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JEWISH IDENTITY AT THE *LIMUS*

The Earliest Reception of the Dura Europos Synagogue Paintings

Jewish identity in the Greco-Roman world has been a subject of sustained concern in recent years. The question of “Who was a Jew?” has interested both historians working within the traditions of Judaic studies struggling in the present to define their own communal identities and historians of early Christianity attempting to understand the composition of the “New Israel”—both in antiquity and in their own faith communities.¹ Scholars of classical art have also entered the discussion, often bringing their own complex ancient-modern identity issues to the table.² The synagogue of Dura Europos, an ancient city overlooking the Euphrates River in eastern Syria, is an excellent locus within which to investigate the nature of Jewish identity in the third century. The Dura Europos synagogue presents evidence for the complicated “hybrid” identity of a small Jewish community on the *limus*, the borderline where the Roman and Sassanian Persian empires—and peoples—met and mingled. The Dura synagogue does indeed “complicate, undermine, *and* give nuance to conventional dichotomies such as self/other, Greek/barbarian, and Jew/gentile,” the charge of this volume.³

The discovery in 1932 of an illustrated synagogue at Dura Europos, an estimated 60 percent of its paintings intact (fig. 1), was immediately recognized to be a sensation, and nothing like it has been uncovered since.⁴ Together with the well-known wall paintings depicting biblical scenes through the lens of late antique Jewish biblical interpretation, an amazing array of Aramaic, Greek, Middle Persian, and Parthian inscriptions were discovered written on the paintings and extant ceiling tiles of the synagogue, and a Hebrew liturgical text that likely originated in the synagogue was uncovered nearby. To the best of my knowledge, this is by far the largest number of languages yet discovered within a single monument of this modest size, and for that alone, the Dura synagogue is noteworthy. Art historians, archaeologists, religion scholars, social historians, classicists, and Talmudists have interpreted the discoveries from the perspectives of their various disciplines.⁵ Little has been written, however, that attempts to integrate the various linguistic and visual remains of the Dura synagogue as the religious meeting place of a unique and intensely multilingual community. In this article I return to the primary sources for the synagogue during its second phase (244/5–ca. 256 C.E.), with particular emphasis upon the epigraphic evidence. My sights are set on the multilingual community at Dura Europos that created the wall paintings, the 125 extant inscriptions,⁶ and the liturgical parchment, leaving behind a precious conduit through which we may “listen in” and perhaps imagine some of the ways that Aramaic, Greek, and Persian speakers

Fig. 1
Dura Europos Synagogue,
reconstructed in the Syrian
National Museum, Damascus

(at least some of whom could read Hebrew)—Jews from East and West and perhaps non-Jews—experienced, imagined, and constructed Judaism in a house near the city wall converted into a magnificent synagogue. I will draw upon the larger contexts of Jewish literary and archaeological remains from late antiquity in this exposition of the Dura synagogue and conclude with some remarks on the place of the Dura Europos synagogue within the larger frame of Jewish culture during the third century.

The Greek and Aramaic inscriptions of the Dura Europos 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 so-called wing panels above the Torah shrine, which contain unlabeled images of four men, are heavily discussed. The panels have received all manner of identifications,⁷ including Moses and Abraham (likely),⁸ Jeremiah and Ezra (less likely, at least to my mind),⁹ and Rabban Gamaliel II proclaiming the lunar calendar (unlikely).¹⁰ Some—like “The Ark in the Land of the Philistines,” as Carl H. Kraeling, the author of the final report on the synagogue, called it (WB 4)—are little disputed even without labels. Others are heavily labeled. Aramaic inscriptions reading “Moses when he went up from Egypt and split the sea,” “Moses when he split the sea,” “Moses son of Levi,” and a lost inscription of which only the name Moses is preserved appear in a single panel that without question illustrates just that event (WA 3, fig. 2).¹¹ This panel is in the upper register of the synagogue paintings, so the glossator did not write it there casually. Someone wanted to make very sure to hyperidentify the hero of the story—who appears three times in this composition—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 readers of Jewish Aramaic? We cannot know, but it is noteworthy that baby Moses, who appears two times in the lowest register (WC 1) 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 translations or paraphrases, *targumim*, of roughly the same period from both Babylonia and Palestine, and is confluent with that literary tradition.¹² The majority of Aramaic inscriptions at Dura are from the synagogue, and this “Jewish” square script appears only in the synagogue inscriptions, in the Hebrew liturgical text, and in a Jewish marriage contract discovered at Dura.¹³ The Aramaic inscriptions—unlike the Greek and Persian wall and ceiling tile inscriptions—were written in a font that was identifiably “Jewish” and apparently conveyed Jewishness to the community and perhaps to Aramaic speaking non-Jews familiar with the Jewish script. If the goal was cross-cultural communication, however, 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 two preserved ceiling tiles. Tile “A” begins (fig. 3):⁴⁴

This house was built in 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 . . .

This inscription includes Jews with biblical names (Samuel—two times—and Abram)—a naming practice common in both Jewish communities of the Roman Empire (in both Palestine and diaspora communities) and those of the Sassanian Persian Empire (that is, Talmudic “Babylonia”). All these donors appear in Greek dedicatory inscriptions as well. The most significant donor, Samuel the priest



Fig. 2
“Moses when he went up from Egypt and split the sea,”
Dura Europos Synagogue



Fig. 3
Ceiling tile “A,” with a
dedicatory inscription in
Aramaic, Dura Europos
Synagogue

and archon, is called in a Greek text “presbyter of the Jews” (fig. 4).¹⁵ Safra, literally “scribe,” was used in Jewish and other Aramaic dialects in both empires,¹⁶ and Arshakh, a Persian name, seems likely to have been a Persian speaker—or at least the child of a Persian speaker. A Greek ceiling tile memorializes donations by Abram and Arsaces—presumably the same Abram and Arshakh as in our Aramaic dedicatory inscription, together with one Solomon and a man with the Greek name Silas.¹⁷ This suggests perhaps the priority of Aramaic and Greek as the main spoken languages of the benefactors of the synagogue, even as at least one Persian—and maybe two—were counted among the benefactors to the congregation.

Significantly, none of the biblical scenes is labeled in Hebrew; inscriptions appear only in Greek and, more commonly, Aramaic. This is very different from later Palestinian images, in which Hebrew, “the language of the holy house,”¹⁸ was used to label biblical scenes in the fifth- to sixth-century Palestinian synagogues at Sepphoris, Gaza, Na’aran, and Beth Alpha.¹⁹ The use of Aramaic at Dura reflects broader trends in Jewish culture of both empires, in which Aramaic translation or paraphrase—Targum—was significant as a mediator between the Hebrew Bible and Aramaic-speaking communities. Aramaic translations of scripture are known from as early as the Dead Sea Scrolls,²⁰ and the translation of scripture into Aramaic and Greek is well attested in late antique Jewish sources, facilitating comprehension of the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Pentateuch, by communities that spoke these languages.²¹ The lack of Hebrew, by now a liturgical language almost everywhere, 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.”²² Suggestively, fragments of a Hebrew liturgical text on parchment with clear parallels to rabbinic liturgical formulas were discovered in the fill to the west of the synagogue building on the street called by the excavators “Wall Street” (fig. 5).²³ Thus, four languages are

Fig. 4
Ceiling tile with a
dedicatory inscription in Greek,
Dura Europos Synagogue

Fig. 5
Hebrew liturgical parchment,
found near the Dura Europos
Synagogue





known to have been used simultaneously in the small Durene Jewish community: Greek, Aramaic, Persian, and Hebrew.

The image of Aaron before the biblical Tabernacle on the western wall of the Dura synagogue (WB 2) is identified as “Aaron” in Greek (fig. 6)—one of only three Greek image labels, none of which is more than one word in length.²⁴ This is in stark contrast to the longer phrases that appear in Aramaic and particularly Persian inscriptions. The presence of Greek dedicatory inscriptions within synagogue contexts was not in the least unusual in Palestinian and Mediterranean diaspora communities during late antiquity, and in the Gerasa synagogue (in modern Jordan), a biblical scene is similarly labeled in Greek.²⁵ Is it significant that Aaron, who appears as a standard Eastern Roman priest sacrificing before a temple, is labeled in Greek?²⁶ Does this conscious labeling suggest an attempt to distance the biblical high priest from similarly portrayed “pagan” liturgical officiates—as, for example, the image of Konon son of Nikostratos in the Temple of the Palmyrene Gods²⁷—in a language that Greek gentiles could understand? I could also imagine the opposite and attempt to show that the biblical priests were not so different from everyone else’s priests, but this approach strikes me as too apologetically modern.



Samuel anointing David appears in the bottom register (fig. 7), to the right of the Torah shrine (WC 4). This scene is labeled in Aramaic, “Samuel when he anointed David.”²⁸ What appears to be a seat for a prominent synagogue leader was located immediately below this image. This would thus circumvent what seems to have been a principled avoidance of placing dedicatory inscriptions within the individual biblical paintings.²⁹ Some, I among them, have connected this seat with “Samuel the priest and archon,” “presbyter of the Jews”—or perhaps with the Samuel mentioned in a second Greek inscription.³⁰ If this is so—and at this point I’m no longer sure it is—then dedicatory inscriptions and a biblical label serve to reinforce each other and thus also power relationships within the Dura synagogue community.³¹ This would parallel the placement of images of benefactors/communal leaders within the sacred area of the Temple of the Palmyrene Gods and the mithraeum,³² but with a decidedly Jewish twist. It would draw a clear message of continuity between the biblical heroes and the Jews of Dura, whom the paintings quietly assert wore the same clothes, shared hairstyles, reclined on the same kinds of furniture, and most importantly, 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.³³ 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,

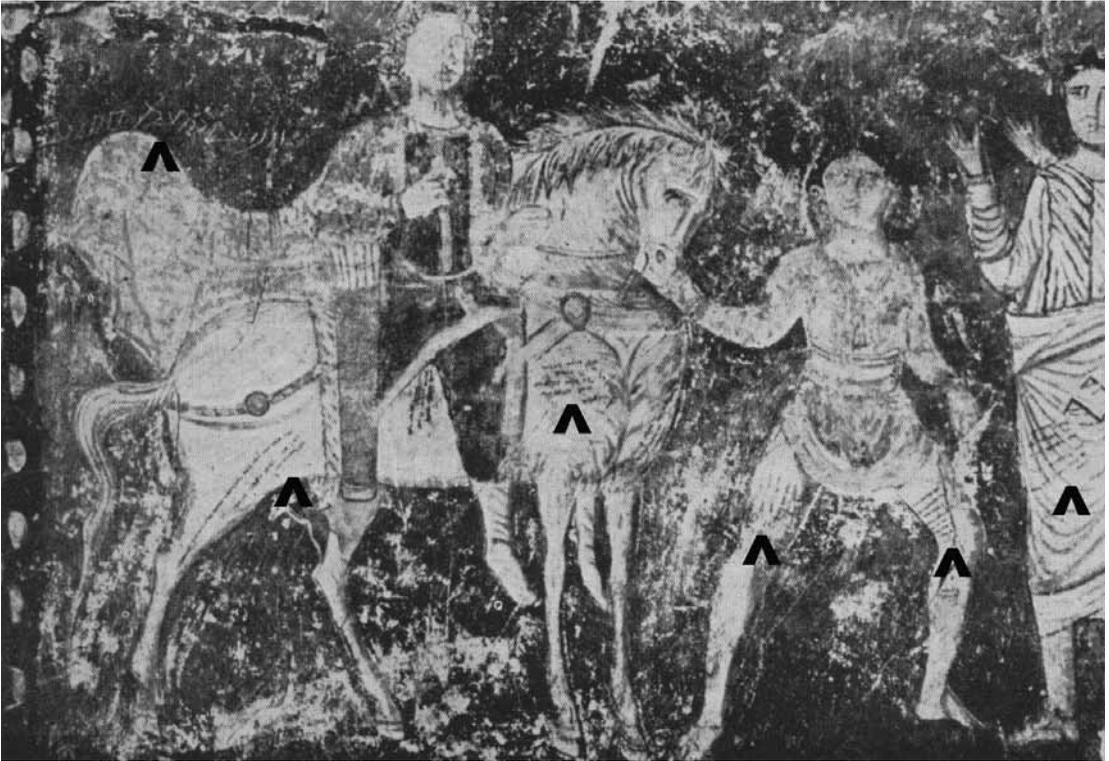


Fig. 6
Aaron before the Tabernacle,
Dura Europos Synagogue

Fig. 7
Samuel When He Anointed
David, Dura Europos Synagogue

they represent the responses of early viewers of the synagogue, sometime between 245 and about 256 C.E. Six inscriptions record the visits of Persian speakers to the synagogue, using similar formulas.³⁴ All these appear on the “Mordecai and Esther” panel (WC 2), depicting episodes from the biblical book of Esther, a theme that would doubtless be meaningful for Persian-speaking Jews (figs. 8, 9).³⁵ Mordecai, Ahasuerus, and Esther, the heroes of the story, are all labeled in Aramaic.³⁶ Haman, the villain, is unlabeled—perhaps a kind of *damnatio memoriae*. Mordecai, Ahasuerus, Esther, Haman, and four servants wear distinctly Persian garb and hairstyles.³⁷ Significantly, the four bystanders are well dressed in Roman costume. 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.³⁸ A visitation inscription appears on the himation of one of the bystanders observing Mordecai’s triumphant ride led by Haman:

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
Approved [or appreciated] this picture³⁹



A graffito on Haman's right leg calls the synagogue "the edifice of the God of Gods of the Jews."⁴⁰ 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 C.E. or as travelers, and more.⁴¹ Whatever the case, numerous Persian-speaking visitors ("scribes") with Persian names liked the Esther panel—so much so that their esteem for it was inscribed right on the painting. Together with the Persian costume, the graffiti serve to enhance the Persian character of this court scene. The fact that this scene was placed so prominently within the synagogue, encompassing the entire lower register to the left of the Torah shrine, suggests its significance to local Jewish self-understanding even before the graffiti were added.⁴²

Other inscriptions focus on images illustrating the resurrection of the dead, a central doctrine of the rabbis of both Palestine and Babylonia⁴³ and of Zoroastrianism.⁴⁴ It is no wonder that Persian speakers, whether Jews or Persians, would find these themes of interest. 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 (WC 1). An Aramaic label made sure that the subject was identified as "Elijah" (fig. 10). We might postulate that this was the original intent of the painters, as this panel is part of a larger Elijah cycle (SC 1–4, WC 1). 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."⁴⁵

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."⁴⁶

This is, of course, the point of the image itself. What is interesting here is that the glosses invoke Persian scribes who well understood the message of this image and emphasized Elijah's act of reviving the dead child. The apparent excitement of Hormezd and Ardaw is memorialized and leads other Persian-speaking viewers through the viewing process. Just to make sure that the viewer knew that this scene represented Elijah, and not his student Elisha, an Aramaic gloss identifying Elijah had been added sometime earlier.

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."⁴⁷ 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

Fig. 8
Mordecai and Esther Panel,
Dura Europos Synagogue

Fig. 9
Persian and Aramaic
inscriptions, Mordecai and
Esther Panel, Dura Europos
Synagogue (^ denotes Persian-
language inscriptions)



Fig. 10
Elijah Reviving the Son
of the Widow of Zarephath,
Dura Europos Synagogue

iconographic models for Dagon⁴⁸—my guess is that “gods” here is the equivalent of *Elohim* in Hebrew, a plural supposed to be the royal “we.”⁴⁹ 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 eyewitness 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 military incursion in around 253 C.E.⁵⁰ More recently Simon James has shown, based upon ongoing excavations, that the incursion never happened.⁵¹ While Persian visits to Babylonian synagogues are not recorded in rabbinic literature, the presence of polytheistic and Christian visitors and “God-fearers”—non-Jews who associated with the Jewish community—is well documented in the Eastern Roman Empire, even within diaspora synagogue dedicatory inscriptions.⁵² Could this explain in part the pride of place given to the visitation texts?

The fact that Arshakh is singled out as a “proselyte” (*geora*) in our inscriptions suggests that Judaism was attractive to some Persians—even to the point of religious conversion. We have seen that Arshakh appears on two dedicatory inscriptions on ceiling tiles in a rather formal Aramaic as “Arshakh the Proselyte” and once in Greek without a Jewish caste designation, as “Arcases.”⁵³ A number of texts in the Babylonian Talmud reference proselytes in the area of Mahoza, a suburb of the Sassanian capital of Ctesiphon, though most of the sources date to the mid-fourth century.⁵⁴ Complicating Arshakh’s title, a tradition in the Babylonian Talmud, *Qedushin* 76b, refers to a situation near the period of the Dura synagogue in which the son of a native Jewish woman and a male proselyte is referred to as

a “proselyte” (*geora*). This designation is unusual in rabbinic sources, in which the child of a Jewish mother, whether native or proselyte, generally does not bear this caste distinction. Was Arshakh a proselyte himself, as one might assume, or was he perhaps the descendant of a proselyte, as in *Qedushin* 76b? This text goes on to suggest that proselytes found entrance to communal leadership positions difficult, at least in Talmudic Babylonia. The proselyte of our text is said to have sought a position of religious authority but was afforded only a lesser administrative position—and this only through the direct intervention of the mid-third-century rabbi from Pumpedita (south of Dura on the Euphrates River), Ada son of Ahavah.⁵⁵ Does the prominence of Arshakh at Dura, and his identification as a proselyte in Aramaic but not in Greek, reflect complexities in his status within the community? We cannot know, though *Qedushin* 76b does indeed complicate the interpretation of this enigmatic proselyte.

The content of the Persian 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, Yaakov Elman has pointed out to me that in the Babylonian Talmud, composed in Sassanian Persia between the early third and sixth centuries C.E., conversations between rabbis and Persian religious leaders focus almost exclusively upon areas of common theological interest.⁵⁶ If our Persians are non-Jews, the same might be said of the fascination with resurrection in the Persian visitation texts.

Inscriptions painted on the image of Ezekiel’s vision of the Valley of Dry Bones (Ezek. 37), a prophecy that took place in Babylonia and appears on the northern wall of the synagogue (NC 1), 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.⁵⁷

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

Many will come, you go otherwise!
They go [or will go], do not go otherwise!⁵⁸

Enigmatic to be sure, a partial inscription on the north jamb of the main door of the synagogue commends, “Quickly come.”⁵⁹ The placement of this inscription at the liminal threshold of the synagogue hall may have reminded visitors to approach the synagogue with a sense of purpose, perhaps parallel to rabbinic texts that command those coming to the synagogue not to dawdle.⁶⁰

The “epigraphic habit” among Jews at Dura Europos was quite strong.⁶¹ Aramaic, Greek, Persian, and Hebrew were used, and I have discussed some of the more fascinating examples.⁶² The Persian visitation mementos found on the Purim panel, whether expressing the sentiments of Jewish or non-Jewish scribes, suggest lively

interaction across the imperial *limus*, and the labeling texts reflect a clear theological and perhaps performative interest. Graffiti on the Elijah and Ezekiel panels are deeply theological, serving to mediate, intensify, and in some cases almost ritualize the experience of viewing these panels.

Inscriptions form the earliest layer of interpretation of the Dura Europos synagogue paintings. They are thus a unique and valuable tool for interpreting the early 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 of the local Jewish community at Dura—and perhaps others—experienced and projected themselves into the synagogue that were as complex as was the culture of the border trading city where they lived. In fact, this hybridity was not unique to the Jewish community of Dura, even if the community's location in a border city makes it so extreme as to be noticeable to modern scholars. This reality is well expressed in the literature preserved from the two empires, most prominently the Palestinian Talmud, completed around 400, and the Babylonian Talmud, finished a century later.⁶³ The territoriality embedded in these titles conceals the deep substructure of intellectual and religious commonality, communication, and travel between the rabbinic centers of Roman Palestine and Sassanian Babylonia that are encoded in these vast bodies of text. The bilingual nature of the two Talmuds is of particular interest. Palestinian rabbinic discussions took place in a dialect known today as Palestinian Jewish Aramaic, which is imbued with Greek loan words and concepts drawn from the Roman context, while Babylonian discussions occurred in the mutually intelligible Babylonian Jewish Aramaic, which contains numerous Persian loan words and concepts. Rabbis moved back and forth between the "Eastern" and "Western" rabbinic centers, and with them their laws, traditions, and legends. Sources also reflect cultural and political rivalry between the Palestinian and Babylonian communities.⁶⁴

Rabbinic as well as some archaeological sources suggest the deep cultural and literary relationships shared by these communities, even as they were separated by an often hostile international border.⁶⁵ The elite literary culture of the rabbis thus provides a significant parallel instance to both the linguistic situation and the knowledge of Jewish legends among Durine Jews.⁶⁶

To conclude: Jewish identity in late antiquity was indeed a complex affair. This has long been known from extant rabbinic sources. The Dura synagogue reflects a similar complexity within a local, non-elite context. The synagogue inscriptions serve as evidence of the ways in which the Jews, as well as perhaps the non-Jews, who functioned within this context and left mementos of their presence on the walls, interacted with their space and with one another. This building—renovated in 244/45, 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, . . . Jew/gentile," *and* Palestinian/Babylonian Jew in antiquity.

Notes

This article is dedicated to Annabel Wharton and Kalman Bland, both of Duke University. Many thanks to Erich Gruen for organizing this splendid project. For their valuable comments and suggestions, I thank my colleagues Yaakov Elman of Yeshiva University, Peter Schertz of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and Rhoda Seidenberg, formerly of Yeshiva University Museum, and my student Shimshon Ayzenberg.

1. This question forms the title of Lawrence H. Schiffman's study *Who Was a Jew? Rabbinic and Halakhic Perspectives on the Jewish Christian Schism* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1985). The literature focusing in this area is now vast. Recent studies include Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999); and my *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005).
2. For example, Jaś Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 271–81, and my discussion of Elsner's approach in *Art and Judaism*, 51–52; and John Pollini, "Gods and Emperors in the East: Images of Power and the Power of Intolerance," in *The Sculptural Environment of the Roman Near East: Reflections on Culture, Ideology, and Power*, ed. Yaron Z. Eliav, Elise A. Friedland, and Sharon Herbert (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 165–95. Pollini borrows the 1950s ecumenical terminology of a "Judaeo-Christian heritage" to flatten Jewish and Christian attitudes, by and by conflating the responses of the colonized Judeans and those of the imperial Romans and the supercessionist Christian empire. See also Annabel J. Wharton, *Refiguring the Post Classical City: Dura Europos, Jerash, Jerusalem, and Ravenna* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 15–21; Margaret Olin, *The Nation without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Omaha: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2002), 127–56; and Fine, *Art and Judaism*, 5–59, 130–31, 172–83.
3. Paraphrasing the original charge to conference participants set by Erich Gruen. See http://www.getty.edu/research/scholarly_activities/events/ancient_mediterranean.html.
4. For general introductions to the art, architecture, and history of the ancient synagogue, see Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1988); and Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Diaspora* (Leiden: Brill, 1998). On Dura, see Hachlili, *Diaspora*, 96–197; Steven Fine, ed., *Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996); and Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2005).
5. Carl H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, with contributions by C. C. Torrey, C. B. Welles, and B. Geiger (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1956), is a supremely balanced presentation, though Kraeling's lack of specialization in ancient Jewish literature is sometimes evident. This is remedied by Eleazar L. Sukenik, *The Synagogue of Dura-Europos and Its Frescoes* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1947) (in Hebrew).

6. David Noy and Hanswulf Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*, vol. 3, *Syria and Cyprus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 139–212, conveniently assemble the somewhat dispersed scholarly discussions on the synagogue inscriptions. In addition to the 125 inscriptions from the second phase of the synagogue, Noy and Bloedhorn (pp. 134–39) note three inscriptions from the first phase, which ended with the refurbishment that took place in 244/45.
7. For a handy list of scholarly identifications of the images of the Dura synagogue, see Joseph Gutmann, “Early Synagogue and Jewish Catacomb Art and Its Relation to Christian Art,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römische Welt*, ed. Wolfgang Haase and Hildegard Temporini, pt. 2, vol. 21.2 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984), 1313–33; and Joseph Gutmann, “The Synagogue of Dura Europos: A Critical Analysis,” in *Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress*, ed. Howard C. Kee and Lynn H. Cohick (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 1999), 73–88.
8. Fine, *Art and Judaism*, 179.
9. On Ezra, see Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 234; on Jeremiah, see Herbert Kessler, “Prophetic Portraits in the Dura Synagogue,” *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 30 (1987): 152–55; and Kurt Weitzmann and Herbert L. Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection, 1990), 130–32.
10. Luc Dequeker, “Le zodiaque de la synagogue de Beth Alpha et la Midrash,” *Bijdragen, tijdschrift voor filosofie en theologie* 47 (1986): 26.
11. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 162–66.
12. Fine, *Art and Judaism*, 180.
13. J. T. Milik, “Parchemin judéo-araméen de Doura-Europos an 200 ap. J.-C.,” *Syria* 45, nos. 1–2 (1968): 97–104; C. Bradford Welles et al., *The Parchments and Papyri, The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report 5.1* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), 75; and Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic, Hebrew, and Nabatean Documentary Texts from the Judaean Desert and Related Material* (Jerusalem: Hebrew Univ., 2000), 1:187.
14. Following the reading of Joseph Naveh, *On Mosaic and Stone: The Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Ancient Synagogues* (Israel: Maariv, 1978), 26–31 (in Hebrew), and my translation in *Sacred Realm*, 162, which corresponds to my own investigation of the inscriptions both at the Yale University Museum and of tile “A” while on exhibition in *Sacred Realm* in 1996. See Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 139–46.
15. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 146–50. *Archon*, “leader,” is a Greek loan 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 Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Babylonian Jewish Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan Univ. Press, 2002), 881–82.
16. Chanoch Albeck, *Introduction to the Talmud, Babli and Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1969), 302 (in Hebrew).
17. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 151–52. A group of ceiling tiles bears the inscribed Persian name Orbaz transliterated into Greek. Scholars are divided as to

- whether Orbaz is the name of a place or of the manufacturer's mark. Similar signed tiles were found elsewhere at Dura. See Lea Roth-Gerson, *The Jews of Syria and Reflected in the Greek Inscriptions* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2001), 88–89 (in Hebrew). Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 209–10:
- “There is no compelling reason to suppose that the bearer of the name was Jewish. It is unlikely that [the] tiles were made specifically for the synagogue.”
18. Avigdor Shinan, “*Lishon Beit Kudsha* in the Aramaic Targumim to the Pentateuch,” *Beth Mikra* 3, no. 66 (1976): 472–74 (in Hebrew); and Steven Fine, *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue during the Greco-Roman Period* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Univ. Press, 1997), 74.
 19. Sepphoris: Zeev Weiss, *The Sepphoris Synagogue: Deciphering an Ancient Message through Its Archaeological and Socio-Historical Context* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2005), 199–202; Beth Alpha, Gaza, Na'aran: Naveh, *On Mosaic and Stone*, 75–76, 91, 97; and Meroth: Joseph Naveh, “The Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Ancient Synagogues,” *Eretz-Israel* 20 (1989): 304–6 (in Hebrew).
 20. Uwe Glessmer, “Targumim,” in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 2:915–18.
 21. Charles Perrot, “The Reading of the Bible in the Ancient Synagogue,” and P. S. Alexander, “Jewish Aramaic Translations of Hebrew Scriptures,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading, and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. M. J. Mulder and Harry Sysling (Assen, the Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1990), 137–88, 217–54.
 22. On the status of Hebrew as a spoken language in late antiquity: Jonas Greenfield, “The Languages of Palestine, 200 B.C.E.–200 C.E.,” in *Jewish Languages: Theme and Variations*, ed. Herbert H. Paper (Cambridge: Association for Jewish Studies, 1978), 143–54. On Hebrew in diaspora synagogues, see my “‘Peace upon Israel’: Synagogues in Spain during Late Antiquity,” in *Los judíos españoles según las fuentes hebreas*, ed. J. Holo (Valencia, Spain: Consorci de Museus de la Comunitat Valenciana, Generalitat Valenciana, Subsecretaria de Promoció Cultural, Museu de Belles Arts de Valencia, 2002), 6–19 (in Spanish and Catalan), 146–50 (in English). On Hebrew as the “holy language,” see my *This Holy Place*, 15–16.
 23. Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 259: “In the fill of Wall Street, however, more precisely in Section W8 behind the neighboring block L8, a piece of parchment was discovered in 1932 which may have some relation to the furnishings of the Synagogue.” See Fine, *Art and Judaism*, 172–83.
 24. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 168–69.
 25. For Palestine, see Lea Roth-Gerson, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Synagogues in Eretz-Israel* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi Institute, 1987), 46–50 (in Hebrew).
 26. The only other figure labeled in Greek is Solomon (Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 167).
 27. See most recently Lucinda Dirven, “Religious Competition and the Decoration of Sanctuaries: The Case of Dura-Europos,” *Eastern Christian Art* 1 (2004): 1–19, and the bibliography cited there.
 28. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 170.

29. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 166.
30. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 150–51.
31. Fine, *Art and Judaism*, 181.
32. See Dirven, “Religious Competition,” 10–11, 14–16.
33. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 176–209. The poor state of preservation of the Persian inscriptions makes them notoriously difficult to interpret.
34. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 181–96.
35. Ancient Jewish sources are collected by Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1941), 4:365–448, 6:450–81. For rabbinic reflection on Esther in Babylonia, see Eliezer Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1994). The Tomb of Esther and Mordecai in Hamadan, Iran, appears for the first time in the writings of Benjamin of Tudela, who visited around 1167. While it clearly existed prior to this visit, its origins are known. See Amnon Netzer, “The Tombs of Esther and Mordecai in Hamadan, Iran,” in *Yisrael: Am ve-Erets* (Tel Aviv: Haaretz Museum, 1984), 1:177–84 (in Hebrew); Amnon Netzer, “Hamadan,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 8:292–93.
36. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 171–72.
37. Bernard Goldman, “The Dura Synagogue Costumes and Parthian Art,” in *The Dura-Europos Synagogue: A Re-Evaluation (1932–1972)*, ed. Joseph Gutmann (Chambersburg, Pa.: American Academy of Religion, 1973), 52–77; and Bernard Goldman, “Greco-Roman Dress in Syro-Mesopotamia,” in *The World of Roman Costume*, ed. Judith L. Sebesta and Larissa Bonfante (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 163–81.
38. Compare Shalom 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. Lee I. Levine and Zeev Weiss (Portsmouth, R.I.: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2000), 155–63.
39. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 181–85.
40. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 187–90.
41. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 181–85.
42. Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 151, overreaches in suggesting a more pointed Emancipation-tinged explanation, arguing, “it testified to the recognition by a Persian monarch of rights for which Judaism inside the boundaries of the Roman Empire was still struggling.”
43. Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006).
44. See A. V. Williams Jackson, *Zoroastrian Studies: The Iranian Religion and Various Monographs* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1928), 143–52.
45. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 196–98.
46. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 200–202.
47. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 199–200.
48. Fine, *Art and Judaism*, 130.
49. See the comments of Shlomo Yitzhaki (*Rashi*) to Genesis 1:1 (*Raschi: Der Kommentar des Salomo b. Isaac über der Pentateuch*, ed. A. Berliner, 2nd ed. by H. D.

- Chavel [Jerusalem: Rav Kook Institute, 1969], in Hebrew).
50. See Michael I. Rostovtzeff, *Dura Europos and Its Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1938), 113; and Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 336–38, esp. n. 75.
 51. Simon James, “Dura-Europos and the Chronology of Syria in the 250s AD,” *Chiron* 5 (1985): 111–24.
 52. Louis H. Feldman, “Proselytes and ‘Sympathizers’ in Light of the New Inscriptions from Aphrodisias,” *Revue des études juives* 147, nos. 3–4 (1989): 265–305.
 53. *Geora*, proselyte, is a standard Jewish Aramaic designation for proselytes during this period. See Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Babylonian Jewish Aramaic*, 278–79; Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Palestinian Jewish Aramaic* (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan Univ. Press, 1990), 127.
 54. Isaiah Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia in the Talmudic Era* (Jerusalem: Shazar Institute, 1990), 137–48 (in Hebrew).
 55. Albeck, *Introduction to the Talmud*, 193.
 56. Yaakov Elman, personal communication with the author, 2009.
 57. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 204–7.
 58. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 207–8.
 59. Noy and Bloedhorn, *Inscriptiones*, 209.
 60. For example, Jerusalem Talmud, *Berakhot* 5:1(9a).
 61. A felicitous term developed by Ramsey MacMullen, “The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire,” *American Journal of Philology* 103 (1982): 233–46.
 62. Relevant, though not discussed in this version, is evidence of iconoclastic behavior in the synagogue; see Fine, *Art and Judaism*, 131–32.
 63. For a general introduction to rabbinic literature, see Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Edinburgh: Clark, 1991).
 64. Lee I. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi Institute; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1989), is still the most accessible introduction to the history of the rabbinic community in late antique Palestine. On Babylonian Jewry, see Isaiah Gafni, “Babylonian Rabbinic Culture,” in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken, 2002), 225–65; and Yaakov Elman, “Middle Persian Culture and Babylonian Sages: Accommodation and Resistance in the Shaping of Rabbinic Legal Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 165–97. On contacts between Palestine and Babylonia, see Isaiah Gafni, *Land, Center, and Diaspora: Jewish Constructs in Late Antiquity* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1997).
 65. Of particular interest are a group of silver Aramaic amulets from Palestine and Syria and Aramaic magic bowls from Babylonia that preserve parallel textual traditions and show Jews in both empires responding in closely related yet distinctly local ways. See Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1987), 25, 104–22. Add to this a silver amulet recently deciphered and discussed by my students Eytan Zadoff and Pinchas Roth, in “‘Smamit and Her Children’: An Unpublished Silver Aramaic Amulet,” in *Puzzling Out the Past: Studies in Near Eastern Epigraphy and*

Archaeology in Honor of Bruce Zuckerman, ed. Steven Fine, M. Lundberg, and W. Pitard (Boston: Brill, forthcoming).

66. Wharton, *Refiguring the Post Classical City*, 48, presaged my interpretative move, rightly arguing for “a coincidence in the intertextualized practice of the midrash [in her case, a passage from *Esther Rabba*] and the synagogue frescoes.” See my *Art and Judaism*, 165–73.

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