogue, and this "Jewish" square script appears only in Jewish contexts at Dura. Thus, the synagogue Aramaic texts—unlike the Greek and Persian texts, were meant for Jewish eyes—being, whether intentionally or not, what James Scott calls an internally focused "hidden transcript."[9] If the goal was cross-cultural communication, Palmyrene might have been a far more useful Semitic language/script. This suggests the centrality of Jewish Aramaic within a Jewish community that drew from Greek, Aramaic and Persian speakers, Jews from both sides of the Roman/Persian divide.

This diversity is expressed most succinctly in the two almost identical Aramaic donor lists that appear on ceiling tiles. Tile "a" begins:[10]

> This house was built ion the year five hundred fifty
> and six, which is the second year of Philip
> …Caesar in the eldership of Samuel
> the priest son of Yed[a']ya the archon [Those who] stood (as patrons)
> of this work were: Abram the treasurer
> Samuel [son of S]afra and [Arshakh]
> the proselyte…

[9] J. C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).
[10] Following my translation in *Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 162.

This inscription includes Jews with Biblical names (Samuel—two times, Abram)—a naming practice common in both Roman (Palestinian and diaspora) and Persian (that is, "Babylonian") Jewish communities. All of these donors appear in Greek dedicatory inscriptions as well. The most significant donor, Samuel the priest and *archon,* is called in a Greek text "presbyter of the Jews."[11] Safra, "literally "scribe," was used in Jewish and other Aramaic dialects in both empires,[12] and Arshakh, a Persian name, seems likely to have been a likely Persian speaker. A Greek ceiling tile memorializes the donations by Abram and Arshakh of our inscription, together with one Solomon and a man with the Greek name of Silas. Interestingly, a second Persian, his name transliterated as Orbaz in Greek, appears on other ceiling tiles. Persians thus appear in Aramaic and Greek as donors, but not in Persian. This suggests perhaps the priority of the Aramaic and Greek among the donors of the synagogue.

In the fifth-sixth century Palestinian synagogues at Sepphoris, Meroth and Beth Alpha, Biblical scenes are labeled in Hebrew. This is not the case at Dura. The use of Aramaic at Dura reflects broader trends in Jewish culture of both empires, where Aramaic translation/paraphrase—*Targum*-- was significant as a mediator between the Hebrew Scriptures and Aramaic-speaking communities. Aramaic translations of Scripture are known from as early as the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the translation of Scripture into Aramaic (as well as Greek) is well attested in Rabbinic literature. The lack

---

[11] *Archon,* "leader" is a Greek word that was taken over into Palestinian Jewish Aramaic spelled with an aleph (as in our inscription), while in extant evidence for Babylonian Jewish Aramaic it appears rarely, and with an *ayin*. See: M Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Babylonian Jewish Aramaic,* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 881-2.

[12] C. Albeck, *Introduction to the Talmud, Babli and Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik and Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1969), 302, in Hebrew.

of Hebrew in the wall inscriptions does not mitigate the possibility that Scripture and prayer might have been recited—at least in part, in the "holy language." Suggestively, fragments of a Hebrew prayer text with clear parallels to rabbinic formulae were discovered immediately outside the synagogue building.[13] Thus, four languages are known to have been used in the Durene Jewish community: Greek, Aramaic, Persian and Hebrew.

Aaron before the Tabernacle on the western wall of the Dura synagogue is identified as "Aaron" in Greek—one of only three Greek image labels, none of which is more than one word in length—a stark comparison with the longer phrases that appear in Aramaic and particularly Persian inscriptions. Is it significant that Aaron, who appears as a standard eastern Roman priest sacrificing before a temple, is labeled in Greek?[14] Does the language suggest an attempt to distance the Biblical priest from similarly portrayed "pagan" priests (an example of such non-Jewish images being the Temple of the Palmyrene Gods) in a language that Greek gentiles could understand—or is this language choice haphazard? Finally, Samuel anointing David is labeled appropriately in Aramaic, "Samuel when he anointed David." What appears to be a seat for a prominent synagogue leader was located immediately below this image. Some have connected this seat with "Samuel the priest and *archon*," "presbyter of the Jews" (or perhaps for another Samuel mentioned in a second Greek inscription). If this is so, and I really don't know if it is, then dedicatory inscriptions and a biblical label serve to reinforce one another—as well as power relationships within the Dura synagogue community. This would parallel the placement of images of benefactors/communal leaders within the sacred area of the

[13] See *Art and Judaism,* 172-83.
[14] The only other figure labeled in Greek in Solomon

Temple of the Palmyrene Gods and the mithraeum,[15] but with a decidedly Jewish twist. It would draw a clear message of continuity between the Biblical heroes and the Jews of Dura, who, after all, wore the same clothes, shared hair styles, reclined on the same kinds of furniture, read scrolls publicly, and shared names.

The Persian inscriptions are of particular interest, as they are far less formal than the Greek and Aramaic texts. These graffiti appear only on the lowest register of the wall paintings—and can be reached while still standing on the floor and benches of the synagogue. Added sometime after the completion of the paintings, these inscriptions represent the responses of early viewers of the synagogue, sometime between 245 and about 256 CE. Six inscriptions record the visits of Persian speakers to the synagogue, using similar formulae. All of these appear on the so-called Purim panel, depicting episodes from the biblical book of Esther—a theme that would doubtless be meaningful for Persian viewers. The main characters—Haman, Mordecai and Esther (all labeled in Aramaic), and four servants wear distinctly Persian garb and hairstyles. The four bystanders are well-dressed Greco-Romans. One could imagine a similar scene on the streets of this border city, with groups of Greeks viewing passing Persians, and Persians viewing Romans and Greeks—particularly soldiers, as they passed.[16] The following visitation inscription appears on the himation of one of the bystanders observing Mordecai's triumphant ride lead by Haman:

---

[15] See L. Dirven, "Religious Competition and the Decoration of Sanctuaries: The Case of Dura-Europos," *ECA* 1 (2004), 10-11, 14-16.

[16] Compare S. Sabar's far more hypothetical interpretation, "The Purim Panel at Dura" A Socio-Historical Interpretation," in *From Dura to Sepphoris: Studies in Jewish Art and Society in Late Antiquity,* ed. L. I. Levine and Z. Weiss, *Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series*, (1999), 155-63.

The month Frawardin in
The year 15 and the day Rasin
When Yazdantahm-Farrabay,
The scribe of Tahm [or, valiant scribe],
[came] to this house, and he
Appreciated [or, approved] this picture

A graffito on Haman's right leg calls the synagogue "the edifice of the God of Gods of the Jews." Scholars have debated whether Yazdantahm-Farrabay and the others mentioned in the visitation inscriptions were Persian-speaking Jews, or perhaps Persian gentiles, whether they came to the synagogue during a supposed Persian invasion of 253 or as travelers, and more. Whatever the case, Persian speaking visitors ("scribes") with Persian names liked the Esther panel—so much so that their esteem for it was inscribed right on the panel. The fact that this panel was so prominently placed within the synagogue, encompassing the entire lower register to the left of the Torah shrine, suggests that the significance of this scene even before the graffiti. The graffiti serve to enhance the "Persianness" of the Purim panel.

Other inscriptions focus on images that illustrate the resurrection of the dead. Thus, an illustration of a prophet reviving a dead child, either Elijah reviving the son of the widow of Zarephath described in 1 Kings 17 or his student, Elisha, who behaves similarly in 2 Kings 4. An Aramaic label made sure that the subject be identified as "Elijah." We might postulate that this was the original intent of the painters, as this panel is part of a larger "Elijah cycle" (as Kraeling calls it). A Persian inscription was painted over Elijah's foot:

When Hormezd the scribe came
And he looked at this [picture]: "Living

> The child (?) (who has been) dead."

Another inscription reads:

> The month [Ardwahist?], day Hormezd,
> When Ardaw the scribe came
> And he looked at this picture and
> He looked at the child(?): "Living the dead (be)come."

This is, of course, the point of the image itself. What is interesting here is that the glosses invoke Persian scribes who "got it," and emphasized Elijah's act of reviving the dead child. The apparent excitement of Hormezd and Ardaw is memorialized, and leads other Persian language viewers through the viewing process. Just to make sure the view knew that this scene represented Elijah, and not his student Elijah (who also brought a child back to life), and Aramaic gloss had been added earlier that identified Elijah.

Another inscription, this one in Parthian and painted above Elijah's right thigh, waxes theological in emphasizing the broader theme of the resurrection of the dead: "Praise to the gods, praise; since life, life eternally has been given." Owing to the overall contempt for non-Jewish deities in the synagogue paintings, with both Baal and Dagon mocked (not to mention the Palmyrene gods who served as the iconographic models for Dagon), my guess is that "gods" here is the equivalent of *Elohim* in Hebrew, a plural supposed to be the royal "we." It is always possible, though, that a presumably non-Jewish author meant "gods" in the plural! Be that as it may, when grouped with the eye witness accounts of Persian scribes, this inscription appears to be assertively performative.

If the Persian scribes were non-Jews, what were they doing in the synagogue in the first place? Early interpreters thought that they were military officers who entered

during a pre-empted military incursion in 253. More recently, Simon James has shown based upon ongoing excavations that the incursion never happened.[17] While Persian visits to Babylonian synagogues are not known, the presence of polytheistic and Christian visitors and "god fearers" is well documented in the eastern Roman Empire, even within synagogue dedicatory inscriptions. Could this explain in part the pride of place given to the visitation texts? The content of the inscriptions is of no help in deciding whether these Persians were Jews or non-Jews, since eschatological interest is a shared concern of both biblical/Rabbinic sources and Zoroastrianism. Significantly, though, Yaakov Elman has pointed out to me that in the Babylonian Talmud conversations between Rabbis and Persian religious leaders focus almost exclusively upon areas of common theological interest. If our Persians are non-Jews, the same might be said of the Persian visitation texts.

Inscriptions painted on the image of Ezekiel's vision of Valley of Dry Bones, a prophecy that took place in Babylonia (Ezekiel 37), and appears on the northern wall of the synagogue, have an even more liturgical feel:

> This make known: Be joyous
> And hear the gods' voice
> Then well being [or, peace] will be upon us.

This seems to be an internal conversation by one Jew with another, referring to the well being [or, peace] will be upon us—in the first person plural. Another graffiti painted over the Ezekiel panel has a similarly internal feel:

---

[17] S. James, "Dura-Europos and the chronology of Syria in the 250's AD," *Chiron* 5 (1985), 111-124.

> Many will come, though go otherwise!
> They go [or will go], do not go otherwise!

Enigmatic to be sure, a partial inscription on the north jamb of the main door of the synagogue commends: "Quickly come…" The placement of this inscription perhaps suggests that it reminded Persian speaking visitors to in approaching the synagogue with intention, perhaps parallel (though I am reticent to suggest this) to Rabbinic texts that command those coming to the synagogue not to dawdle.[18]

To sum up: The "epigraphic habit" among Jews at Dura Europos was quite strong. Greek, Aramaic and Persian were used, and I have discussed some of the more fascinating examples. This cacophony provides a fascinating multi-lingual and multi-cultural commentary on the paintings, allowing for a limited though still "thick description" of the synagogue of this small, yet very complex, community. The Persian visitation mementos found on the Purim panel, whether expressing the sentiments of Persian or Jewish scribes, suggests lively interaction, and the labeling texts reflect a clear theological and perhaps performative interest. Graffiti on the Elijah and Ezekiel panels is deeply theological, serving to mediate, intensify and in some cases almost ritualize the experience of viewing this panel.

Inscriptions form the earliest layer of interpretation of the Dura Europos synagogue paintings. They are thus a unique and valuable tool for interpreting the earliest reception of these paintings and their place within the now-lost liturgical life of the community. The Persian, Aramaic and Greek inscriptions express ways that members

[18] Relevant, though not discussed in this version, is evidence of iconoclastic behavior in the synagogue. See *Art and Judaism,* 131-132.

of the local Jewish community at Dura—and perhaps others-- experienced and projected themselves into their synagogue in very local terms. Luckily for us, they painted and inscribed their religious experience onto the walls of "the edifice of the God of Gods of the Jews." This building—renovated in 244/5, destroyed around 256, discovered in 1932 and continually interpreted ever since, does indeed "complicate, undermine, AND give nuance to conventional dichotomies such as self/other, Greek/barbarian, and Jew/gentile" in antiquity, and, I dare say—they do so for our own world as well.