The Frescoes of the Dura-Europos Synagogue: Multicultural Traits and Jewish Identity

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Abstract

This study concerns the multicultural influences which shaped the architectural form and artistic decoration of the Synagogue at Dura-Europos, an ancient city located on the west bank of the upper Euphrates in Syria (244/5 C. E.) Preserving the Jewish tradition after the destruction of the Second Temple, in a location remote from Palestine, was essential in order to maintain a strong identity in the small Jewish community of Dura, engulfed by pagan and multitheistic societies. Biblical narratives were used by the Jewish community to assert their history. In chapter 1, there appears a discussion of what scholars have said about the cultural development of Dura, how the Synagogue paintings reflect it, and how these represent a Jewish identity. In chapter 2, two scenes from the frescoes will be discussed, highlighting the various cultural influences, both foreign and local. On the other hand Rabbinic literature, including the *Midrash*, the *Mishnah* and the *Mekhilta de R. Ishmael*, compiled by the third century C. E., gives a textual explanation for the scenes, emphasizing the strong association that the Jews of Dura had with their roots and heritage.

Résumé

L'étude examine les facteurs multiculturels qui ont influencé l'architecture et l'ornementation de la Synagogue de Doura-Europos, ville ancienne de la Syrie située sur la rive occidentale de l'Euphrate (244/5 ap. J.-C.) Durant la période postérieure à la destruction du Deuxième Temple, il importait de préserver la tradition juive dans cette région distante de la Palestine, afin de maintenir un fort sentiment d'identité au sein de de la petite communauté juive de Doura, enclavée dans une société païenne et plurithéiste. La communauté se servit alors de récits bibliques pour affermir son histoire. Le chapitre 1 présente l'opinion d'éminents spécialistes concernant le développement culturel de Doura: comment les fresques de la Synagogue en sont le reflet, et comment elles répresentent l'identité juive. Le chapitre 2 traite de deux scènes des fresques, faisant ressortir l'effet de divers facteurs culturels étrangers et locaux. Par ailleurs, la littérature rabbinique déjà compilée au troisième siècle ap. J.-C. y compris le *Midrash*, le *Mishnah* et le *Mekhilta de R. Ishmael*, fournit une explication écrite des scènes et démontre les liens étroits qui existaient entre les Juifs de Doura et leurs racines et traditions juives.

Preface

Writing my thesis about the frescoes of the Dura-Europos Synagogue and Jewish identity has been a journey through the past. I have always been intrigued by origins and sources, especially in relation to the art of Dura-Europos. My particular interest in this subject stems from an undergraduate background in Humanistic Studies, with broad interdisciplinary and historical perspectives and a strong focus on Art History. Continuing my education at the Masters level in Jewish Studies has afforded me the opportunity to integrate the various disciplines, and at the same time has fulfilled my desire to relate with my culture and myself. The subject of Dura-Europos and the contextualization of the Synagogue at Dura involves all the above elements. Moreover, living in Montreal has given me the privilege of being part of a multicultural city, which in some ways is comparable to ancient Dura-Europos.

The task of bringing this study to fruition would not have been possible without the assistance and encouragement of a number of people who need to be singled out. I should like to express my gratitude to Professor Gershon Hundert of the Department of History, my supervisor and chair of the Department of Jewish Studies. I have learned much from his scholarship and teaching. Moreover, his openness and flexibility in allowing me to pursue my research on this topic is greatly appreciated. Professor Elizabeth Digeser, a former member of the Department of History at McGill University and now at the University of California at Santa Barbara, provided valuable advice at all stages of this study, in addition to giving seminars and personal attention. My thanks are

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Paul Klee maintains that "art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes it visible". The focus of this research will be the frescoes of the Synagogue in Dura-Europos, which were painted in the period 244-256 C. E., and how the representations of different cultural elements is connected with the identity of the Jewish community. This study will enhance the understanding of the frescoes of the Synagogue in Dura-Europos by placing them within the context of their historical, religious and social milieu, and in turn will facilitate a broader understanding of Jewish life and identity in a multicultural society. The relationship between the Jewish community at Dura and the classical and Near Eastern world in the first three centuries C. E. will be examined so as to discover structural similarities and influences exhibited by the Jewish community. The discussion of diverse cultures represented, such as Greek, Roman, Parthian, Sassanian, Syrian and Christian, will explain how these are related to Jewish identity. Moreover, this study will identify ways in which the frescoes reflect various influences, while asserting the Jewish community's fundamentally Jewish roots and orientations.

Chapter 1, called Scholars, will review different interpretations by noted scholars of numerous themes or topics related to the frescoes of Dura-Europos. The topics examined will include the history of Dura as well as that of the Jewish community. The Synagogue building with its unique wall paintings will also be looked at in a socio-cultural context highlighting the prevailing art and architecture of the time. Chapter 2, called Frames, will include the analysis of two specially selected panels as well as data on

multicultural qualities. These are the "Mordechai and Esther" scene and the "Exodus and Crossing of the Red Sea" scene. This collected information will show the manifestations of different cultures at Dura, as reflected in clothing, dress, architecture and furniture, with special references to the two frames. In addition, the influence of Rabbinic Judaism and *Midrash* as well as Aggadic explanations will be considered. Behind the multicultural borrowings lies the core of Jewish tradition.

The basis of the subject of the paintings in the Synagogue is the Hebrew Bible. When one considers the richness of the Bible, it would not be surprising that the Jews of the Roman Empire would turn to their own religious and historical tradition for the subjects of their art. However, for the form they would take quotations from the current artistic practices of their pagan neighbours. The Jews at Dura realized that the Romans needed art not just for the individual, as during the period of the Republic, but for the service of the state. This idea was very suitable for the Jewish community, as they are always community oriented, and in this way they had an opportunity to tell and portray their Biblical story in order to serve their communal purposes. The earliest known example of a narrative cycle in Jewish and Christian art appears in the frescoes of the Dura Synagogue (Goldman 1966 : 36). However, continuous narratives had been used by the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans and the Sassanians (Ghirshman 1962: 87). In the Dura Synagogue, narrative scenes give pictorial form to important national events. For example, Judaism does not focus on the individual, but rather on communal landmarks, such as the one portrayed in the frescoes of the Crossing of the Red

Sea and the Mordechai and Esther story. Thus, the viewer looks at the paintings and the stories re-enforce his identity and beliefs.

In the archaeological evidence from antiquity, there are only two securely dated synagogues, the Dura-Europos Synagogue of 244-45 C. E. and the Gaza Synagogue of 508-509 C. E., though many are known, starting from the last century B. C. E. Rabbinic Judaism traces the origin of the Synagogue to Moses. However, most scholars maintain that the synagogue had its beginnings during the Babylonian exile. This idea was expressed by the tenth-century Gaon of Pumbedita, Sherira ben Hanina (ed. A. Hyman 1911: 61-62). Nevertheless, there are various theories on the origin of the synagogue. It is possible that it was a historical crisis, such as the Hasmonean uprising in second-century B. C. E. in Judaea, which brought about the development of the synagogue. Similarly, it is just possible that the frescoes of the Dura-Europos Synagogue were also a result of a historical crisis for the Durene Jewish community occasioned by Sassanian threats as well as the decline of the Roman Empire, their current overlord.

Alexandrian Jews as well as other Jews of the Diaspora responded to Hellenism by adapting pentateuchal-theocratic Judaism to Hellenistic concepts (Gutmann 1981: 3). The Judaism of Judaea and Babylonia was different in that there was a scholarly class of Pharisees, intellectuals who used the Pentateuch as proof texts to comment on the Written Law and to compile the Oral Law (the Jerusalem and Babylonian *Talmud*). Since the destruction of the Temple, sacrifices by both individuals and priests came to an end. However, through the observance of the *Halakhot* (Laws), which are set forth in the Divinely Revealed two-fold Law, the synagogue became an important meeting place

where, through prayers and ceremonial practices, the individual Jew could practice his belief in the two-fold Law, with the assurance that its observance would bring about salvation of his soul and resurrection (Gutmann 1981: 6). Dura is closer to Palestinian and Babylonian Judaism in its focus on purely Jewish traditions, but shows some degree of Hellenism in its external traits.

Chapter 1: Scholars

Chapter 1 will concern itself with a survey of scholarly debate on major aspects of the cultural development of Dura-Europos. In order to provide a better understanding of the possible motivating factors for the paintings decorating the walls of the Synagogue in Dura-Europos, a number of issues will be discussed. These will include the history of the site as well as the history of the Jewish community. In addition, the various cultural influences shown in the art and architecture of the Dura Synagogue as well as different methods of interpretation of the paintings will be presented. This survey will concentrate on the following works: M. I. Rostovtzeff 1932, 1935, 1938; Ann Perkins 1973; G. M. Cohen 1978; C. H. Kraeling 1979; Marie-Henrietta Gates 1984; E. R. Goodenough 1988; A. Wharton 1995.

Discovery of the site

The identification of Dura was made by Professor James Breasted on the basis of the geographic chronicle of the Euphrates region by Isidore of Charax (1st century B. C. E.- C. E.), who refers to "Dura, the city of Nikanor, a foundation of the Macedonians" (Breasted 1924: 37). James Breasted, Director of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, was in Baghdad when, in April of 1920, the British army was occupied in Mesopotamia trying to sort out problems with the Beduin tribes in the desert near Baghdad. During this time, the British army maintained only a weak hold on the Syrian desert along the middle Euphrates river. In March of 1920, Captain M. C. Murphy and a

group of British soldiers were in a ruined fortress near the village of Salihiyeh, overlooking the Euphrates where, as a result of digging trenches, certain finds were made (Hopkins 1979: 1). In the process of digging into earth fill behind city walls from antiquity, the soldiers discovered a clear and well preserved wall-painting depicting over-life-size figures carrying out an act of sacrifice (Perkins 1973: 1). Since one of the scenes on the painting mentioned above, which depicted the *Tyche* (Good Fortune) of Dura, was labelled, this helped identify Dura. This discovery resulted in the involvement of Breasted. Because of deteriorating military circumstances, he had only one day at his disposal to gather data and information about the paintings. In a very short time, Breasted brought forth Dura-Europos to the scholarly world and published *Oriental Forerunners of Byzantine Painting* in 1924. Subsequently, the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters (*Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*) invited the Belgian scholar Franz Cumont to undertake more extensive excavations in 1922 and 1923, since Dura-Europos was considered a site of major archaeological importance. Later, Cumont allied himself with his friend Michael Rostovtzeff, Professor of Ancient History and Archaeology at Yale University. He in turn piqued the interest of Yale University, and this resulted in a consortium with the French Academy for an in-depth study of Dura-Europos from 1928 to 1937 (Perkins 1973: 2). Wharton notes that a Franco-Syrian group have recently resumed work at Dura (Wharton 1995: 15). The earlier excavations were able to expose from one-fourth to one-third of the city of Dura. The inner part of the western city wall was well preserved, since in order to protect their city from the Sassanian Persians in the middle of the third century C. E. , the people of Dura built a large embankment in order to

strengthen the wall, which was exposed to the plain. Adjoining the part of the city wall which was saved were the Synagogue, the Mithraeum, the Christian chapel, and the Temple of Bel, also known as the Temple of the Palmyrene Gods (Gates 1984: 168). Goodenough points out that when the painted walls of the Synagogue were discovered in the sands of Dura-Europos in 1932, they were perfectly preserved (Goodenough 1988: 178).

Date and foundation

The earliest knowledge about Dura dates back to the early Hellenistic period, when Nikanor, a general of Seleucus I, Alexander's successor in Syria, founded a fort as well as a colony of Macedonian soldiers on the middle Euphrates, and named it by the Macedonian name of Europos. Rostovtzeff dated the foundation *ca* 280 B. C. E. (Rostovtzeff 1932: 93). By the time of his 1938 study of Dura, Rostovtzeff was inclined to believe that the identity of Nikanor was a matter of dispute. Since Nikanor was most likely a relative of Seleucus and one of the two governors-general of the East in the early years of his rule, Europos would have been founded in *ca* 300 B. C. E. (Rostovtzeff 1938: 10). According to Breasted, this colonization happened during the time when Nikanor was governor of Mesopotamia under Seleucus I, and before 312 B. C. E., when he rebelled against his ruler (Breasted 1924: 38). Gates maintains that Seleucus I was the recognized and venerated founding father throughout the history of Dura-Europos (Gates 1984: 167).

Name and status

The name Dura is an Assyrian word meaning stronghold, and it continued to be used over a long period of time. Furthermore, Breasted explains that possibly because Nikanor was not able to give his new foundation a name which would characterize it as a Macedonian settlement in the Orient, the place was "called Europos by the Greeks" (Breasted 1924: 38). Subsequently, both names were authenticated as a result of findings in the written records of the city. According to Rostovtzeff, the name Europos was given to Dura because this city in Macedon was the native city of Seleucus I (Rostovtzeff 1938: 10). During the municipal period (211 C. E. until the end of 256 C. E.), the Semitic name of Dura, meaning a fortress, replaced Europos. Gates surmises that the combination of Dura-Europos is a modern usage (Gates 1984: 168).

Furthermore, Rostovtzeff asserts that Dura was founded by Nikanor as a Greek *polis* (Rostovtzeff 1938: 37). According to Cohen, Dura was originally a military colony, since most of the settlements began as military colonies, but later grew to become an independent *polis.* The evidence for this comes from a parchment *(P. Dura* 15) concerning a sale, subject to redemption, of part of a *kleros,* which lists the items to be mortgaged. In a colony, this transaction was not allowed, but in a *polis* it was (Cohen 1978: 69-71). Gates maintains that Dura was never an independent administrative unit, a *polis* (Gates 1984: 166). Wharton claims that identifying Dura as a station or town is not accurate. According to her, it was a medium-sized Greek *polis*, with a population of about 6,000 people, which is comparable to that of Priene (Wharton 1995: 20).

History of Dura

In the late second century B. C. E., Dura became part of the Parthian empire and the home of a strong Parthian garrison (Rostovtzeff 1932: 99). Dura became a Parthian fort, governed by a Parthian governor-general until 164 C. E., at which point she became part of the Roman province of Syria (Rostovtzeff 1932: 104). Because of political circumstances, earlier in second century C. E. Trajan had sought to conquer the Parthians in order to follow the aspirations of Alexander the Great in uniting the "civilized world to become a single kingdom" (Rostovtzeff 1932: 106). For a short time, Mesopotamia came under Roman rule, but soon returned to Parthian control in the time of the emperor Hadrian (117-138 C. E.). However, in 165 C. E., Dura, considered a military outpost on Rome's eastern frontier, lost her position as a Parthian fort and became a Roman garrison town (Rostovtzeff 1932: 110). In summation, in the period between 280 B. C. E. and *ca* 256 C. E., Dura was initially occupied by the Macedonians, followed by Parthians and subsequently by Romans (Rostovtzeff 1932:156).

In 256 C. E., the Sassanians under Shapur captured Syria, and advanced as far as Antioch, and finally occupied and destroyed Dura in 256 C. E., as evidenced by the latest coins found in the ruins of Dura, which date to 256 C. E. Subsequently Dura became "a piece of desert", a no-man's land between the Persian and Roman empires, never again to be occupied by Roman soldiers (Rostovtzeff 1932: 119). According to Wharton, the Sassanians dispersed the population after a siege, and the city was never rebuilt (Wharton 1995: 15). According to Perkins, the events of the last years of Dura are not known from clear evidence. In any case, a coin was found on the body of a Roman soldier who fell

when the Sassanians captured the city. The evidence provided by the coin indicates when the city fell (Perkins 1973: 6-7).

History of the Jewish community at Dura

Rostovtzeff highlights the fact that Babylonia was an important centre of Judaism in the Assyrian, Persian and Hellenistic periods. The Parthian conquest did not bring changes, since the Arsacids had a very open and tolerant attitude towards religion. Since the Babylonian conquest, Judaism had spread from Babylonia up the Euphrates and the Tigris, with the result that Jewish communities were founded even in northern Mesopotamia (Rostovtzeff 1938: 100). Furthermore, Cohen explains that the Seleucids inherited the Asian heart of Alexander the Great's empire, and with it, his policy of settling Graeco-Macedonian colonists on the land. Although some began as civilian colonies, most Seleucid settlements began as military colonies (Cohen 1978: 5-8). Some of the civilian colonies consisted of Cardacians and Jews, and Dura-Europos is an example of a military colony. Cohen maintains that sometimes military colonies were initially made up of retired or reserve soldiers. Old soldiers were advantageous to use as settlers, since it was a favourable arrangement for both parties. The Seleucid soldiers were well organized into various units, and they had a proven record for loyalty. On the other hand, the soldiers were eager for new opportunities because they received land grants. Frequently, however, a military colony started as a garrison of active soldiers, who received land, were demobilized and given the privilege of settling there. In many

situations, settlements were necessary for protection of trade routes. Thus, it could be surmised that Dura was conceived by the Seleucids for the protection of their trade routes.

It is possible that there were Jews among the early settlers at Dura. It may be noted that Babylonian Jews were sent to Lydia and Phrygia in order to maintain internal security of trade routes (Cohen 1978: 6). Kraeling points out that the coins of the city of Dura-Europos give the earliest evidence of Jewish presence in the city. The coins discussed include ones issued by John Hyrcanus, the Maccabean king ruling Palestine from 135-104 B. C. E. It is known that, in 130 B. C. E., Hyrcanus led a military expedition from Palestine to Babylonia to help Antiochus VII against the Parthians. There is strong evidence that Dura was on the king's route and this resulted in the appearance of the coins in the city of Dura-Europos. Jewish coins are found at Dura from subsequent periods all the way to the Jewish revolt of 66-71 C. E. In addition, the resumption of relations between Palestinian and Babylonian Judaism in the late Parthian period (1st century C. E.) and the location of Dura on the Euphrates road made it natural for a small resident colony to emerge in the city during the late Parthian era (Kraeling 1979: 326). The first evidence of Jewish continuity in Dura, after the cessation of Palestinian coinage, is the earlier Synagogue building.

Perkins asserts that, between 165 and 200 C. E. (early days of Roman occupation of Dura), a private house in Dura was converted into a synagogue. However, she does not rule out the possibility that there were Jews living in Dura-Europos earlier (Perkins 1973: 24). Goodenough maintains that, in contrast to the number of Jews living in Babylonia, the Jewish population in Dura was very small. However, Kraeling maintains that the

community must have had the required ten males necessary for the establishment of a synagogue (Kraeling 1979: 327). They lived in a predominantly pagan city, where the inhabitants were initially Greek, then Parthian, and subsequently Roman soldiers and merchants. In Perkin's view, as a result of living in such a mixed environment, the Jews were required to put a strong emphasis on their identity and achievements. Moreover, "their peculiar relationship with their God must have provided a strong and necessary element of reassurance" (Perkins 1973: 24). In addition, their Synagogue was much smaller than other religious buildings in the city. Therefore, their physical surroundings resembled those of Jews living in Ephesus, Corinth or Antioch as opposed to those of Jews living in Nehardea, a much larger Jewish community located in Mesopotamia, north west of Ctesiphon and south of Dura (Goodenough 1988: 184).

Gates notes that, just as Mesopotamian temples were located in residential quarters and resembled private houses in general layout, the same was true of the Synagogue and the two other religious buildings (Gates 1984: 169). Kraeling explains that, on the map of the excavations, the Dura Synagogue was shown as a building which belonged to a group of structures located on a city block, designated as L7. This block was part of the west-central section of Dura, located near the important western defensive wall of the city. The eastern part of Dura was initially occupied and developed by the Macedonian settlers from Hellenistic times, and the western part, to which block L7 belonged, was barely inhabited. The first Synagogue building was of small size and located in a less desirable street of the city (Kraeling 1979: 328). By the third century C.

E., the area where the Synagogue existed had been developed and, according to Kraeling, heavily populated.

It is worthy of note that the residents of the area where the Synagogue stood were involved with the commercial life of the city, and were associated with the outside world. Nevertheless, the section maintained its basic residential character. In comparison with other sections, some of which had houses of more luxurious character, and others which were more modest, one can deduce that Block L7 was representative of Dura's middle class dwellings. Kraeling asserts that it was in this enclave where the Jewish community of Dura established itself. It became a centre of religious and social life (Kraeling 1979: 3). Wharton points out that the Jewish and Christian cult centres were part of a large building programme in the western part of the city. She asserts that this area was a middle class neighbourhood, contrary to Krauthheimer's suggestion that it was "a quarter of the poor" (qtd in Wharton 1995: 25). According to Kraeling, the Jewish community was Oriental in its life and ideology. In fact, the Durene Jewish community did not portray itself as any different from many others that had existed in the smaller cities and settlements located on the commercial and military highways of the Near East (Kraeling 1979: 329).

The construction of a new larger building for the Synagogue in Dura-Europos was an important event in the history of the community. The commemorative inscription, in Aramaic, on the roofing of the House of Assembly dates this event to 244/245 C. E. (Kraeling 1979: 333). However, according to Kraeling, this date does not signify the completion of all aspects of the Synagogue building. Nevertheless, the building was put

to use in spite of its deficiencies. The new building, because of its size and spaciousness, indicates the increased affluence of the Jewish community. Seating space in the Synagogue grew as a result of adding a second row of benches to accommodate one hundred and twenty-five persons as opposed to sixty-five in the earlier building (Kraeling 1979: 335). Gates maintains that the House of Assembly was able to provide seating through the use of rows of benches at the foot of the walls, at first for sixty-five people and subsequently, in the expanded building of the second phase, for one hundred and twenty-four people (Gates 1984: 173). However, according to Rostovtzeff, the earlier structure provided 90 seats on its benches (Rostovtzeff 1938: 61-62).

This later Jewish community was no longer considered an insignificant minority, as they owned a substantial amount of property in the area of the Synagogue. Moreover, being proprietors of an important structure for worship, they were on the same footing with other religious groups. Kraeling notes that there is no definite evidence as to the number of later members of the community born in Dura as descendants of earlier Jewish inhabitants. It is also unknown how many people came from the outside, and what number of recent arrivals were of Babylonian origin (Kraeling 1979: 334). However, it becomes obvious from the Greek dedicatory inscriptions (Kraeling 1979: 277-289 nos. 23-28, 52, 35) as well as the appearance of a proselyte with a Greek name on one of the Aramaic tiles (Kraeling 1979: 274 no. 17) that new people who had been brought up in a Hellenized environment joined the Jewish community (Kraeling 1979: 334). In fact, these newcomers increased the size of the Jewish community, and some new members rose to positions of importance and rank within the group.

In addition, there were superimpositions on some of the frescoes of the Synagogue in the form of Middle Iranian *dipinti* bearing Iranian names (Inscrs. nos. 42-53). The question arises as to who these people were and what their connection to the Jewish community was. Bernhard Geiger, who concerns himself with study of the Middle Iranian texts, says that the aforementioned *dipinti* were written in Parsik (Middle Persian), and there were also three graffiti (Inscrs. nos. 54-56) in the Parthian (Pahlavik) script and language (Kraeling 1979: 283). He attributed the writings on the wall paintings to Iranian scribes who were visiting Dura. However, the question is still under scrutiny and it is unknown whether these scribes were official ambassadors or whether they lived in Dura at the time of the temporary Persian (Sassanian) occupation in 253 C. E. One might even suggest that they were Jewish people with Iranian names.

According to Kraeling, the dates of execution of the *dipinti* are not as significant as the proper understanding of their meaning in order to have a greater knowledge about the life of the community (Kraeling 1979: 335). In fact, the superimposition of the *dipinti* on some of the panels gives additional information about the history of the Jews in Dura-Europos. The main inquiry regarding the *dipinti* revolves around the question of why some scribes called *dipivars* with Mazdean names came to the Synagogue, once with a Jewish official, and "looked at" specific pictures on a day of a certain Persian month during the fourteenth or fifteenth regnal year of Shapur, i. e., 254 or 255 C. E. (Kraeling 1979: 336). Who were these *dipivars,* what was their function, and why the inscriptions on three particular panels written in Middle Iranian idiom (Kraeling 1979: 337)? The panels represent Mordechai and Esther (WC2), Elijah reviving the widow's child (WC1),

and the Restoration of National Life (NC1). The first panel would be significant and appealing to Sassanian visitors because it shows the favour and protection extended by the Persian monarchs in earlier days. The second and third depict the Jewish community's belief in the doctrine of resurrection, which the Persians also recognized. Kraeling asserts that these points serve as an important source of reference for the last years of the Jewish community in Dura (Kraeling 1979: 336-337). However, it is unclear whether the *dipivars* were Sassanian Persians or Persian Jews.

Kraeling points out that the Jewish population in the third century C.E. in lower Mesopotamia was more numerous than that of Palestine. This population increase occurred because there were a number of towns concentrated along the canal from Babel to Nippur. These towns were primarily Jewish as a result of exiles being brought from Palestine by Nebuchadnezzar. In addition, there were people who left Syria and Palestine in the years of the Great Jewish revolt (66-70 C. E.) and also in the second century C. E. to evade Hadrian's repressive edicts and the Bar-Kochba revolt. In fact, Josephus mentions in *Antiquitates* XV, 39; XI, 133 "untold myriads" of Jews in lower Mesopotamia (Kraeling 1979: 325). Rostovtzeff discusses evidence of correspondence about a Jewish trading house in Nippur that was actively involved in trade with the Chaldeans, Medians, Aramaeans, Edomites, and Sabaeans (Rostovtzeff 1932: 22). This would indicate the presence of Jews in those towns from an earlier period.

Economic life

Rostovtzeff, on the basis of his travels through Syria, Palestine and Arabia in 1928, gives a historical overview of the way in which caravan trade developed along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The area between those rivers, known as the "fertile crescent" because of its good agricultural land, which supported rich vegetation, fostered the development of many trading towns and routes. Dura is one of the cities on which Rostovtzeff concentrates. He describes in detail the history of the caravan cities. In addition, through the archaeological remains, he attempts to portray the life and conditions of the ancient inhabitants and the nature of the trade that passed through these towns (Rostovtzeff 1932: v-vii). Furthermore, Wharton asserts that Dura, contrary to accepted views, was not a desert town but was located in the heart of the fertile crescent (Wharton 1995: 19).

Rostovtzeff describes Dura as a mixture of caravan station and frontier port (Rostovtzeff 1932: 92). He maintains that the caravans coming from the lowlands of the Euphrates and Tigris, or from the highlands of Persia, travelled northward and westward, either across the Syrian desert or up along the Euphrates. Consequently, it was important to have fortresses on the banks of the Euphrates for the protection of the caravan route and also at the points where the river could be the easiest to cross. Dura fulfilled this requirement (Rostovtzeff 1932: 93).

The period of Parthian rule provided the greatest prosperity for Dura. In fact, Kraeling begins only with the later Parthian period, *ca* 50 C. E. to 165 C.E., in his overview of the Jewish community in Dura-Europos, because he considers this period

the most affluent in Dura's history (Kraeling 1979: 322). The growing importance of Palmyra helped Dura grow beyond her role as a fort, and Dura became a point of departure for the main caravan route from the Euphrates to Palmyra. Moreover, it was by way of Dura that the Parthians sent caravans from Palmyra to Mesopotamia and Iran, and there the caravans picked up merchandise and returned to Palmyra. Merchants passing through Dura might stay there for a short time. Earlier under Parthian rule, the caravan trade had made merchants out of many people who were members of the original Graeco-Macedonian colony, initially landowners and soldiers. During the earlier Parthian period (first century B. C. E.), the Nabataean caravan kingdom for a short time included Damascus under her authority, and this may have paved the way for Palmyra to become joined with the Nabataean caravan route. According to Rostovtzeff, this event triggered communications across the desert, passing through Dura and Palmyra, which resulted in greater wealth for the Seleucids and the Parthians (Rostovtzeff 1932: 100). In the later Parthian period, the garrison of Dura had to supervise and maintain the safety of the roads which led to the west, south and east across the Euphrates. This trade proved to be very lucrative for Dura, as taxes were imposed on the merchandise carried by the caravans who passed through or stayed in Dura. This tax was imposed in addition to the custom duties which were collected by the Parthians. Rostovtzeff suggests that Dura must have been a rich and prosperous town in the first-century C. E., since most of her important pagan buildings date from that time (Rostovtzeff 1932: 105). It was during this Parthian period that Dura was in her heyday, both as a strong fortress and a bustling commercial city (Rostovtzeff 1935: 200). During the first century C. E., Dura was one of the cities

participating in the important caravan trade which connected Parthia to the Roman Empire (Rostovtzeff 1932: 105). After 165 C. E., during the Roman period, as a result of frequent wars on the Euphrates, the caravan route moving up that river shifted its direction, avoiding Dura and going directly to Palmyra. Therefore, the caravan trade was no longer enriching Dura.

In addition to Dura's importance as a trade centre, she was also surrounded by fertile land. Moreover, Cohen points out that documents from late Seleucid and Roman times indicate that the land in the area of Dura supplied its owners with good crops of cereal, fruits and grapes (Cohen 1978: 20). Earlier, agriculture had been in general the mainstay of everyday living. In this respect, the Jewish community was continuing a tradition which can be traced back to Ezra the Scribe (Kraeling 1979: 325-326).

Rostovtzeff outlines business transactions conducted by an individual named Nebuchelos, who lived in the third century C. E., to illustrate the type of business conducted during the deteriorating conditions in the Roman Empire of that period. Nebuchelos was a multifaceted businessman who, together with his son and partners, was engaged in money-lending and land transactions as well as the buying of clothes and materials. The details of his business transactions were written on his office walls. There was, however, no mention there of any connection with the caravan trade, or merchandise going to and from Parthia. According to Rostovtzeff, all the business executed by businessmen like him in the third century was of a local nature. In fact, the volume of business was very small, since the third century was a period of wars and economic deterioration. The same author believes that Nebuchelos and his partners wrote

their business records on the plastered walls of his office because they could not afford to buy paper (Rostovtzeff 1932: 208).

Kraeling notes that in the 240s C.E., during the Roman period, the Jewish community of Dura enjoyed a great deal of comfort and expansion. However, in the same period, Rome began to decline, and so did Rome's importance in the Near East. One explanation for the affluence of the Jewish community in this period is that the inhabitants of Dura, both pagan and Jewish, were engaged in purveying goods and supplies to the Roman garrison, since Dura under the Romans was essentially a military base. The evidence of coins dating from the third century found at Dura and coming from the upper Khabur, a fertile and well-watered region, suggests that this area provided good markets for purchase of necessary goods for the Roman garrison (Kraeling 1979: 335). Kraeling explains that coins from Dura dated to the early third century C. E. indicate a lucrative economic association with cities from Northern Mesopotamia, such as Nisibis and Edessa, which also had Jewish colonies. He further suggests that the Jewish traders and merchants had an active involvement in regional commerce and some may have established themselves in Dura. After all, Dura was the defense headquarters for the whole region, so therefore it was good business logic to sell the country's products to the army's service of supplies (Kraeling 1979: 330).

Military functions

Dura-Europos was probably one of many fortress-colonies serving the purpose of protecting the Euphrates route. Since the Seleucids originally ruled Iran on one side, and

Asia Minor on the other, this route was very important to them. In fact, it connected Seleucia, their Babylonian capital on the Tigris, with Antioch, their capital on the Orontes.

Dura became, after 165 C. E., first and foremost an important military centre. She was important as the strongest fortress on the southern frontier of Roman Mesopotamia, geographically situated on the route used by the Roman army to move down the Euphrates on the way to Ctesiphon, then the Parthian capital of lower Mesopotamia. The main reason for the Roman occupation of Dura was to create a military base for protection against the Parthians. However, the main duty of the Roman garrison was to maintain the security of the caravan routes as well as the roads passing through Dura (Rostovtzeff 1932: 201). In the third century C. E., a new Iranian power wrested control from the Parthians. This was the Sassanian dynasty, which until its final success *ca* 224 C. E., had been pursuing expansion westward into Mesopotamia. This new development was the catalyst for the Romans after 210 C. E. to substantially expand the garrison in the city of Dura (Perkins 1973: 6). The northern part of the city became the camp, and a wall that was now built cut this area off from the rest of the city. A building programme catering to the new realities was put into effect. Included were baths and amphitheatres as well as new administrative buildings. In addition, temples for deities well liked by the Roman army were erected, such as Mithras and Jupiter Dolichenus. Moreover, the first Jewish Synagogue was remodeled at this time, and the Christian chapel was adapted from an older house.

Cultural influences in Dura

Dura exhibited a diverse mix of both peoples and cultures as a result of being occupied by Macedonians, followed by Parthians and subsequently by Romans, between 280 B. C. E. and *ca* 256 C. E. According to Rostovtzeff, the population in Dura had originally been Macedonian and therefore spoke Greek, but the fact that the Durenes were under Parthian influence for three centuries exposed them to Iranian ways (Rostovtzeff 1932: 104). Perkins opines that the majority of the population, who were indigenous people of the city, spoke Aramaic (Perkins 1973: 8). Fergus Millar comments that in Roman Dura there were a great number of different languages, such as Greek, Latin, Semitic (including Aramaic, Hebrew, Palmyrene, and Syriac) and Iranian. However, earlier on, when Dura was under Parthian rule, Greek and Palmyrene were the only languages used of which there is some evidence (Millar 1998: 475-478). Millar's conclusions are based on written evidence (inscriptions, *dipinti*, graffiti, papyri and parchments). Wharton asserts that many languages were spoken in Dura, as evidenced by graffiti inscribed in Aramaic, Middle Persian, Parthian, Greek and Latin, which attest to the heterogeneity of the population. In addition, inscriptions by donors for shrines had Semitic, Greek and Macedonian names, in spite of the fact that the original Macedonian settlers maintained their aristocratic status throughout Dura's existence (Wharton 1995: 19). Moreover, Semitic women were in the majority at Dura, and as a result the population became more "Semiticised" (Rostovtzeff 1932: 104). However, according to Rostovtzeff, the culture of the city was Greek with an Iranian sprinkling, and not Graeco-Semitic. In fact, the art used by the Jews had a Hellenistic foundation, with Parthian "or

Persian accretions" (Goodenough 1988: 184). Goodenough points out that there is no Jewish literature available that is so full of Iranian elements as are the Synagogue frescoes (Goodenough 1988: 184).

Rostovtzeff maintains that the combination of Macedonian-Iranian characteristics together with Semitic origins made Dura foreign to Roman habits and culture (Rostovtzeff 1932: 157). Moreover, according to Wharton, the Roman effect on Dura was not significant, since the Roman occupation was not very long. As a matter of fact, it can be said that, both in the later second and early third centuries C. E., the Macedonian foundation and Parthian rule were just as influential on Durene culture as the Roman presence (Wharton 1995: 19). However, Goodenough argues that the Judaism of Dura was much closer to that of Palmyra and Roman civilization than to the Judaism of Babylonian culture and atmosphere. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude that the Jews of Dura belonged culturally to Babylonian Jewry.

The Graeco-Macedonian people in Dura maintained their names, their old traditions, their Greek language and legal codes. In addition, they used the Seleucid calendar (Gates 1984: 167). However, in view of their milieu, they developed habits and tastes of the East. Actually, they were no longer Greek but Levantines, even though they spoke Greek (Rostovtzeff 1932: 198).

According to Perkins, the location of Dura-Europos, adjacent to the Euphrates, offered her strategic importance in terms of control over the military and commercial traffic. These routes linked lower Mesopotamia and western Syria, with its routes to the Mediterranean. Moreover, Dura was a station on the very important caravan route, which

crossed the desert to Palmyra. Perkins asserts that travel on these routes necessitated a *modus vivendi,* resulting in a mingling of people with a variety of different nationalities as well as the co-existence of elements from diverse cultures. Consequently, this multicultural influence became part of Durene civilization, and was reflected in her art, in spite of the fact that throughout her history she was ruled by three masters (Perkins 1973: 4). Gates agrees that Dura-Europos, as a result of different foreign occupiers, was exposed to a variety of cultural influences. These influences manifested themselves in numerous monuments excavated in the city, which indicate that the core and lifeblood of Durene culture is oriental, with Syro-Mesopotamian origins. She comments that it is not possible to explain the religious buildings, Jewish, pagan, or Christian, without this context in mind. For example, just as Mesopotamian temples were located in residential quarters and resembled private houses in general layout, the same was true of the Mithraeum, the Synagogue and the Christian chapel (Gates 1984: 169). The embellishment of walls with painted decoration was present in all the temples of Dura-Europos. The frescoes represent gods and goddesses, mythological scenes, and scenes of sacrifice performed by their donors. There were figures of galloping horsemen, of hunting riders, and of running animals. The temple of the Palmyrene Gods had the best preserved wall paintings. The figures in the frescoes are all depicted in frontal fashion, which was a Parthian characteristic, and a prevalent artistic convention in Dura. The use of registers divided horizontally by architectural moldings, and the focus on the back wall of the cella with a place for a cult-figure as central focus, were also of Mesopotamian heritage. In fact, it was this type of arrangement in the cella which was appropriated in

the Synagogue, the Mithraeum and the Christian chapel. Furthermore, according to Gates, it is easy to see the evolution of the cult niche or *aedicula* of the temples from such a background. Goodenough explains that when Jews put the Torah scrolls in the niche, the people receive the presence of the Deity. In fact, the worshippers at Dura were praying to the Shekinah, which the scrolls brought into the Synagogue. He maintains that the function of the Torah niche resembles that of the niche in the pagan shrine, where the cult image is placed (Goodenough 1988: 185). Kraeling asserts that in the Synagogue there was obviously no representation of the deity in the niche. However, the idea of a central focus in terms of the layout of the paintings decorating the Synagogue walls was retained. The painting above the niche, which portrays the Messianic King of the House of David surrounded by the representatives of the Twelve Tribes, becomes the alternative for the forbidden deity (Kraeling 1979: 349). Goodenough maintains that the painting shows the "salvation of Israel, the ultimate value of Yahveh, if it did not represent Yahveh" (qtd in Goodenough 1988: 253). It is noteworthy that all three religious structures mentioned above, in spite of their ideological differences, respected the local Durene conventions in both decoration and design. In fact, a number of similarities are shared by them. For example, all three sanctuaries are located near the city wall, which was the area of expansion in Dura-Europos under Roman rule (Gates 1984: 172).

There is very little information concerning Durene religion in Hellenistic times. However, the little that is available shows the Hellenistic period in Macedonian Dura-Europos, as in Macedonian colonies, to have been in principle Greek. From the late first century B. C. E. to the third century C. E., when Dura was under the rule of Parthia and

Rome, information is more abundant. According to the evidence, "a multitude of heterogeneous religions appear to mingle as in a cauldron, and a host of gods and goddesses of various origin found worshippers in the city" (Rostovtzeff 1938: 59). The gods of Semitic origin (e.g., Babylonian, Mesopotamian, Northern Syrian, Anatolian, Phoenician, Palmyran and Arabian) were most prominent in Dura. However, many of the oriental gods worshipped also had Greek names, in particular Zeus and Artemis, which attests to the fact that Greek religion did not disappear during the Parthian and Roman period. Perkins points out that although the names of the deities are given in Greek, examination of the texts and iconography of the cult images demonstrates that their characteristics have been combined with those of older Semitic deities. For example, Zeus Theos is portrayed in his temple wearing Parthian attire. Adonis is also shown in Parthian clothing and hairstyle, but the name could be a hellenization of the Phoenician Eshmun or any other of the Asiatic dying-rising gods (Perkins 1973: 8). The Seleucid gods (e.g., Tyche) and the dynastic cult still survived at Dura. Perkins says that the protecting Fortunes of the two cities, Dura and Palmyra, represented in a frescoe from the Temple of Bel, are rendered according to a Hellenistic model. They were both copied from the statue of the Tyche of Antioch by Eutychides. However, in one depiction, Tyche (the Fortune of Palmyra), has attributes of the Semitic Atargatis, and in the second case (the Fortune of Dura) Tyche is depicted as a male in the appearance of Zeus Olympios. The notion of personifying good fortune is a quotation from the Greek world, but its representation at Dura is all-embracing. Rostovtzeff opines that there was very little evidence for the presence of Iranian cults, such as Mazdaism and Zoroastrianism,

and in fact, no fire temple was found or any reference to Ahuramazda (Rostovtzeff 1938: 60). Rostovtzeff explains that figures in Parthian military dress often have Iranian names and are worshipping Iranian gods as well as deities of foreign origin (Rostovtzeff 1938: 60). However, the Roman army based in the military camp at Dura worshipped the gods and goddesses of Rome as well as the deified emperors and members of the imperial family. This was common practice in Rome as well as in the rest of the empire (Rostovtzeff 1938: 61). Interestingly, the soldiers also embraced some oriental gods, whom they considered to be their protectors, such as Mithras. Wharton points out that among the necessary changes to accommodate the new military reality within the prescint, there were a number of religious edifices. These were the remodeled Temple of Bel, a new Mithraeum, and a temple known as the Dolicheneum, which housed the cults of many gods honoured by the soldiers, including Jupiter Dolichenus, also known by the Greek name Zeus Dolichaios, and Turmasgade, also identified with the epithets Zeus Helios Mithras. It is worthy of note that, although these deities are considered "oriental", their cults are much more revered in Europe as opposed to Asia. The *vexillationes* (military detachments) in Dura, such as IVth Scythica, Xvth Flavia, IIIrd Cyrenaica, XXth Palmyrenorum and IInd Ulpia, show that the large military presence was a factor in the large ethnic and religious mix in the city (Wharton 1995: 25). In addition, Judaism and Christianity, proselytizing religions, entered the busy religious landscape. The small Christian church started to function in the third century. The Jewish Synagogue was first established at the end of the second century and subsequently in the third century was enlarged. According to Rostovtzeff, there was insufficient time for the Christians and

Jews to convert many people. Therefore, those groups did not play an influential role in the religious life of Dura (Rostovtzeff 1938: 60-62). In any case, the great majority of the people at Dura followed the Semitic religions (Rostovtzeff 1938: 62). On the other hand, Millar points out that the influence of Palmyra in the religious sphere was significant in Dura (Millar 1996: 478).

Kraeling points out that although Dura was under Parthian and later Roman rule, there was a certain air of continuity manifested by the fusion of various cultural forces. This becomes evident in the arts, where Hellenistic influences from painting and sculpture were combined with others to reflect Iranian models and at the same time continued the designs and established custom of the Semitic Orient. In fact, as Kraeling says, "there is no essential difference between components of the paintings from the Temple of Bel and those from the Synagogue, though they are all of two hundred years removed from each other in time" (Kraeling 1979: 323). This pattern also holds true for domestic architecture as well as the religious history of the city. It makes no difference what the gods are called in either Roman or Parthian times, because they are essentially Oriental in character (Kraeling 1979: 323).

In terms of external appearances, Parthian influence was manifest. Parthian coiffures and clothing were evident on frescoes and terracottas. Green-glazed pottery was a Parthian heritage from the first century B.C. E., and its production remained popular for the Duration of Dura's existence (Perkins 1973: 5). Goodenough attaches a great deal of importance to clothing, and identifies four types of dress. He maintains that each different outfit worn by the cast of characters in the paintings of the Synagogue is

representative of a certain role in society (Goodenough 1988: 191). He points out that the most consistent key to meaning was the *chiton* and *himation* of the Greek dress with the *clavi* on the chiton and the forked gams on the *himation*.

Art and architecture

Rostovtzeff explains that although Dura was never a great centre of art, the evidence indicates that the population appreciated works of art (Rostovtzeff 1938: 59). Votive statues, cult bas-reliefs and impressive paintings as well as scenes of everyday life were frequent decorations in both religious as well as domestic environments. In fact, local artists took great pride in their work, and as a result many were signed. Religion played a key role in the art of Dura. In fact, art was in the service of religion. Rostovtzeff maintains that the religious paintings are the real jewels in Dura. According to him, the temple of the Palmyrene gods as well as the temple of Zeus Theos had rich painted decorations, some of which survive. In the latter building, there is a large painted cult figure dressed in Iranian clothing in the centre of the back wall. The side walls were divided into registers which were painted. In fact, Rostovtzeff opined that these two buildings were similar to Christian churches, especially the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic (Rostovtzeff 1938: 69).

In plan, the temples of Dura are very closely related to shrines in ancient Babylonia and Assyria. In this region, however, paintings were utilized in the palaces of the kings but not in the religious structures. Thus very little is known about the origin of the painted temple in Mesopotamia. Since all the major temples at Dura, which were

built before the Synagogue, had wall paintings, that is probably why the Synagogue was decorated with paintings. According to Kraeling, the Jews of Dura must have decided that this type of decoration is the convention in Dura for religious structures, and therefore followed in their footsteps. Kraeling asserts that this idea does not follow in the earlier building, in which the decorations were more in keeping with domestic and non-religious structures (Kraeling 1979: 348 and note 122). He further explains that the narrative element in the representations was most prevalent in the Christian Chapel, in the Temple of Mithras, and in the Synagogue. It is worthy of note that the element of narrative is most fully expressed in the above three structures belonging to the communities which require a personal commitment from their members. This commitment would signify that the decorations have a didactic purpose (Kraeling 1979: 349).

Perkins asserts that the importance of Durene art does not lie in technical skill or in extraordinary aesthetic development, but rather in the way different influences and combinations of foreign ideas were used to form a particular local style. Perkins illustrates her point with the example of a painting in the Temple of Bel mentioned above. The frescoe, which depicts a Roman tribune called Julius Terentius, a Latin name, is shown in the usual hieratic frontal pose typical of Durene art. He is performing a sacrifice over a fire-altar, which is a quotation from Iran, to a trio of military gods resembling those of Palmyra. At the same time, the Fortunes of Dura and Palmyra represented in this frescoe are portrayed in a Hellenistic form, but placed in a subordinate position at the bottom of the frescoe (Perkins 1973: 9).

Synagogue

Kraeling asserts that "the contribution that Dura makes to our understanding of the synagogues, the religious life, the art, and the institutions of the Judaism of the Dispersion in the third century of the present era" is invaluable (Kraeling 1979: 321). The site also makes an enormous contribution to our knowledge of other religious groups such as Mithraism and Christianity (Kraeling 1979: xix). This contribution was nowhere more evident "than in the sphere of art", where components which originated from Hellenistic painting and sculpture were united with characteristics of Iranian models. In addition, the Durenes continued to maintain the long-standing tradition of the Semitic Orient.

Rostovtzeff describes in detail how, in 1931-32, by a stroke of luck, the excavators found under a section of the desert wall, to the south of the main gate, a private house. Apparently it was built in the third century and was converted for use as a Christian meeting place and place of worship. Subsequently, in 1932-3, under the same sloping embankment but to the north of the main gate, a Jewish Synagogue was unearthed. The building was well preserved, and its wall paintings and painted inscriptions indicate the purpose of the edifice (Rostovtzeff 1938: 101). The painted Synagogue was built by re-using an earlier structure, itself a re-modeled residential building. There were two building phases of the Synagogue, the first occurring at the end of the second century C. E., and the second in 244/5 C. E. (Rostovtzeff 1938: 104). From an architectural point of view, the first Synagogue was created from a remodeled house and maintained some aspects of domestic architecture. According to Kraeling, the

first Synagogue was planned as a private house for a congregational group, small in scope and modest in decoration (Kraeling 1979: 30-33). In 244/5 C. E., the second Synagogue was built, as indicated by an inscription, about fifty years after the first one. However, the date of the murals is not recorded (Goodenough 1988: 178). The second Synagogue, in 244/5 C. E., involved expanding and decorating the earlier building. The expansion encompassed the width of a whole block, which included a suite for the congregation elder, and a guest house for traveling Jewish merchants, through which one gained access to the courtyard of the Synagogue. Immediately behind this courtyard was the House of Assembly, a broad room (11.5 by 7.5 metres) with its principal entrance in the middle of the east wall and another door situated at the southern end of the same wall. The Torah niche was placed against the west wall of the House of Assembly opposite the main entrance (Gates 1984: 172). Kraeling points out that the placement of this niche solved the problem of having the congregation face the Torah niche, Jerusalem, and the interior of the room at the same time (Kraeling 1979: 25). According to Goodenough, the second Synagogue was made to resemble the inner shrines of the pagan temples. For example, this characteristic is seen in the use of the niche both in the Durene Synagogue and in pagan buildings (Goodenough 1988: 185). Gates maintains that all the religious buildings inside the city wall have their cult niche along the western wall of the building, so therefore the Synagogue is only following the general trend (Gates 1984: 173).

In the first decorative phase of the Synagogue, 244/45 C. E., the pictures had contained floral and geometric designs but no figural representations. However, in

249/50 C.E. this form of decoration was changed and the subject matter became narrative as opposed to floral and geometric. Kraeling comments that it is unknown whether the Jewish community chose the simple type of decorations in the first decorative phase because of paucity of funds or because of its outlook regarding representational figures. Excavations have shown that, in the second decorative phase, three main structural elements of the House of Assembly, namely, ceiling, walls and Torah Shrine set against the west wall, were elaborately decorated. According to Kraeling, "the House of Assembly was a veritable treasure-chamber of mural decoration" in which throughout the whole interior, starting with benches and looking vertically, the walls were covered with elaborate designs and pictorial scenes (Kraeling 1979: 39). This type of embellishment was typical of other Durene religious sanctuaries as well as the rooms of important public and private edifices. In addition, Kraeling highlights the fact that because the House of Assembly of the Synagogue was a meeting place for a large community of worshippers, it was even more ornamental as opposed to the *naos* of a temple or the reception room of a private person (Kraeling 1979: 39).

The walls of the second Synagogue were divided into five registers, of which the decorations of the top registers are lost. However, the second (A), third (B), and fourth (C) horizontal registers were composed of panels of different lengths. Within these panels, scenes and figures of Biblical stories were rendered. The first zone (the dado) descended near the level of benches. This was articulated with imitation marble incrustation. The decoration of the ceiling consisted of designs applied to the lower faces

of tiles suspended in coffers (Kraeling 1979: 38-39). The Torah Shrine bore a pictorial composition on its arch, marble veneer with inlay paneling on its base, and an enclosed niche. For Kraeling, the organization of the decorations in the Dura-Europos Synagogue is a blend of earlier eastern and western elements (68).

Goodenough comments that the discovery of the Synagogue was as important as that of the Dead Sea Scrolls in terms of our knowledge about Judaism, yet in comparison it has not attracted a great deal of interest. The scrolls can be read, but how does one read the language of the frescoes (Goodenough 1988: 179)? According to Wharton, the significance of these finds, in terms of their spatial division, is the material evidence they provide "of the ritual of a particular late antique ethnic or sectarian group" (Wharton 1995: 15).

Rostovtzeff brings to the attention of his readers the fact that strict interpretation of Exodus xx. 4 paved the way for the absence of carved images of living beings in the Temple of Jerusalem as well as synagogues. This prohibition was still in effect during the Hellenistic as well as the early Roman era. However, in the early first centuries C. E., several Rabbis attempted to soften this interpretation to allow the decorations of synagogues to include pictures depicting the sacred books of Judaism. Nevertheless, Rostovtzeff maintains that it is not known how widespread acceptance of this interpretation by Jewish communities was. Moreover, this type of ornamentation was "never universally adopted as canonical and in conformity with the rules of the Talmud" (Rostovtzeff 1938: 102). According to Goodenough, the literary evidence from the Graeco-Roman era concerning Judaism suggests that Jews did not use images during that

period. Therefore, it is surprising that, whereas the Synagogue at Dura in its earlier phase was not adorned in such a manner, the Jewish community chose to adopt the liberal interpretation of *Exodus* xx. 4 in the middle of the third century, in the renovation belonging to that period (Rostovtzeff 1938: 102).

In addition, Jewish history adduced from Jewish writings shows that there was a total rejection of pagan religion (Goodenough 1988: 180). Moreover, Goodenough maintains, as does Tcherikover, that hellenization only affected some of the very affluent families. In point of fact, by rejecting paganism the Jews showed their active belief as a group in the one true God. Goodenough notes that some Jews took an interest in mysticism, messianism, or eschatalogical ideas. However, even these people rejected pagan worship and motifs as much as any rabbi (Goodenough 1988: 180-181). The frescoes at Dura are completely faithful to Judaism.

Kraeling asserts that the religious art of Dura, and especially the Synagogue, shows a style and composition that could relate to sculptures and paintings appearing in Palmyra, Hatra and Edessa (Kraeling 1979: 382). If we observe the earliest date of similar known monuments as a point of departure, we may find evidence that the common style in the Orient existed a long time before Roman rule, probably during the era of Parthian authority. Kraeling emphasizes the importance of time and place for the understanding of style, as it is the combination of these elements which translates into meaning. He goes on to explain the three important spheres of influence, Greek, Iranian and Oriental/Semitic, which had a bearing on the above. The Greek effect on the Synagogue artist is shown, for example, by the dress worn by civilian males and the

standing philosopher type as represented in the Ezra panel (Wing Panel III), by the spear and shield armaments of the soldiers in the Exodus Panel (WA3), by the stage-space device, the temple forms, and the Nikes as possible decorations on the gateway of Pharaohs' city in the Exodus panel (WA3), and by the Psyches, the clothing worn by the ladies-in-waiting, and the Persephones with fruits and flowers of the ceiling tiles. The Iranian influence manifests itself by the costume composed of tunic and trousers, which were worn by all members of the Royal court and by people associated with the Temple. In addition, the beautiful horses and their riders, the hunting dogs (Panel ECI) and the animals of the chase found on the ceiling tiles can be mentioned. Oriental or local influence is evident in the absence of realism and naturalism, but it featured a depiction of ornaments as well as veristic detail, some elements of architectural tradition and perhaps some of the clothing worn by women not of courtly rank. In addition, the use of frontality, which is so dominant in the frescoes, could be attributed to the Hellenistic phase of Oriental art. According to Kraeling, the tents of Panels WBI and NCI, and the picture within a picture in Panel NB2, are some contributions which could be attributed to the Roman phase in Dura (Kraeling 1979: 382-84). In summation, it can be said that the Synagogue as a monument of ancient art follows a tradition of painted sanctuaries found at Dura. The style and arrangement of the decorations and the religious subject matter all show a commonality (Kraeling 1979: 382). Furthermore, the "synthetic" style of the Dura artists gave them an opportunity to do a great amount of work in a short period of time. Its repetitiveness and formalism, as exhibited by the frescoes, was very suitable for the purposes of the Jewish community in the Synagogue. Moreover, this style served as

a protection against accusations of promoting idolatry or moving away from the tradition of the written and oral Word (Kraeling 1979: 384). Consequently, in the Synagogue, the art "that was of necessity purposeful found an ideal opportunity to serve a community that needed what it had to give" (Kraeling 1979: 384). It is for this reason that the Synagogue with its decorations is one of the finest and best monuments of ancient Judaism.

Scholarly views on the significance of Dura

"A small provincial city lost on the boundaries of two civilizations, the Greek and the Parthian", was the assertion made by Franz Cumont, the Belgian archaeologist who worked in Dura for two years (qtd in Rostovtzeff 1932: 158). According to his findings, Dura was never an important centre of political life or a large wealthy town. Consequently, it could not be expected to produce first class works of art in architecture, sculpture, painting or jewellery made from gold and silver. Wharton points out that scholars in addition to Cumont, such as Breasted and Hopkins, generally referred to Dura as an outpost of the Roman Empire and described its native population as "static, immutable and primitive" (Wharton 1995: 18). On the other hand, Rostovtzeff asserts that the significance of Dura is not its political stature, but rather its remains, which provide valuable information. He compares Dura to Pompeii, and considers Dura the Pompeii of the Syrian desert. He explains that the similarity of the two cities manifests itself in their history of wall painting (Rostovtzeff 1938: 9).

Wharton asserts that the study of Dura-Europos has "traditionally been dismissed as aesthetically if not historically uninteresting" (Wharton 1995: 15). Many art historians,

because of their outlook on Orientalism, did not consider the ancient monuments and artworks of Dura sufficiently important for extensive examination. She maintains that this attitude resulted in ignoring the layer of meanings which were associated with the buildings and frescoes of Dura. According to Breasted in his *Oriental Forerunners of Byzantine Art,* the East, that is the Near East, is only valuable in terms of what it can contribute to "scientific" origins of the West (Wharton 1995: 17). Furthermore, the mission of the Oriental Institute of which Breasted was a member was to demonstrate how the East, with its primitive beginnings, was the precursor of Western civilization. Breasted gives oriental works a special status, in that they are a "cultural link between the Orient and later Europe" (Wharton 1995: 21). Moreover, looking at the Dura paintings will provide the ancestry for Byzantium.

Wharton points out that, for Weitzman, the Dura frescoes only provide a necessary genealogy for the non-existent Western (Greek/Hellenistic) models (Wharton 1995: 21-22). In addition, she explains that, for Kessler as for Breasted, the Dura frescoes were forerunners of Christian art. Furthermore, these three scholars espoused Eurocentric standards, which in the past have played a leading role with regard to the interpretation of the frescoes of Dura-Europos. Kessler, who wrote the second part of *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art,* maintains that the frescoes serve as a paradigm for Christian church decoration. He further shows by example that there are "ties binding the Dura Synagogue to later Christian buildings" (qtd in Wharton 1995: 22). He points out the structural resemblance, in terms of arrangement and decorations of the Synagogue, to San Paulo fuori le Mura and Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. It is needless

to point out that all these comments and descriptions were designed to enhance the superiority of the Western tradition (Wharton 1995: 20). In point of fact, the study of Dura was tinged with an Orientalist attitude concerning its art, people and location. Moreover, Dura was being referred to as an outpost of the Roman Empire by scholars such as Breasted, Cumont and Hopkins, and it was said that the only changes those people experienced were the ones introduced by foreigners. In fact, it was the duty of the West to save Hellenistic culture from being swallowed up by oriental influence (Wharton 1995: 18). Wharton further explains the extent to which Orientalism encourages a constant comparison between East and West, and thus denegrates the abstract nature of Eastern art as crude and unsophisticated (Wharton 1995: 20). Rostovtzeff remarks in relation to Durene and Palmyrene art: "There is a complete negation of the body which is not Greek...it is a conscious negation of the principles of Greek art" (qtd in Wharton 1995: 20). James Breckeridge describes an image from Dura as an example of folk art, since it is so simplified (Wharton 1995: 20). In terms of depictions, Weitzman considered the orientalized figures as static, standardized and hieratic because of the artist's incompetence (Wharton 1995: 20).

Scholarly approaches to the study Dura

In Wharton's view, the accent in earlier scholarship was on stylistic matters such as linearity, frontality and flatness as characteristics shared by all three, and these were considered generally of poor quality. Moreover, she also points out that scholars such as Rostovtzeff believed that the "religious paintings of Dura are rigid...mere outlines" (qtd

in Wharton 1995: 33), and Perkins wrote that "as to be expected in a garrison town located on a frontier, the paintings show a... provincialism... and mediocre level of execution" (qtd in Wharton 1995: 33). Wharton, who disagrees with these views, comments instead on the construction and reception of the works of art at Dura, as opposed to the traditional focus on style and quality. She explains that the language of pictures is not independent of their producers and viewers. In the past, the paintings in Dura were explained in terms of one identifiable meaning as opposed to a variety of possibilities. According to Wharton, the paintings permit many interpretations without authorizing any single one. She stresses the notion of multivocality of the depictions.

Goodenough took as his problem the interpretation of symbols of art and archaeology in the study of religion. He developed a method for explaining the meaning and use of symbols (Goodenough 1988: ix). He discusses the various methods of interpretation pertaining to the Dura Synagogue frescoes. He suggests using Jewish traditional midrash as well as midrashim from Philo for some explanations. He maintains that there are difficulties in finding a proper method for understanding, because some scenes have no connection to any biblical events, while others which might bear some resemblance include elements which have no relationship to the biblical text. In addition, do any of the so-called symbols which appear in one scene have the same meaning in every other scene? Nevertheless, Goodenough points out that the Jews of Dura found their Judaism exemplified by the use of the same symbols of their faith which the Jews were utilizing everywhere. These symbols were entwined with eschatological and mystical allusions as opposed to halachic references (Goodenough 1988: 251). He does

not see any evidence of polytheism, idolatry or deviation from beliefs in the One God by the Jewish community at Dura, but asserts that different interpretations of the Bible must have been prevalent, such as allegories or midrashim (Goodenough 1988: 186).

Kraeling discusses the mystical and rabbinic-homiletical explanations to explore which approach would provide the most suitable interpretation of the pictorial art, and to ascertain the likelihood of a theological pattern linking the frescoes. In his view, the paintings in the Dura Synagogue do not have a mystical connotation. Moreover, the ideas and subjects presented in the paintings do not demonstrate an allegorical approach as known from the Philo tradition. However, he maintains that the material chosen for illustration in the Synagogue suggests a strong connection with religious life and observance of Judaism as known from the Bible and the *Mishnah* (Kraeling 1979: 351). Kraeling asserts that the subject is very difficult, and that it will take many years of study and adjustments before the correct appraisal can be made of the Dura paintings (Kraeling 1979: 340).

Illustrated Bible, codex, pattern books and philosophers

Hachlili points out that three answers have been given as to the sources that the Durene artists consulted for their frescoes. They are illuminated manuscripts; monumental works; and cartoons, copybooks and pattern books (Hachlili 1998: 185). She maintains, along with other scholars, that illuminated Jewish manuscripts served as examples for the Dura artist. Kraeling suggests that the Passover Haggadahs, the Esther Rolls, the Mahzors and Siddurs with their hagiographic and Haggadic additions offer the

closest resemblance to the Dura pictures. However, none of these are as extensive in representation as the Dura frescoes, which address books such as I *Samuel* and I *Kings*. According to Weitzmann, book illustrations originated in the Hellenistic period. Among the literary works, it is especially the Homeric epics and the tragedies of Euripides that existed in illustrated editions (Kraeling 1979: 395-396). Kraeling further explains that analysis of the Synagogue paintings implies the dependency of the artist on other patterns and the possible existence of a repertoire of iconographic stereotypes. Evidently, these repertoires are most visible in scenes such as Mordechai's triumphal ride through Susa, which could relate to imperial art, which includes the decorations of palaces and national memorials. In addition, there may have been separate repertoires available for religious and secular matters.

According to Goodenough, Biblical scenes at Dura exemplify many details which can be seen in illuminations of early Greek manuscripts of the Old Testament and in the early paintings in the catacombs as well as in Christian mosaics (Goodenough 1988: 186, 251). Kurt Weitzman in his book co-authored with Herbert Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art,* asserts that the frescoes of the Synagogue were copied from illustrated books dating from the Hellenistic era, which were made in Antioch amidst Greek surroundings (Wharton 1995: 21). According to Wharton, there is no material evidence supporting this claim. Therefore, the Durene Synagogue frescoes are the only evidence for the missing original models. In other words, there must have been some sort of earlier illustrations making possible these works, even though we do not have parallel scenes from Jewish buildings outside of Dura. According to Wharton,

Kessler shows that there are similarities between the Dura Synagogue paintings and miniatures in a number of Byzantine manuscripts (Wharton 1995: 22). Consequently, both Jewish and Christian works were based on a Greek Hellenistic past.

Art and theology: is there evidence of cultural borrowing?

Goodenough argues that the Jews of Dura maintained their loyalty to Judaism by interpreting their faith by means of borrowed symbols. In other words, the Jews made use of many pagan symbols, but adapted them to their own needs. The emergence of the frescoes from the Synagogue displayed another dimension in terms of pagan symbols and images from earlier discourse. It is worthy of note, for example, that the god Ares at Dura oversaw the Exodus from Egypt, and Victories placed their crowns on the acroteria of the Temple (Goodenough 1988: 180). The question presents itself why, given the Jewish disinterest in pagan symbols, would Jews embrace them and make use of them with Old Testament scenes? Evidently, there is no literal evidence to give a proper explanation, so therefore the monumental evidence of the art has to be addressed. Goodenough discusses the findings of other scholars, who explain the significance of the pagan motifs on the frescoes, such as those on the ceiling and the dado, as "purely decorative" (Goodenough 1988: 181). However, he maintains that pagan motifs in graves and Jewish synagogues from a later period give the impression that Jews used them in their mystic approach to the divine and in the hope of victory "in the end of days" (182). He firmly believes that the new symbols found on the Dura frescoes will result in similar meaning (182).

Is there a unifying thread in the arrangement of the frescoes at the Dura Synagogue?

Leveen maintains that since not all of the frescoes survived, it is difficult to find an underlying motive for the way they were done. It is difficult to "discover any single thread to bind them into an organic unity" (Leveen 1974: 51). Gates asserts that the Dura paintings portraying biblical scenes, according to present understanding, cannot be explained as thematic or as a programmatic cycle. However, what can be surmised is that they are a narrative illustration of the history of the Jewish faith from Moses and the Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant, and the Temple of Solomon to scenes of deliverance and prophecy. These are all in the service of upholding and reconfirming, for the local Jewish community, the close covenant binding them, as people of Israel, to God (Gates 1984: 173). In any event, Gates says that even if our present knowledge of synagogue art does not explain the decorative programme used, "it certainly conforms quite reasonably to local religious practices" (Gates 1984: 174). There is no concensus at all among scholars with regard to the correct order for viewing and interpreting the paintings. However, Hachlili maintains that there is agreement amongst them (Kraeling 1979: 349-354; Gutman 1973: 140) that the scenes do not follow a biblical order, but rather illustrate certain books, such as *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Numbers*, I *Samuel*, II *Samuel*, I *Kings*, II *Kings*, *Ezekiel*, *Esther* and possibly *Daniel* and *Nehemia* (Hachlili 1998: 184).

Rostovtzeff inquires about which direction the scenes on the walls should be read, and decides to follow the method employed by Kraeling and Pearson, which starts at the entrance door and goes around the chamber. In any case, the important issue to be considered is whether these scenes have any connection, or form a pattern. Rostovtzeff's

aim is to show that these frescoes are single individual events with no links to each other. In terms of subjects used by the Synagogue, they were mythographical, events from the Holy Scriptures of the Hebrews, both canonical and uncanonical, but not ritualistic. In contrast, Perkins comments that what is so interesting is that nowhere in the Durene frescoes are there representations from Greek mythology, which was so important in both Greek and Roman art (Perkins 1973: 34-35). Rostovtzeff maintains that many artists worked on the Synagogue project at different times during its development, and as a result there is no unity in the paintings (Rostovtzeff 1938: 112-115). He says that the artists were local, members of the Mesopotamian school, who fused Semitic, Greek and Iranian traits (130). This is in contrast to the Christian Baptistery, where the frescoes portray a distinctly Graeco-Roman effect. In addition, the frescoes in the Baptistery display a unity of plan, idea and composition, a tradition which represented primarily Hellenistic influence derived via Antioch or Alexandria, and was utilized by local artists (133). Rostovtzeff asserts that the only agenda the decorations in the Synagogue had were to illustrate the stories so that the devout would be able to visualize the events in the texts which were read and interpreted to the community in the Synagogue (116). In fact, he points out that this effort in the Dura Synagogue represents the earliest endeavor to illustrate particular events from the Bible (121). According to Perkins, the Synagogue depicts scenes from Jewish history, with a definite emphasis on divine intervention, which is represented by the hand of God as seen on top of some of the panels (Perkins 1973: 57-58). She also maintains that scholars have been looking for a linking theme connecting the various panels of frescoes, or walls, but have been unsuccessful.

Much has been written about the frescoes, and Kraeling analyzes all of the theories about the interpretation of the paintings. For example, according to Oleg Grabar, the paintings borrow Roman imperial motifs and inner meaning. Du Mesnil du Buisson has suggested that the three registers illustrate the three aspects of Jewish religion, that is, the Law, the Covenant, and the Prophecies (Du Mesnil du Buisson 1934: 105-119). Sonne asserts that the accent of the Synagogue paintings is upon Israel's absolute right to the "three crowns" (the claims of Judaism as an authoritive and divinely revealed religion). He identifies the three crowns with the three registers. Register A is the "crown of the Law", Register B, the "crown of the priesthood", and Register C, the "crown of the kingdom". These registers, in his view, symbolize a defense against the efforts of the Christians to seize these rights (Kraeling 1979: 356). Wischnitzer-Bernstein sees the Messianic theme in all of the paintings, because she perceives the re-birth of the Persian kingdom and the threat that it represented to Rome's supremacy as the time for intensification of messianic expectation (Kraeling 1979: 356). Kessler in the second part of *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art* treats the decorations of the Synagogue at Dura with a focus on the messianic theme of deliverance, represented by the Temple as well as the elements associated with it (Wharton 1995: 23). Goodenough gives a mystic interpretation (Goodenough 1988: 48).

Goodenough suggests that the plan of decoration of the Synagogue was most likely decided by a group of people associated with the Synagogue, a group that would resemble the idea of a "philosopher" who understood symbols on a deeper level. For Philo, as Goodenough points out, the philosopher was one who delved into Jewish

allegory or himself had the vision of God (Goodenough 1988: 193). Thus Goodenough believed that the design of the frescoes was influenced by mysticism. According to Kraeling, however, the frescoes in the Dura Synagogue are a didactic tool emphasizing Rabbinic Judaism, because they give insight into the religious life and thought of the community, its attitude towards the Law, historical traditions and religious observances of the people. He asserts that the pictures, if they are understood correctly, indicate that those who commissioned them had a strong and well-informed commitment to the established traditions of Judaism. According to Kraeling, these people had a close affiliation with both Palestinian and Babylonian centres of Jewish religious thought, and had an understanding of the special problems and needs of a community living in a vulnerable political situation (Kraeling 1979: 335-336). Goodenough believed that the Jews of Dura were deeply influenced by pagan culture and Hellenism, whereas Kraeling maintains that they were loyal to the *halakhah.*

Audience(s)

According to Wharton, the paintings in the Temple of Bel, the Synagogue and the Baptistry of the Christian building expressed narratives which were familiar to their audiences. This culminated in a complex dialogue in which each viewer had to formulate the depiction in a personal way. In her view, this intertextuality is what is generally missing from traditional study of iconography, which assumes that there is only one possible text/s for explanation (Wharton 1995: 63).

Furthermore, the Dura frescoes could indicate a visually powerful communal self-representation. Kraeling makes the observation that, in the second and third centuries C.E., the Jewish people of the Mediterranean Dispersion, including Alexandria and Antioch, played a less important part in overall Jewish life than in the first century C. E. He finds this point interesting, because in terms of their numbers and devotion to ancient traditions, they were stronger in the second and third centuries C. E. During this period two important developments promoting Jewish life were formulated. The first was the codification in the Mishnah and eventually in the Talmud of a great body of what was an oral commentary on Biblical laws and injunctions. Moreover, there was the growth of a large amount of Haggadic material elucidating and interpreting the Biblical text for "devotional and inspirational purposes" (324). The second development was the formation of a central authority in Palestine, the Patriarch, and in lower Mesopotamia the Exilarch. They were the instruments through whom a larger community could be represented and the religious and social life could be overseen. The result of these developments was that Judaism recovered some sense of unity, which had been lost with the Romans.

In addition, the Jews turned much more inwardly to themselves, concentrating on the traditions their scholars and preachers had compiled through their study of the sacred book (Kraeling 1979: 325). In addition, Kraeling notes that it was in such period of inwardness that important works of Jewish architecture and art came to the forefront. These works included the Galilean Synagogues, the Jewish catacombs of the Western Mediteranean and the Synagogue in Dura-Europos. Kraeling discusses the implications

of such a building programme, which might suggest an effort to reach out to the society at large as opposed to the opposite tendency mentioned above (Kraeling 1979: 325). However, in addition to the Jewish accent on Law and tradition, worship and piety, these monuments, in his view, corroborate the inward-looking tendency discussed above. He maintains that the Synagogue at Dura-Europos was indicative of economic as well as communal strength, which together showed an expression of deep-rooted conviction about the importance of Jewish religious observance and tradition (Kraeling 1979: 325). Thus it can be surmised that the frescoes of the Synagogue were produced to be viewed primarily by the Jewish community.

With regard to the Synagogue frescoes, Wharton asks how the Jews of Dura defined themselves when their larger community's physical centre was in Jerusalem. She maintains that the depictions of the Synagogue, "in their celebration of both the orality and textuality of the word, materially deliver the historical complexity of their past power to the Jews of the present community" (Wharton 1995: 64). Moreover, during and in between the Synagogue services, the frescoes served the community by helping them to become aware of their place in the dispersion. This could be done because the frescoes are an attestation of the community's continuous presence in its own location.

Chapter 2: Frames

Two panels from the Dura-Europos Synagogue wall-paintings will now be discussed. They are "the Mordechai and Esther scene" (WC2) and "the Exodus scene" (WA3). This choice arose from particular interest in these subjects, but certainly without thought of any possible linkage between the two narratives. However, in time it became evident that there were striking similarities between the two. Both narratives involve a wicked king who controls the fate of the Jewish people, and both kings are influenced by nasty advisors such as Haman in Persia, and according to the *Midrash*, Bilam in Egypt. In fact, both stories start with a meeting dealing with "the Jewish problem", and in both stories the liberator resides in the royal palace. In the first instance, Esther dwells in the palace of Achasverous and tells him to "let my nation live" (*Esther* 7: 3), and in the second instance, Moshe lived in the palace of Pharaoh and tells the king to "let my people go" (*Exodus* 5: 1). The first story depicts the deliverance of the Jewish people in Persia, and the second story concerns itself with the Jewish exodus from Egypt, in an earlier epoch.

The Mordechai and Esther panel (WC2) is composed of two scenes which, according to Kraeling, could be read from left to right (Kraeling 1979: 151-164) or, according to Sukenik, from right to left (Sukenik 1947:105). In scene one, on the viewer's left, a man dressed in Persian-Parthian costume, identified as Mordechai, is sitting on a white horse and is turned to face the viewer. He is garbed in the same royal attire (*Esther* 6:8) depicted in other frames of the Synagogue frescoes, such as

Achasverous (WC2), Pharaoh (WC4), King David and David-Orpheus (reredos). His full and puffy hair is representative of Parthian hairstyle and is covered with a Phrygian cap. Mordechai is wearing a flying cloak, of which similar portrayals may be found on the Syrian relief of Asheru and Sa'ad from Dura (Downey 1977: 57-60, fig. 45). The horse, with its rider, is being led by a man dressed in a very short tunic, with a single *clavus* and wide belt, and who is bare-legged as well as shoeless. Kraeling points out that servants were generally depicted in a simple belted tunic with two *clavi* and encircled at the waist. However, for the "royal servant", Haman, the portrayal was a little different (Kraeling 1979: 372). Goodenough (1964 IX: 181) identifies him as a Persian stable groom, whereas Tawil (1979:104) believes his costume to be non-Persian. Under the horse's belly there is a *dipinto,* reading "Mordechai", written in Aramaic. This identifies the scene as Haman leading Mordechai.

There is an enlightening *Midrash,* which tells the story of the way Haman became Mordechai's slave (Deutsch 2002: 36-49). During the second year of Achasverous' reign, there was a rebellion in one of the provinces in India. Achasverous dispatched two armies of six thousand troops each to restore order. He put Mordechai in command of one of the armies and Haman of the other, and provided each army with sufficient provisions for three years. The situation looked serious, and there was the possibility of a lengthy siege. Haman's army was involved in the west of India and Mordechai in the east. Haman expected a swift end to the conflict, and therefore he did not budget his provisions prudently. In fact, within a year, Haman's army was facing the prospect of starvation. On the other hand Mordechai, because of his careful organization, was amply equipped for

the possibility of a three-year siege. Haman, desperate for nourishment, appproached Mordechai and suggested capturing the city quickly to put a speedy end to the war. However, Mordechai was patient and willing to wait for the city to surrender in order to avoid heavy casualties. Since Haman could not initiate a military action unilaterally, he was forced to beg Mordechai for food, as his troops were very hostile because of hunger and fatigue. Mordechai was not ready to comply with Haman's request, for he knew that within a short time Haman would be in want once more. After much discussion, Haman agreed to Mordechai's proposal that Haman be sold to Mordechai as a slave in exchange for food. Mordechai, much to Haman's horror, insisted on a formal sale, which needed to be written on parchment. However, parchment was not readily available. Therefore, Mordechai's lieutenant suggested writing the terms of the sale on Mordechai's boot. Haman wrote with his own hands the nature of the circumstances and his free will to become a slave to Mordechai. Thus Mordechai became Haman's master, and gave him food in exchange for Haman's servitude as well as all the troops and belongings of his army. Under Mordechai's managment of both armies, the siege was terminated within three months and Mordechai was hailed as the victor. Haman, in turn, was ridiculed for having sold himself as a slave (*Ba'al HaTurim* to *Genesis* 25:30). It is interesting to note that the writing on Mordechai's boot, which is mentioned in the *Midrash,* becomes writing on the horse's belly in the Dura frescoes.

The Achaemenians in the early days of their empire were insecure, because they were in the process of urbanizing and civilizing themselves from a nomadic way of life. Not surprisingly, therefore, their art tended to be imitative of older cultures. They

preferred the side view presentation in art just as their sophisticated neighbours were doing. This had been a tradition for a very long time (Ghirshman 1962: 7). However Mordechai, sitting on the horse, is presented in three-quarter view, a more natural way and a Greek characteristic. A parallel to a three-quarter view could be observed in the male figure on a Ghandara relief depicting the presentation of the bride (Ghirshman 1962: 10 fig. 16). Therefore, it can be said that the scene depicting Mordechai on the horse is a combination of early Hellenistic and Achaemenian style.

An interesting parallel to the portrayal of Mordechai on the horse may be observed on a relief of a god on horseback found in an area about 100 km. west of Palmyra (Colledge 1976:45 fig. 26). Another parallel might be found on a religious bas-relief of Palmyra (154 C. E.) showing a close relationship to Parthian art. The Parthian influence is evident in this scene of sacrifice in which the worshipper and his fire-altar occupy the centre of the relief. On each side there is a warrior deity riding a horse, which is represented in a side view, as opposed to the rider, who is shown in a frontal, full-face view. In fact, these deities are shown wearing the same type of flowing cape as Mordechai on his horse, but the rest of the clothing is different. The characteristic Parthian hair style may be seen on the heads of the warrior deities sitting on the horses (Ghirshman 1962: fig. 86). Moreover, the horse on which Mordechai is sitting has his head presented in the same sideway frontality as the bull represented in a sculpture from Persepolis (Ghirshman 1962: fig. 14). The rosette depicted on Mordechai's horse is a symbol of protection and luck which dates back to ancient Mesopotamia, and is also seen in the art of the Achaemenians in Persepolis (Ghirshman 1962: 9 fig. 14). Neither the

Mordechai scene nor the scene of the sacrifice suggests any interaction among the characters represented. As in typical Parthian representations, there is no feeling or emotion conveyed. There are other similarly postured horsemen in Palmyrene sculpture on bas-reliefs, which are dated from mid to late second century (Drijvers 1976: Pl. LIV:1, LXII:1, 2).

Another parallel to the way Mordechai is represented may be found on the frescoes in the Mithraeum of Dura, which deal with hunting and banquet scenes. The hunter, riding a horse and presented frontally, wears a short tunic over pants, embroidered and narrow at the ankles, resembling Mordechai's outfit (Ghirshman 1962: 48 fig. 62). Ghirshman asserts that it is in the presentation scenes that frontality is most widely used in Persian art. He maintains that such scenes appear frequently in narrative art "dedicated to the service of the gods", and that in these types of scenes, where action and presentation are combined, the law of frontality has prevailed in very early Iranian art. Frontality may be observed in the Cincinnati plaque, 8th-7th century B. C. E., from Luristan, and in a bas-relief from the Palmyra region representing the god Malka between Jupiter-Hadad and Genneas, early 1st century C. E. In fact, even in animal imagery one can observe the frontal view from protohistoric times up to the Arsacid era. This frontality recalls the way Mordechai is shown on the horse. The face of Mordechai's horse is turned to the front, as in the depiction of the lion attacking the bull from the 6th-5th century B. C. E. in Persepolis (Ghirshman 1962: 9 figs. 11, 13,14).

The horses portrayed in the frescoes of the Synagogue are associated with battle scenes or with royalty, as in the case of Mordechai in royal garb sitting on a horse. There

are many parallels to horses in these roles, which can be seen in Royal Sassanian art. For example, according to Ghirshman, royal investiture on horseback is a characteristic that already existed in Achaemenian art. There is evidence of this tradition from a Scythian work in South Russia. Ardashir I, founder of the Sassanian Dynasty, continued this convention and had a relief made of his equestrian investiture at Naqsh-i-Rustam (religious and funerary centre of the Achaemenians) in the third century C. E. (Ghirshman 1962: 133 figs. 168, 169). According to Herodotus, the royal Persian riders all had diadems, and in the Synagogue painting Mordechai is wearing a red cap with a diadem (*Histories* 7. 55.2). The posture of Mordechai, who turns to face the viewer while seated on the horse, as well as the quiver filled with arrows at his side, are Parthian attributes. According to Kraeling, quivers are generally found in battle and hunting scenes (ECI) of Parthian and Sassanian origin as well as on scenes of military triumph (Kraeling, 1979: 134). In addition, the horse's stance on four slim limbs supporting a heavy body, its short-haired mane and small head, are Parthian characteristics (Ghirshman 1962: fig. 90). The typical Parthian puffy shoulder-length hair is shown on Mordechai.

Because of the similarities between the Synagogue frescoes and parallels from other places in Dura and Palmyra, it is evident that local tradition was derived from Parthian art (Hachlili 1998: 153). However, Moon asserts that Mordechai's pose was Roman and represents a Roman triumphal entry. Furthermore, he suggests that Parthian art took quotations from the Roman convention (Moon 1992: 594-595).

Scene two shows a king sitting on a throne (WC2). He wears a long Persian coat, which is decorated and indicates royalty (Goldman 1973: 54-55). The coat is worn over

loose Parthian trousers with a decorative stripe down the middle of each leg, a belt and an embroidered tunic jacket with stripes. On his feet soft boots are shown, and his head is covered with a Phrygian cap together with a diadem (Hachlili 1998: 136). Embroidered Persian-Parthian costume, sometimes richly ornamented, is standard apparel for royalty and people associated with the court. However, Greek dress is employed by lesser figures (Colledge 1976: 74).

The depiction of the king with his clothing, hair style and posture may be compared to the representation of Pharaoh in WC4. Parallels for the puffy, circular hairstyle may be found in Palmyra dating from second century C. E., since the Palmyrenes had a strong affiliation with Parthian material culture (Ghirshman 1962: 78 fig. 91). In fact, all the royal figures depicted in the Dura synagogue wall paintings show this type of hairstyle, including Haman.

There are two male attendants standing behind the king, one of whom is holding a book, and there is one female attendant behind the queen. The king's throne (WC2) is an upholstered chair with a draped, high back. Each front end of the handrails of the throne has a golden lion at its edge. These lions, serving as side supports of thrones with seated deities, are frequently seen in the Orient and Dura (Kraeling 1979: 158, n. 589). The wall-painting of the sacrifice of Terentius in the Temple of Bel in Dura-Europos shows the Tyche of Palmyra sitting on a throne and keeping her hand on a lion (Colledge 1976: 228). On the other hand, Tawil finds parallels in sculptures from Mesopotamia and Iran for the rendering of the lions, and concludes that the Achasverous throne is in keeping with the usual form of the royal furniture of the era (Tawil 1983: 60-62 figs. 3-6).

Furthermore, the throne is placed on a dais composed of five steps. These steps are decorated on each end with lions and eagles alternating on each step. It is worth noting how the lion and eagle are fused in a single motif. The throne of King Solomon (WA2) on the Dura frescoes, as well as that of Achasverous, have the alternation between the eagles and lions on the steps. However, this is in contrast to the biblical description, which says that Solomon's throne was adorned with lions (I *Kings* 10:20). According to Hachlili, the artist at Dura was evidently drawing on a tradition that Achasverous owned Solomon's throne, and was possibly quoting from the *Targum Sheni* to *Esther* (Ginzberg 1955: 4. 157), which describes Achasverous' throne with the lions and eagles (Hachlili 1998: 388).

King Achasverous (WC2), as well as other kings (WC4) portrayed on the wall-paintings, are seated frontally. Each of these seated figures has his knees apart, but ankles not crossed, in typical Parthian manner. A fragment of a funerary composition from Palmyra (*ca* 100-150 C. E.) shows a boy in Parthian dress seated with his knees positioned in the same way except for the ankles crossed (Colledge 1976: fig. 99). Achasverous (WC2) and other key figures in audience scenes (e. g., WC4, Pharaoh, David in the center upper panel) use a type of court gesture. This gesture consists of one hand holding on to a sword and the forefinger extended in a particular way. Mordechai (WC2) is using one hand in this style. The other hand of Achasverous and these figures is outstretched, with open palms. The male attendants in WC4 and standing beside Achashverous in WC2 hold their arm in the same fashion. According to Tawil, these heraldic gestures may show some similarity to investiture portraits of Parthian kings

(Tawil 1983: 62). The investiture of King Narsah (third century C. E.) in Naqsh-I-Rustam could be comparable to the way Achasverous is extending his hand (Ghirshman 1962: 10 fig. 13).

A queen sits on the king's immediate left on a smaller throne. Esther's throne is a cushioned chair, also with a draped, high back with Hellenistic legs and a foot stool for the queen's feet. This type of throne was depicted for the thrones of Pharaoh (WC4), David (upper panel of the reredos), and David-Orpheus (lower panel of the reredos). There is a parallel to this type of throne on the painting of the tribune Terentius in the temple of Bel in Dura, showing the *Tyche* of Palmyra, who sits on a throne with the same kind of turned leg as the one on Esther's throne (Rostovtzeff 1938: pl. 2). There is a *dipinto* in Aramaic on the third step of Achasverous's throne and another one under Esther's footstool, each one identifying the characters. These *dipinti* were added to explain the narrative, but they are not quotations from Scripture. The name Esther is not spelled in the usual way (Hachlili 1998: 135, Kraeling 1979: 271, 272).

The crown on Esther's head is reminiscent of the *Tyche* of Dura from the Temple of Bel. Her hairstyle, her frontal posture, the way she is holding her veil in one hand, and the position of the other hand, are traits comparable to those of the goddesses from Palmyra of the first century C. E. (Colledge 1976: fig. 38). The scroll type of border framing the Esther scene closely resembles those seen in relief depictions of the goddesses referred to above. Esther is garbed in a sleeveless bodice, a long skirt and a veil for queens. According to Hachlili, this type of outfit was also worn by a female figure, possibly the Queen of Sheba in WA2, and the ladies-in-waiting of Pharaoh in

WC4. All of these are most likely based on Hellenistic models. Another parallel to Esther's dress can be seen on a second century C. E. winged Victory from Palmyra, which shows the same high-waist effect in conjunction with a hip sash (Colledge 1976: 32 fig. 11).

Hachlili suggests that Esther's outfit could be the adaption of the Greek *peplos* (Hachlili 1998:140). The veil's significance (as treated by artists in vase paintings) is not only an apparel worn by a new bride, but could also be indicative of a woman's status as a wife (Jones 2002: 158 fig. 8). According to Blundell, the veil is considered to be a boundary between concealment and exposure. Consequently, the female's handling of the veil is a sign for the rite of passage from bride to married woman.

The "Lady of Auxerre", an archaic Greek statuette made from limestone, possibly from Crete, also wears a long dress, and large feet show from beneath the skirt. She positions her right hand across her upper body in a way which has been considered an indication of adoration. Her frontal and rigid pose also offer some parallels to Esther (Pedley 1993: 141 fig. 5.27). In fact, Athenian vase-painting provides information about representations of women's dress. It must be borne in mind that the artistic portrayals were executed by men, and therefore their images of women in classical Athens were beautiful and desirable objects of the male gaze (Jones 2002: 171). However, if one looks at a frescoe from Thera in the Cyclades, representing a priestess, the sash depicted on the priestess' lower hip as well as the band around the bottom of the garment form a close parallel to Esther's dress. In addition, the earrings, bracelet and necklace also show similarity with Esther's jewelry (Pedley 1993: 85 fig. 3.28). Furthermore, the portrayals

of all the Jewish women in the Synagogue frescoes manifest the lower hip sash. The hip sash has a parallel on a relief from north-west of Palmyra, portraying the guardian spirits of Bet-Phasi'el and dated 191 C. E. (Colledge 1976: pl. 44).

Another interesting parallel to the Mordechai, Esther and Achasverous scene can be observed in a funerary couch mosaic dated 218-238 C. E. from Edessa. This region was first a client kingdom. In 195 C. E., it became a Roman frontier province. Nevertheless, local kings ruled Edessa untill 241/2 C. E. As mentioned earlier in chapter I, Edessa was frequented by Durene Jewish businessmen, so it would not be surprising if depictions on the frescoes shared similarities with that region. In fact, this mosaic has inscriptions in Syriac which give the names of the figures represented. Similarly, the Mordechai and Esther scene in the Dura Synagogue (WC2, scene 2) also has inscriptions in Aramaic, identifying the characters represented. In the funerary couch mosaic, the characters wear Parthian costume. The men have long-sleeved tunics and the women ornate head-dresses with high caps from which their veils hang behind. The positioning of the characters is all frontal and the eyes are fixed on the viewer. As with the artist of the Dura frescoes, the mosaicist had no interest in spatial relations or anatomical forms. The mosaic panel is also surrounded by borders in the same fashion as the frescoes, but with a different motif. The female in the mosaic is sitting on a type of throne, and her feet are anchored on a foot stool just like Esther (Dunbabin 1999: 172-173 fig. 183).

In the Near East, foot stools were made of wood, and Egyptian royal foot stools were painted with figures of the two traditional enemies of Egypt. Symbolically, the

pharaoh might tread down his enemies under his feet. In the same fashion, Esther is symbolically treading the enemies of the Jews under her feet.

Next to the king, on his right, a group of four men dressed in Greek *chiton* and *himation* and wearing sandals are standing. The men have short hair. The heads depicted appear small. This conforms to the "traditional idealism of Achaemenian art" (Ghirshman 1962: 89). In fact, there was a head of a statue found at Susa (1st-3rd century C. E.), which was made in the Oriental tradition. The small head, flat face and blank stare with the wide-open eyes form a parallel to the painted figures at Dura, which convey timeless qualities (Ghirshman 1962: 98 fig. 109). The *himatia* of the four figures are decorated with two bands, similar to those found in the Bar Kokhba caves in Palestine (Yadin 1963: 221, 227 fig. 75). Some scholars believe that the *himation* might be a *tallit.* However, the ends would need fringes, and the garment is not worn in the manner of the *tallit* (Revel-Neher 1992: 53-56). Draped wear, Greek style, was also shown on Moses, David and Samuel and on Ezekiel and Elijah as well as the elders depicted on other frames in the Synagogue (WB4, SC3, SC4). Zeus-Kyrios, depicted in a Dura relief, is also shown wearing this type of clothing (Goldman 1973: 64; 1994: 167, fig. 10.15). There are also examples of figures from Palmyrene tombs wearing draped garments of Greek style (Tanabe 1986: 197, 206, 208, 260).

On the basis of Midrashic sources (*Targum Sheni* to *Esther*), Kraeling maintains that the four figures could be identified as the "House of Israel", who took part in the proceedings (Kraeling 1979: 156-157). Sukenik suggests that these four figures could be the "Jews of Shushan". His suggestion is based on Conte du Mesnil's observation that

the *himation* on the left by-stander has *tallit* fringes (Sukenik 1947: 108). Nevertheless, neither Kraeling nor Sukenik explains why these figures are dressed differently from the others in the scene as well as being placed in the centre of the two-part panel (Sabar 2000: 161). Goodenough says that these figures are "heavenly beings" because the white Hellenistic garment symbolizes heroes and holy persons (Goodenough 1966: 221-237). The *Book of Esther 1:2* speaks about the King on his throne and refers to four Persian capitals - Susa, Ecbatana, Babylon, and Persepolis. The latter reference may indicate that the king was now in residence in Susa, his designated capital. Susa was chosen by Darius I as his winter residence. Perhaps there are four figures standing on the king's right because they symbolize the four Persian capitals (Berlin 2001: 6-7). Another explanation given by Kraeling regarding the four figures on the king's right suggests that they represent the people of Susa designated to be witnesses to Mordechai's triumph. These witnesses would be standing to the right of Mordechai and therefore resting their weight on their right foot (Kraeling 1979: 373 n. 207). A parallel to this position of the foot with its downward pointing can be seen on the Konon frescoes at Dura (Cumont 1926: pl. XXX1).

The scroll borders framing the frescoes (WC2) have a number of parallels. In Daphne, Antioch, a floral border of a floor from the "House of the Buffet Supper" has an elaborate continuous design accented by flowers. The house dates from the late second or early third century C. E. (Downey 1963: figs. 68-69). Another example is in the new Temple of Bel in Palmyra, dedicated in 32 C. E. In the "Offering" scene, the lower register depicts a wide vegetation scroll. This embraces tendrils, leaves, vines, grapes and

some flowers as well (Colledge 1976: 36 fig. 14, pl. 20). In addition, one may cite the relief representing Aglibol and Malakbel from the peristyle of the cella in the Temple of Bel in Palmyra (Dirven 1999: figs. 17, 18, 19). Other parallels are to be found among mosaics from Cilicia (Budde 1972: figs. 149, 154, 156, 210, 237). In addition, one of the cult bas-reliefs in the temple of the Gadde at Dura (158-9 C. E.), showing the Gad of Dura, Zeus-Baalshamin, the West Semitic storm god, the dedicant, and Seleucus Nicator, is framed in a scroll type of the same design (Dirven 1999: 113, pl. III).

The story of Esther and Mordechai was a good choice for the Jews of Dura to portray on one of the frescoes in the Synagogue. The setting of the story is Susa in Persia. Mordechai is a Jew who was a part of the Jewry exiled to Babylonia. This story supposedly takes place during the reign of the Persian king Xerxes (486-465 B. C. E.), whose Hebrew name is Achasverous (Vanderkam 2001: 10). Mordechai, the Jew uprooted from Jerusalem and living in exile, as well as Esther, a dependent orphan, were living in Susa. The Persians had allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem, but many remained where they were. The Jews were a minority, living in all parts of the Persian empire. The Persians, who were favourable to the Jews, were the liberators who conquered Babylonia and granted the return to Judah/Israel. The representation on the Dura frescoe, illustrating parts of the *Book of Esther*, recalls the circumstances of the Jews living under the authority of the Persian regime and subject to imperial power. According to Gruen, that reality was not constrained by chronological limits, and it is possible that Jews of the Hellenistic era were looking back before the Achaemenids were replaced by Alexander and his successors. At the same time, this representation may

have been very appealing to the Sassanians, who were trying to bring back the glory of the Achaemenid Empire. The common factor is the diaspora existence, which occupies a pivotal place in the story and implies the same diaspora situation in Dura. Gruen further explains that the *Book of Esther* demonstrates a life style for Jews in the diaspora. Mordechai was placed second in command to the king, the ruler of the empire, and was the advocate of the Jews. In addition, Esther used her influential position to save and elevate her people. The high positions of Mordechai and Esther indicate that Jews could be actively engaged in the life of the dominant society, while at the same time maintaining their bonds and affiliations with their own community (Gruen 2002: 144-146). In fact, the Book of Esther itself maintains that the Persians were sympathetic to the intended victims of Haman, who was planning to destroy the Jewish people. When Haman's decree was published, the city of Susa was in dismay. However, when the reversal came and Mordechai appeared in royal attire and a crown, the city was filled with joy. This reversal of fortune is a very familiar idea in Hellenistic times. The colourful paintings show pride in the Jewish heritage and feelings of thankfulness for the prosperity afforded them. Moreover, the importance attached to the *Book of Esther* can be seen by the way WC2 is positioned at the left side of the Torah Shrine on the west wall of the Synagogue chamber.

The subject of the Mordechai and Esther story was essential for the Jewish community for two reasons. Firstly, it was associated with the annual celebration of Purim, and secondly, it "testified to the recognition by a Persian Monarch of the rights for

which Judaism inside the boundaries of the Roman Empire was still struggling" (Kraeling 1979: 151).

The second wall-painting to be discussed will be the long frieze composed of two scenes relating to the Exodus from Egypt (WA3). In the first scene, there is a depiction of a city wall with an open city gate (cf. the similar gate in WC4). The characteristics of the city depicted show a Roman city representing Egypt. McCown (1962: 634) maintains that for people dwelling in a Near Eastern location, the city gate was not just an entrance and exit or a means of defense, but also the centre of the city's social, economic and legal affairs (Levine 2000: 27). In fact, together with the street behind, the city gate served the function of a central square, as in a western city. According to Levine, it can be surmised that the city gate provided the most important communal setting in Near Eastern cities and towns. In addition to using it as a marketplace, a ruler could hold court and prophets could speak there (I *Kings* 22:10; *Jeremiah* 38:7) (Levine 2000: 27-28). In fact, any public declaration could gain the approval of the whole community, as there was maximum exposure. In ancient Near Eastern tradition, people came to the city gate to worship the gods. This becomes evident as a result of cultic finds near the gates of Megiddo V (a), Beersheba IV, and Tel Dan (Levine 2000: 29). Levine points out that, in the post-exilic era, the city gate was used by Ezra and Nehemiah: "The entire people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching of Moses with which the Lord had charged Israel" (*Nehemiah* 8:1). Moses in WA3 was using the city gate to lead the Children of Israel out of Egypt. In fact, it was at the square in front of the city gate that Moses was organizing

the people in a distinct fashion for departure, as this was an event of great importance to the entire Jewish nation.

The panels on the door, which have grooved mouldings and portray the Exodus, have a parallel from the time of Hadrian, as seen on the doors of the Temple of Hadrian in Ephesus (Ramage and Ramage 1996: 196 fig. 7.26). Behind the door on the frescoe, the depiction of the plague of darkness is perhaps suggested. The plague of darkness started in the daylight, in order that the Egyptians should be aware that this was not an extension of the night (Deutsch 1998: 261 n. 225, citing *Targum Jonathan*). However, the darkness is perhaps more of an illustration of maltreatment and misery suffered by the Jews in Egypt, as one may see in WC4, depicting Pharaoh and the infancy of Moses. Here too there is an open doorway behind which there is darkness.

The arch above the open door rests on a post and lintel frame. The rounded arch above the tympanum is crowned by a nude figure holding a spear and a globe, and each of the two sides of the arch has a winged wreathed Nike (Victory) standing on a globe. They are of the same type as the ones used for representations of theTemple in Panels WB2 and WB3. The nude helmeted figure set on the top of the arch is that of an emperor, a type familiar in Graeco-Roman art, and of the sort adapted for use during the Roman Imperial Age, especially in Syria during the reign of Hadrian. According to Kraeling, this statue represents a symbol for a "royal city", which in this case is the city of Pharaoh (Kraeling 1979: 77 fig. 16). To the right of the gateway there are depictions of two columns of the Corinthian order, considered to be a Roman characteristic. In fact, both the archway and the columns resemble elements in Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli, built

ca 135 C. E. (Ramage and Ramage 1996: 185 fig. 7.5, 7.6). However, the base of the columns is of the Greek Attic-Ionic style. Such painted columns may be seen in the *Cubiculum* from Boscoreale (Lehman 1953: 85 fig. 51). The two isolated columns, one of which is red and the other black, represent the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire that guided the Israelites through the desert (Weitzman and Kessler 1990: 41). However, these pillars also represent an older tradition stemming from the Achaemenid fire altars (Ghirshman 1962: 151 fig. 194).

It is worthy of note that, at the base of the red Corinthian column in WA3, there is a depiction of a bull, which is important in the context of the Exodus. The head of the bull at the base of the column is cropped at the chin, which is a Proto-Iranian characteristic, and subsequently became widely used in Parthian art (Ghirshman 1962: 37). The bull in the Near East was symbol of lordship, leadership, vital energy and fertility. Therefore, it was deified or used as representation of divinity. The bull is the cult-animal of Baal-Haddad, the Divine King, whose executive was the Aramaean king Bar Rakkab. Frequently, the bull served as a pedestal on which the god stood, elevated above the human level (Sarna 1991: commenting on Exodus 32: 4 and citing Pritchard 1954: nos. 470-474). The ancient Israelites most likely borrowed their bull symbolism from the Canaanites. Such animal motifs are frequent in Jewish art, which demonstrate Oriental influences. "For the Israelites, the bull signified power and the 'young bull' symbolized the platform upon which the unseen God stood, rather than God himself" (*Encyclopaedia Judaica* 1971: vol. 14 1526-27) (cf. *Exodus* 32: 4, 8; 1 *Kings* 12:28; *Nehemiah* 9:18). Kli Yakar and Alshich to *Exodus* 32:4 suggest that the bull's head

might represent the zodiac sign of Joseph, without whose body the Israelites would not have left Egypt.

There is a relief in Assyrian style from the late eighth century B.C., from Zenjirli near Aleppo, which illustrates the bull's head (Gray 1969: 99). The Assyrian motif is depicted sideways, but the Dura frescoe exhibits Parthian frontality. In funerary art, a bull's head with horns can be seen in the Vigna Randanini catacomb in Rome (Hachlili 1998: 385 fig. VIII-3c; pl. VI-36).

God was good to the Jewish people, in spite of the fact that they made a molten calf and said, "This is your God who brought you out of Egypt," in this way committing a great sin (*Nehemiah* 9: 18). "You in your abundant compassion did not abandon them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud did not depart from them to lead them on the way by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to give them light in the way they were to go" (*Nehemiah* 9: 19). Thus the bull at the base of the column could represent the transgression of the Israelites.

The crenellated wall in this scene (scene 1) appears to be built of ashlar masonry, a Roman characteristic adopted by the Parthians. The Parthian palace from the second century C. E. in Hatra is a good parallel to the wall depicted in WA3 (Ghirshman 1962: 36 fig. 49). The representation of the plague shown on the walled city in WA3 is that of the hailstorm, which is shown against the wall above and to the right of the gateway. These hailstones were transparent ice balls with bright flames glowing inside. The plague of hail was intended to show the strength of God's hand by destroying the land but not living creatures. As mentioned above, the plague of darkness may be represented behind

the doors. However, the destruction of trees, grass, crops, fruit or anything else is not shown or alluded to on the frescoe.

Kraeling maintains that in WA3 (Exodus) Moses is depicted three times. It is worthy of note that in the Dura frescoes there are many examples of figures or objects appearing three times. This characteristic is demonstrated in Pharaoh and the Infancy of Moses (WC4), the Ark in the Land of the Philistines (WB4), Elijah on Mount Carmel (SC4), Ezekiel, the Destruction and Restoration of National Life (NC1), the Consecration of the Tabernacle and its Priests (WB2), and Jerusalem and the Temple of Solomon (WB3). Evidently, the number three is looked upon as having a magical or mystical interpretation (Hachlili 1998: 422).

On the left of this scene, Moses is depicted standing and holding over his head a large staff in his right hand. Evidently Moses is leading the Israelites from a city toward a body of water. *Exodus* 14:16 says, "And you lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground" (Sarna 1991: commenting on *Exodus* 14:16). Eastern and Western elements are combined in this pose, for Moses recalls the Greek Herakles holding a club (Gray 1969: 113). Moreover, in Nysa, which was the first capital of Parthia, the royal palace (third to second century B.C.), shows examples of art in which Western elements were combined with Iranian themes. For example, the head of Herakles was used syncretically to represent the Iranian deity Verethragna (Ghirshman 1962: 29, fig. 37).

Important figures such as Moses are depicted in the paintings at Dura as larger or positioned in the middle, and even appearing separated from others and placed on a

higher level. The Biblical figures portrayed are recognizable from the narrative in the paintings (WA3, EC1, WC1, WC3). WA3 in particular shows conventions of the Ancient East, notably Oriental traits according to which stature (size) indicates importance and principal characters appear in the centre. In scene two of WA3, this centrality manifests itself twice in the above fashion with the depiction of Moses. However, in scene one, the portrayal of Moses follows the Greek tradition of placing important figures in the foreground (Hopkins 1979: 143). The Jews of Dura were able to depict this characteristic in an Oriental style.

The portrayal of figures such as Moses in the Exodus scene is frontal, stiff, and static, with no life or action in them (Kraeling 1979: 366-368, 383). In fact, Parthian art stereotyped figures in the above described fashion. The presentation of figures in a frontal manner is considered to be characteristic of Parthian art, a style prevailing in the lands ruled by the Parthians (Ghirshman 1962: 1). One of the departures from this frontality occurs in scene two (WC2), when a document held by Mordechai is either received from or given to Achashverous. This latter scene shows the Sassanian influence in art depiction, which combines Achaemenian profile with the frontality of Parthian art, for Mordechai is portrayed sideways, but everyone else frontally.

Typical Parthian motifs, such as bows, arrows and quivers, are not present in the Exodus panel. The clothing depicted on Moses corresponds to the Greek *chiton* (tunic), *himation* (mantle) and sandals. According to Kraeling, short hair is generally depicted with the type of garment Moses is wearing. In addition, facial hair, small beard and mustache are optional. Moses does not appear to have a mustache on the frescoe. The

dress and hairstyle are Greek in origin, and Kraeling suggests that this represents a Western contribution to the artistic style of the Near East (Kraeling 1979: 372). Parallels to this type of figure would be the classical standing orator, such as Demosthenes, Aristotle the philosopher, and Sophocles the playwright (Pollitt 1986: 52, 60, 61 figs. 44, 54, 55).

Moses is portrayed standing, with his whole body facing the viewer. He appears to be holding his left arm close to his body to enable him to have the ends of his *himation* rolled over his arm. A parallel to the way the *himation* is rolled over the arm of Moses may be found on the sculpted portrait of Augustus of Prima Porta from early first century C. E. (Ramage and Ramage 1996: 96, fig. 3.14). The position of the leg of Augustus, with the weight resting on the right leg and the left drawn back, is parallel to the way Moses is standing. In addition, both Augustus and Moses, when stepping forward, turn their head to the right and even the shapes of the heads are very similar.

In this scene, one can see four levels of Israelites who are marching. The men appear to be organized in the fashion of massed infantry, as depicted on Trajan's column. Some are dressed as soldiers in a shirt of mail or scale armor over close fitting pants, and wear high boots. They are equipped with oval shields (Kraeling 1979: 80) and spears, and wear knobbed helmets on their heads. The massed helmets of the soldiers in the Exodus scene are characteristic of Hellenistic style. The lower files depicted in the front show civilian men who are garbed in long sleeved *chitons*, which are girded and reach to the knees. These *chitons* have two wide *clavi*. They are positioned to give the notion of sideways movement, but the faces and upper parts of the bodies are viewed in a frontal

position. One of the men is holding the hand of a small child, who tries to keep pace with the grown-ups. The child is dressed in exactly the same style of *chiton* as the father. The depiction of the child could indicate that all the Jewish people left Egypt and not only the men, as Pharaoh wanted (Deutsch 1998: 253 n. 142, citing Abarbanel on *Parshat Bo* p. 83, and p. 254 n. 150, citing *Hizkuni* in chapter 10, verse 11). An interesting parallel of taking a child by the hand may be found on the Roman processional relief of the Ara Pacis in Rome (Ramage and Ramage 1996: 103 fig. 3.26). There are no females shown in scene 1, which may show Achaemenian influence, which generally excluded female figurations in monumental art (Ghirshman 1962: 42). Another characteristic of Hellenistic style, the illusion of depth, as seen in the Dura frescoes, is the Eastern use of tiers or rows of figures in vertical depth and less accent on spatial effects (Hopkins 1979: 176). The term Hellenistic implies many combinations in the Near East in which the Greek ingredient was obviously present but not exclusive (Biale 2002: 79).

The men of the lower files appear to be holding objects which could be spoils taken from the Egyptians (Leveen 35-36). These hieratically placed crowded figures have the purpose of impressing the viewer and accenting the importance of the people and events (Hachlili 1998: 136). Kraeling says that these files of armed men have no parallel in Christian art dealing with the subject of the Exodus (Kraeling 1979: 80). However, he finds corroboration in Exodus 13:18, which states, "Now the Israelites went up armed out of the land of Egypt". One may also cite the passage, "Bring forth the Israelites from the land of Egypt, troop by troop" (*Exodus*: 6:26).

Another explanation from the *Midrash* may show a connection between the armed men and the plague of hailstorm. When the plague came to an end, both the thunder and rain stopped, but the falling hailstones remained suspended in mid-air. The angel Gavriel, who is in charge of fire, and the angel Bardael, who is in charge of hail, came down from heaven with other angels and got hold of the falling hailstones. They in turn held them for another time, to be used again during the era of Joshua forty-one years later, when God granted a favour to him in his conflict with the Giveonite (Canaanite) invaders. God assured Joshua of victory and released the hot hailstones, which had remained suspended in the air at Moses' intervention when they were about to fall upon the Egyptians (Ginsberg 1955: volume IV 38). The hailstones were more potent than the swords of the enemies, and the Jewish army was victorious (Deutsch 1998: 247-248 n. 81, citing *B'rochot Nad,* Rashi 54a, and Ralbag in *V'eirah,* chapter 9, verse 33; n. 82, citing *Torah Shlemah* 113, and *Midrash Hagadol;* n. 83, citing *Midrash Hagadol*). Thus the hailstones in WA3 might also call to mind the later victory of Joshua.

The second scene in this panel, moving from right to left, shows a wide body of water filled with swimmers in various positions. In addition, waves are visible and fish are breaking from the water. Furthermore, a man can be seen associated by his action with the people in the water, followed by another man who is directing a multitude alongside a thin strip of water (Kraeling 1979: 75). This second scene of the panel is usually taken to portray the drowning of the Egyptians in the Sea of Reeds (Kraeling 1979: 82). The water is displayed in a vertical perspective. However, the swimmers are depicted in a horizontal manner. A parallel can be observed from the column of Marcus

Aurelius in Roman Imperial art, in which a boat is depicted horizontally on a river seen vertically (Ramage and Ramage 1996 fig. 8.21). The idea that the scene depicts the drowning of the Egyptians is dubious for several reasons. The order of the story, as the frescoe depicts the figures in the water, is not consistent with that interpretation. In reality, the Israelites crossed the Sea of Reeds before the Egyptians drowned, but in the frescoe the Israelites are crossing after the figures are in the water. Moreover, the Egyptians came after the Israelites with horses, chariots and arms, none of which are suggested in the frescoe. Here it will be argued that the figures in the water represent the tribes of Benjamin (Deutsch 1998: 349 n. 55, citing *Mekhilta de R. Ismael*, and *Me-Am Lo'ez*) and Judah (Deutsch 1998: 349 n. 57, citing *Mekhilta de R. Ismael*), who were first to enter the waters. In fact the tribes argued, in an amicable fashion, about who should have the honour of being first to enter into the sea. Subsequently, it was members of the twelve tribes who went into the sea and were saved by the splitting of the water. Thus the swimming figures are likely to represent the twelve tribes. In addition, the frescoe also shows some swimmers returning to shore, who may represent some of the people who were frightened in the water, which was getting too deep for them to move further (Deutsch 1998: 350 n. 59, citing *Mekhilta de R. Ismael*).

Evidently, the reports of the planned escape of the Jews came to Pharaoh's attention, and on the sixth day of the exodus the Egyptian army was ready to pursue the Israelites. The Jews were heading for the land of Canaan. The shortest distance was via the Mediterranean coastal road. However, they intentionally avoided it, because this coastal road had been heavily fortified by the Egyptians, and therefore they followed a

longer route that led into the wilderness. As a result of this re-routing, the Egyptians surmised that the Israelites had lost their way, and Pharaoh sent his troops to attack them. At the same time, the Israelites found themselves blocked by the Sea of Reeds on one side and the Egyptian army on the other (Shanks 1999: 35). Pharaoh was delighted by these new events and attributed this great stroke of luck, which enabled him to trap the Israelites, to the maneuvering of Baal Zaphon, his deity. However, he did not recognize that this trap was organized by God for him (Deutsch 1998: 334-335). The Jewish people became restless and extremely frightened, but Moses assured them that God would save them. Moses prayed to God and the Jews saw an army of ministering angels standing before them who would act as protectors (Deutsch 1998: 339 n. 131, citing *Mekhilta* de R. Ismael, and n. 132, citing *Shir Hasihirim Rabbah* in *Yefei To'ar*, chapter 10, verse 9). In the frescoe, this army can be seen in the foreground on the far left side of scene two of panel WA3. Behind them are representations of the twelve tribes, each bearing a standard. It was at that moment that God told them to advance into the sea (Shanks 1999: 35). Moses was instructed to stretch his staff to the sky, and this resulted in the warm blast of the east wind, which would ultimately prepare the waters for Moses' miraculous splitting of the sea (*Exodus*: 14: 16; also see Deutsch 1998: 347 n. 40, citing Sforno commenting on *B'salach*, verses 14-16). In point of fact, Moses was not instructed to strike the sea, but rather to signal with his rod to the winds to blow back the waters (*Exodus*: 14:21). In the frescoe, this action by Moses is clearly seen by the way he is holding his staff by his side. However, *Isaiah* (63:12) points out that it was God who split the sea. The two hands of God (Kraeling 1979: 229 n. 905) are depicted as the

divine intervention separating the waters, thus allowing safe passage on dry land for the Israelites. According to Kraeling, the representation of God's hand had become an established convention in Jewish pictorial art by the third century, when it became a sign of miracles (Kraeling 1979: 57). In art of the ancient Near East, the hand of God is one of the symbols depicting deities. This idea can be observed on the upper part of an obelisk of Tiglathpileser I from Nineveh, dated in the 12th century B. C. E. (Parrot 1961b: 35 fig. 40). Another parallel may be found on a Palmyrene altar, on which four upraised hands with the palms outwards are represented (Tanabe 1986: pl. 152). The hand of God in pagan art represents an act of blessing and protection. It is in the Dura frescoes that the depiction of the hand of God manifests itself for the first time in Jewish art, but later in the third century this symbol was frequently used (Hachlili 1998: 144). In Christian art, this tradition only started in the fourth century.

The splitting of the sea was indeed a miracle, which was made up of many components, as there are ten miracles associated with the sea (Deutsch 1998: 357 n. 89, citing Midrash *Tanhumah* commenting on *B'shalach,* chapter 10). First, God split the sea not all at the same time, but rather as a "receding fissure" (Deutsch 1998: 357), which opened up more and more to accommodate every step the Jewish people needed to walk in the sea (Deutsch 1998: 357 n. 90, citing Malbim commenting on *B'shalach,* chapter 14, verse 22). Secondly, the floor of the sea, which was made up of ice, was not wet or slippery, so that the walk was clear and safe for passage (Deutsch 1998: 357 n. 91, citing Rabbenu Bechai commenting on *B'shalach,* chapter 14, verse 21). Thirdly, there were two walls of water that rose on each side of the opening in the shape of arches protecting

the Jewish people. This feature acted as tunnels, so that it was as if they were walking safely through tunnels of water (Deutsch 1998: 357 n. 92, citing *Mekhilta* de R. Ismael commenting on *B'shalach* chapter 15, verse 8). The tunnels ran in a semi-circle as opposed to a straight line. The vertical curved line shown to the left of the swimmers on the frescoe represents those tunnels.

It is worthy of note that Gallienus was emperor during the last years of Dura (253-268 C. E.) and was instrumental in advocating a spirit of culture and learning. During his reign, Neoplatonic philosophy became important under the influence of the philosopher Plotinus. His teachings, as depicted in portraiture, reflect more of an interest in the inner emotions and spiritual qualities of an individual as opposed to an exact replica of the person. The portrayals of Moses, and in particular the taller Moses in scene two, resemble the portrait of Plotinus in its timelessness and pensive expression (Ramage and Ramage 1996: 263 fig. 10.11).

Moreover, *Numbers* 1:52 states, "the Israelites shall encamp troop by troop, each man with his division and each under his standard" (Sarna 1991: commenting on *Exodus* 6:26). This reference could be relevant to the group shown in scene 2, made up of twelve men carrying standards, who represent the Twelve Tribes (Kraeling 345). In fact, these twelve tribes (who are also shown in scene 1, but without the standards) could signify the "six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children" (Exodus 12:37). It has been suggested that the Hebrew word *elef*, thousand, in this case means a clan or a small military unit, such as a number of fighting men taken from each tribe (Sarna 1991: commenting on *Exodus* 12:37). The standard being held by each of the tribes has a

parallel in the Menorah procession, represented on the Arch of Titus, 81 C. E. (Ramage and Ramage 1996: 143 fig. 5.10). In addition, Rostovtzeff compares the "soldiers and standard-bearers of the chosen people in the Exodus scene of the Synagogue" to the Tribune of Dura painting in the Temple of Bel, where the soldiers are grouped the same way (Rostovtzeff 1935: 245; Colledge 1976: fig. 60).

Behind the large Moses holding his staff in a lowered position there are depicted twelve earth-coloured horizontal stripes separated from each other by blue bands. These are meant to indicate twelve dried lanes through the Sea of Reeds. It was through these dried lanes that the twelve tribes traversed the sea, with each tribe having its own separate tunnel through which to pass as a family (*Targum pseudo-Jonathan* on *Exodus* 14-21 and *Genesis Rabbah* LXXXIV, 5 and 8). The Via Latina frescoes in Rome show a series of stripes which could be seen as a parallel to the stripes in the Dura frescoe. Weitzman maintains that the Via Latina frescoes deal with the same symbol as the one in the Exodus panel, even though the number of stripes is smaller (Weitzmann and Kessler 1990: 49 fig. 71).

The frescoe in scene two depicts many fish jumping and swimming in the water. In fact, the fish shown in the frescoe seem to have both fins and scales, which are the two signs needed to identify kosher fish. In addition, the fish seem to have a pink hue, which would also indicate that these fish were kosher (cf. *Halachah Berurah*, volume 7, issue 5, n. 8, citing what the author heard from Rabbi Belsky, who heard it from Rav Moshe Feinstein). Fish are a symbol of fertility (*Encyclopaedia Judaica* 1971: 10. 257-258 fig. 2), and according to Goodenough they are a magical symbol. He asserts that most fish

depicted in diaspora art are in fact dolphins. He maintains that the Jews may have considered the dolphin "as a symbol of hope for themselves and their loved ones" (Goodenough 1956: 5:11 27). Hachlili states that fish and dolphins connote the sea and are usually used as a decorative feature. Moreover, they are used to fill empty spaces, and since this practice was part of an established artistic tradition, they most likely appeared in sketch book patterns (Hachlili 1998: 390).

As a symbol of fertility, the fish in WA3, scene 2, refer to the growing population of Jews in Egypt. The world was created to be inhabited (*Isaiah* 45: 18), and God's blessing of Israel always included fecundity (*Leviticus* 26: 9; *Deuteronomy* 28:11) and the absence of barrenness (*Exodus* 23: 26; *Deuteronomy* 7:14). The fertility of the Israelites in Egypt was very annoying to the Egyptians (*Exodus* 1:7: "The Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them"). This description of immense fertility for the Jewish population indicates the divine blessings given by God at Creation and after the Flood. *Genesis* 1:28 says, "God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth". In *Genesis* 9: 1, "God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth". The idea of the Jewish people growing in numbers evokes the notion of the start of a community of Israel in Egypt that is self-sufficient and separate from Egyptian society (Sarna 1991: commenting on *Exodus* 1:7).

It is worthy of note that the frescoe does not portray any women, possibly because in Oriental art this was not traditional. However, the depiction of the fish is indicative of

the multitude of people, which includes women and children. Jacob used the metaphor of fish when he blessed the sons of Joseph: "May he bless the lads, and let them carry my name, along with the names of my fathers, Abraham, and Isaac. May they increase in the land like fish" (*Genesis* 48: 16).

According to the Midrashic insights of Rabbi Uziel Milevsky, fins and scales are representative of Jewish survival. The scales and fins represent two important components of Jewish continuity, because the Torah is compared to water and the Jewish people to fish. In the same vein, just as fish are not able to live outside of water, the Jews are not able to exist without the Torah. The scales are needed to protect against hostile invasion, and fins are needed to turn away in order to avoid danger. Similarly, the Israelites had to develop a tough skin in order to withstand dangerous external factors and to limit their interaction with the people of the surrounding culture. The scales of kosher fish represent the social barriers that Jews living in the diaspora had to maintain. However, it is necessary for the Jewish people to mingle with the people from the host country, to be involved in their society and follow the law of the land. Taking the above factors in consideration, the fins of the kosher fish represent the ability of the Jewish people to adapt to their environment, in the same way as the fins guide the fish. The Jewish community at Dura is a good example of people who adapted to local culture, yet at the same time remained proud of their distinct identity.

According to Gruen, Hellenistic Jews enjoyed retelling biblical tales. They were very creative and used a variety of forms to make the story as interesting as possible by adapting history, epic, and exegesis. Canonical texts were frequently excerpted,

augmented, supplemented or inverted. Familiar legends were told with a different accent, and biblical heroes were re-cast for greater admiration. There was no intention to change or substitute anything in Scriptures. The Jewish audience were very familiar with the traditional tales, and the new angle helped them gain different insights. Thus the artist at Dura was following a well-known practice (Gruen 2002: 182).

Conclusions

The discovery of the city of Dura-Europos and its archaeological and artistic treasures is one of the most important events in the study of ancient cultures. These treasures were dormant under the sands in a ruined fortress overlooking the Euphrates until March of 1920. The identification of Dura was made by Professor James Breasted on the basis of Isidore of Charax's geographic chronicle of the Euphrates region, dated from the first century B.C. E. or first century C. E. In the process of digging into the earth fill behind the ancient city walls, large and clear wall-paintings were discovered depicting an act of sacrifice. Subsequently, in 1932, as a result of further excavations, it became evident that the buildings adjoining the western wall of the city of Dura were well preserved. These buildings included a Jewish Synagogue with its wonderful frescoes, as well as a Mithraeum, a Christian chapel, and the Temple of Bel.

Dura was situated between the Roman and the Persian worlds. Originally founded under Seleucus I as a military colony, Dura became part of the Parthian kingdom in the late second century B. C. E. until 164 C. E. During this period, Dura acquired strong eastern characteristics. Since the Babylonian conquest of the Jews, Judaism and Jewish communities had spread extensively from Babylonia up the Euphrates and the Tigris, as well as into northern Mesopotamia. One of the settlements affected was Dura-Europos. Evidently, the coins of the city of Dura-Europos are the earliest indicators of Jewish presence there. The coins go back to the period when John Hyrcanus ruled Palestine (135 to 104 B. C. E.) At the time, the king was helping Antiochus VII against the Parthians.

Therefore Dura was on the king's route. In fact, Jewish coins even as late as 66-71 C. E. are found in Dura. In any case, the first evidence of continous Jewish habitation in Dura, after the termination of the Palestinian coinage, is the first Synagogue building.

During the early Roman period, between 165 and 200 C. E., a private house was restyled as a Synagogue. It was small in size, and situated in a residential part of the city, in much the same way as temples in Mesopotamia. The city for the most part was pagan. At first, the inhabitants were Macedonians, and subsequently they were joined by Parthians, Semitic peoples and eventually Roman soldiers and merchants. Living in an atmosphere of such a mixed culture, the Jews of Dura had to constantly redefine their identity. Religious tradition and observance were important tools towards that end. In addition, accomodation and acculturation were part of everyday life.

A new and larger Synagogue building, according to a commemorative inscription in Aramaic on roofing of the House of Assembly, was built in 244/245 C. E. However, it is not certain whether all facets, including the frescoes, were completed by that date. At this point, the Jewish community was larger and more affluent and enjoyed more importance, since they were significant landowners in the vicinity of the Synagogue.

It is difficult to say where the newcomers to the Durene Jewish community came from. However, evidence of Greek dedicatory inscriptions, as well as a proselyte with a Greek name on one of the Aramaic tiles, would suggest that people who were brought up in a Hellenized atmosphere joined the Jewish community. There were also superimpositions on some of the frescoes of the Synagogue in the form of Middle Iranian *dipinti* giving Iranian names, as well as *dipinti* in Parsik and graffiti in Parthian script and

language. The subject is still open to question as to who these people were or if they were Jewish people with Iranian names.

The period of Parthian rule was the most prosperous one for Dura, especially *ca* 50 C. E. to 165 C. E. It was during this time that Dura became a point of departure for the main caravan route from the Euphrates to Palmyra. The garrison at Dura was in charge of maintaining the safety of the roads which led to the west, south and east across the Euphrates. Consequently, the caravan merchants were forced to pass through Dura and to lodge there for a short stay. This procedure was financially advantageous for Dura, as taxes were levied on the goods transported by the caravans who passed through and stayed in Dura. After 165 C. E. the tide turned, when as a result of frequent wars on the Euphrates, the caravan route was diverted directly to Palmyra, thus bypassing Dura. This change diminished Durene wealth. However, the Jewish community during the Roman period experienced comfort and affluence. The reason for their success was that Jewish as well as pagan merchants were actively involved in the purveyance of supplies to the Roman garrison stationed at Dura. Evidence of coins from the third century C. E. found at Dura originating from the fertile Khabur region indicates that supplies were coming from there. Moreover, the coins also show evidence of strong economic ties with the cities of Nisibis and Edessa in Northern Mesopotamia, which had Jewish colonies. Consequently, since Dura was essentially a military base under the Romans, good business sense dictated the import of products from those places in order to cater to this market.

The main reason for the Roman occupation of Dura was to create a military base as a protection against the Parthians. However, the Roman garrison also had to protect the caravan routes and the roads passing through Dura. In the third century C. E., the Sassanians, who were a new Iranian power, took over control from the Parthians. The Sassanians were interested in expansion westward into Mesopotamia. Perceiving this even before the Sassanians finally ousted the Parthians, the Romans after 210 C. E. expanded the garrison in the city of Dura. It was this period of the building programme which witnessed the building of baths, amphitheatres, new administrative buildings and temples for deities such as Mithras and Jupiter Dolichenus. In addition, as mentioned earlier, the Jewish Synagogue was remodelled at this time (244/245 C. E.). Similarly, a house built in the third century C. E. was transformed by about 232 C. E. into a Christian meeting place and place of worship.

While Parthian foreign policy concentrated on maintaining the status quo with Rome, the Sassanians were much more aggressive. They projected themselves as the restorers of the past glory of the Achaemenian Empire. Such an agenda, from a political standpoint, included the recapturing of countries from Western Asia which had been conquered by Cyrus and Darius and were now under Roman control. The demise of Dura in 256 C. E. could have been the result of this programme. In any case, the Jews were not the primary target, but were affected by a political decision. The intention of the Sassanians was to deny Rome control of a key position on the upper Euphrates.

In the eyes of early scholars, Dura was not an important centre of political life or a large wealthy town. In fact, it was usually regarded as a mere outpost of the Roman

Empire whose population was primitive. However, the scholars maintain that its importance rests on its remains, which provide important information. Some think it is important as a forerunner to western art. More recent scholarship, on the other hand, is more concerned with what it tells us about its own time. It is in this sense that there has been a major shift with regard to area studies.

Dura was a multicultural city with a heterogeneous population. As a result of Dura's occupation first by Macedonians, followed by Parthians, and subsequently by Romans, between 280 B. C. E. until *ca* 256 C. E. the city shows many different cultural imprints coupled with a variety of languages. During Parthian rule, Greek and Palmyrene were the languages used of which there is evidence. However, in Roman Dura, Greek, Latin, Semitic and Iranian languages seem to be indicated. The various graffiti inscribed in Aramaic, Middle Persian, Parthian, Greek and Latin attest to the above claim. Nevertheless, the population became very Semiticised because Semitic women were in the majority at Dura. As a result of a *modus vivendi* among so many different nationalities as well as the co-existence of elements from different cultures, Dura adapted this multicultural influence as part of her everyday life.

There are different schools of thought with regard to cultural influences exerted on Dura, in particular, on the question of whether they are more Roman or Babylonian. Nevertheless, the Graeco-Macedonian tradition remained strong, Greek was still spoken, and in fact the Seleucid calendar continued to be used at Dura. In any case, it can be surmised that, because of where they were living, the Durenes acquired habits and lifestyles of the East and were now Levantine.

The art at Dura-Europos reflects the impact of the various masters she had over time. However, the lifeblood of Durene culture as well as its art is oriental, with Syro-Mesopotamian origins. The location of temples in residential areas, the appearance of painted walls used for decoration, the use of registers, and the focus on the back wall of the cella for a cult figure, were characteristic of all the temples of Dura. The frescoes in the temples represent gods and goddesses and mythological scenes, and the figures are all represented in a frontal fashion. This was a Parthian characteristic, which was a standard artistic practice in Dura. There is very little information about the painted temple in Mesopotamia, since paintings were used in the palaces of kings and not in religious edifices in Syria and Babylonia. The major temples at Dura, all earlier than the second Synagogue, were painted, and therefore the Synagogue was decorated with paintings as well. It is worthwhile to point out that the narrative element in the frescoes in the Synagogue was also noticeable in the Christian Chapel and the Temple of Mithras. Evidently, these communities required personal commitment from their members, and the narrative element would indicate a didactic function for the decorations.

There is scant information about Durene religion in Hellenistic times, but it was mostly Greek. However, from late first century B. C. E. to the third century C. E., when Dura was under Parthian and Roman rule, there is evidence of a great number of religions appearing on the landscape. Gods of Semitic origin were foremost, but many of the oriental gods also had Greek names. Evidently, Greek religion survived during the Parthian and Roman era. However, it has been pointed out through texts and iconography of the cult images of Greek gods that their characteristics have been

combined with those of older Semitic deities. For example, Zeus Theos is shown in his temple in Parthian attire. Religion played a very prominent role in the art of Dura. The absence of Iranian cults, such as Mazdaism and Zoroastrianism, is noticeable. However, figures in Parthian military dress often have Iranian names and are worshipping Iranian gods. The Roman army, on the other hand, portrays Roman gods and goddesses as well as deified emperors and members of the imperial family. Furthermore, the soldiers also worshipped some oriental deities such as Mithras, and the influence of Palmyra in the religious sphere was important. In addition to all these different religions, Judaism and Christianity also made an appearance.

The three most important influences on the religious art of Dura were Greek, Iranian and Oriental/Semitic. The Synagogue shows a style and composition related to these factors, which were also evident on sculptures and paintings in Palmyra, Hatra and Edessa. In summation, it can be said that the Synagogue followed a tradition of painted sanctuaries found in Dura. The style and arrangement of the decorations as well as the religious subject matter all portray a common heritage.

One can say that the Jews of Dura, by depicting their Biblical stories, were also recalling their great heritage or historical past, and repeatedly reminding the viewer of victories which came through their faith and service to God. At the same time, they also show Jewish survival after defeat. The Hebrew prophets were the first to recognize that a weak nation that remembers its defeats can survive better than a strong nation that forgets its victories. The inspiring quality of the Bible could have been important for a Jewish community located on the Euphrates, far away from the centre of their homeland.

The primary purpose for the paintings by the Jewish community at Dura was to re-affirm their identity. By recalling their history, they had examined their actions and learned lessons for the future, while at the same time the paintings were a source from which the Jewish people drew strength to recover from difficult times.

The Jews live with their past, but not in the past. The frescoes are representative of such a concept, since the past was always with them, in terms of their religious tradition and observance. However, the Jews of Dura were, it seems, trying to find areas of commonality and shared values between themselves and the surrounding cultures. For example, the evidence of frescoes and terracottas shows that in the style of clothing and coiffure, Parthian influence was dominant. Clothing in the frescoes is used as a means of communication. It acts as kind of silent language, yet it tells a great deal about the organization of a society in which it is worn. In addition, it reveals the social stratification of the society. Parthian attires are depicted on royal figures, Jewish and other, and Greek *chiton* and *himation* are shown on everyone else. This is a clear indication of the way the Jewish community at Dura was keeping in touch with their everyday society.

For the Jews of Dura, for whom the ancient Persian Empire was favourable, recalling Achaemenian ways was gratifying. At the same time, their depictions of this culture may have been appealing to the Sassanians, who claimed to be the true successors of Cyrus, Darius and other Achaemenian kings. During the third century C. E., the Jews were turning much more inward and concentrating on learning, particularly in Babylonia, where the Talmud was being compiled. The Sassanians at the same time were also

engaged in working on commentaries on the *Avesta*. Considering these factors, one might suggest that the small Jewish community at Dura was contributing to this trend of preserving traditions in the way that was most familiar to them, that is, painting.

The Jews became part of the Hellenistic environment, but what they needed was a means of defining their singularity or uniqueness within their milieu, which included the special characteristics that made them both integral to the community, and true to their heritage (Biale 2002: 80). In emulation and imitation of the pagan art with which the Jewish Durene community was surrounded, the Hebrew Bible stories were a natural choice. The stories were suited to representation in mosaics as well as other art forms. The Jews of Dura interpreted and recalled their heritage in the frescoes. However, the multicultural elements used in the depictions showed their respect for the host society and at the same time re-affirmed their own Jewish identity.

Scholars have been looking for a theme connecting the different panels of frescoes, but have not reached any consensus on this question. The positions taken can be grouped into three categories. Firstly, some maintain that there is no unifying idea connecting the various narratives. The scholars who are exponents of this school maintain that the individual panels are related to the liturgical readings on the Sabbath and holidays and these paintings helped the people who attended the Synagogue services to understand visually what was being read (Rostovtzeff, Sukenik and Leveen). Others insist that there is one leading theological theme uniting the frescoes. Among the scholars who take this view, some suggest that the scenes are a tribute to the sovereignty of God, and thus comparable to cycles found in Roman Imperial art (Grabar). Other scholars posit that the

panels are a reflection of Rabbi Simon's teaching, which speaks about three crowns, "the crown of Torah, the crown of Priesthood and the crown of Kingdom" (*Avoth* 4:17) (Sonne). Another scholar sees a Messianic theme throughout the whole cycle of the frescoes (Wischnitzer). Jewish history (*Historia*) is different from secular history, which is called *Geschichte*, in that it has an objective and a particular mission or purpose, and has a beginning and an end. *Geschichte*, on the other hand, does not identify an ultimate objective or destiny. Jewish history has a definitive purpose, a fulfillment of ultimate redemption in a Messianic era, whereby man will find his fulfillment in realizing God's purposes in terms of creation and existence. These observations could be used to support Wischnitzer's view. Furthermore, Goodenough claims the Philonic doctrine of the soul's mystic ascent and the hope of victory over death is the message of the paintings. The third position combines elements of the first two and suggests that there is a variety of messages denoted. This school of thought suggests that the paintings connote historical covenant relationships, which include reward and punishment, salvation and Messianic expectation. Moreover, for an interpretation to be acceptable, it must be fitting to the historical context of the Dura Synagogue and the evidence of the paintings (Kraeling). In summation, with the exception of Goodenough, all the scholars agree that any explanation of the frescoes has to be rooted in Rabbinic Judaism. Goodenough maintains that the paintings can only be interpreted in the light of mystic Hellenistic Judaism (Gutman 1992: 139).

It is worthwhile noting how Rabbinic Judaism looked upon these frescoes. Rostovtzeff very definitely states that these frescoes were not in keeping with the rules of

the Talmud (Rostovtzeff 1938: 102). It can be said that as a general rule the Rabbis tolerated works of art, but did not encourage them. Nevertheless, in the tractate *Abhodah Zarah* of the Jerusalem Talmud, it is stated, "In the days of Rabbi Jochanan, men began to paint upon the wall, and he did not hinder them" (qtd in Leveen 1974: 56). It was specifically Rabbi Jochanan bar Nappaha, who was head of the community in Palestine, who allowed this practice and whose authority extended beyond Palestine. He was born at the end of the second century in Sepphoris and died in 279 C. E. in Tiberias. His date covers the period of the second Synagogue at Dura, and this could explain why the second Synagogue was adorned in such a fashion.

The synagogue provided Jewish life of Late Antiquity with an essential unity. In spite of its many geographical, linguistic, cultural and religious variations, this communal institution with its ever present religious component provided a common framework for Jewish communities everywhere (Levine 2000: 606). Before the destruction of the Second Temple (pre-70 period), though synagogues already existed, this need had been satisfied primarily through the Temple. Afterwards, however, the locally based institutions built by Jews wherever they lived created a "diminished sanctuary", which has served their needs up to the present time. It is worthy of mention, however, that both synagogue architecture as well as artistic expression varied from community to community. In fact, as result of external influences, diversity was always greater than similarity. The tastes and inclinations of each community were the ruling force for all aspects of the local synagogue (physical, cultural, functional and religious). This is relevant to Dura, where multiculturalism was an important local feature.

Another important characteristic of the Synagogue at Dura to be studied is the representation of the Jewish tradition in the frescoes. An iconographic approach to works of art generally involves the meaning of the subject matter. This methodology concerns itself with the way the artist writes the picture or image, as well as what the picture writes, in other words, the story it tells. It was this type of interpretation that most scholars in the early twentieth century used in trying to understand the frescoes of Dura-Europos. An approach connected to iconography (writing the picture) is called iconology (knowledge of the picture) or the science of imagery, which refers to the study of the larger background (if any) to which a work belongs. This notion of iconology, espoused by Ernst Gombrich, involves the reconstruction of an entire programme, and therefore considers more than one text. As such it becomes contained in a context, which includes both a cultural as well as an artistic setting (Gombrich 1972: ch. 1).

There is also a fundamental difference in the way artists work. Gombrich, in his book *The Story of Art,* showed a development of representation "from the conceptual methods of the primitives and the Egyptians, who relied on what they knew" to the achievements of the impressionists, who recorded "what they saw" (Gombrich 1961: 393). In other words, he says we have often looked back to the Egyptians and their method of representing in a picture all they knew rather than all they saw. In fact, he points out how the primitive artist used to make a simple face, for example, out of forms rather than copy a real face (Gombrich 1961: 394). Representation is not a replica and it it does not have to be like the motif. Gombrich posits that the test of the image is not its lifelikeness, but its efficiency within a context of action. With respect to the artist,

Gombrich maintains that the "Egyptian in us can be suppressed, but he can never be quite defeated" (395), because the Egyptian in us stands for the active and inquiring mind, not the innocent eye, which can probe the ambiguities of vision (395).

Seeing that we have a limited amount of archaeological material and no literary data regarding the Dura Synagogue, how do we determine a specific interpretation? There is simply not enough historical context to offer a degree of certainty is deciding what a particular symbol or representation could have meant at the specific time and place. In spite of the fact that the Synagogue has an unparalleled selection of Biblical scenes, we have no independent source which can tell us about the way the Jewish community located on the Euphrates River in the third century C. E. functioned in terms of beliefs and practices.

However, what we can surmise on the basis of the frescoes is that these people were knowledgeable in Scriptures and certainly the *Midrash.* In fact, Rabbinic works such as the *Mishnah* as well as the *Mekhilta de R. Ismael, Sifra* and *Sifre Deuteronomy,* all compiled by the third century C. E., are reflected in the paintings of the Synagogue. For example, on the right hand side of Panel WA3, scene 2, depicting Exodus and the Crossing of the Red Sea, there is a vertical curved line separating the people in the water from the two individuals representing Moses. This scene refers to the miraculous splitting of the sea, which was made up of many components. When God split the sea, it did not happen all at once but gradually, with the sea opening up more and more to accommodate the Jewish people who were walking in the sea. There were two walls of water that rose on each side of the opening, which took the shape of arches that protected

the Jewish people. According to *Mekhilta de R. Ismael*, commenting on *B'shalach* chapter 15, verse 8, this feature acted as tunnels so it was as if they were walking safely through tunnels of water. Moreover, the tunnels ran in a semi-circle as opposed to a straight line. The vertical curved line shown to the left of the swimmers on the frescoe represents those tunnels.

Another example from the *Mekhilta de R. Ismael* concerns the same panel (WA3, scene 2), where the figures in the water could represent the tribe of Benjamin, who were the first to enter the waters, and not the Egyptians, as has been suggested by modern scholars such as Gates (1984: 175). Moreover, an explanation from the *Midrash* may show a connection between the armed men and the plague of hailstorm in panel WA3, scene 1. In this scene, the hailstones are suspended in the air. According to the *Midrash,* when the plague came to an end, the thunder and rain stopped. However, the falling hailstones remained suspended in mid-air. The angel Gavriel, who is in charge of fire, and the angel Bardael, in charge of hail, came down from heaven with other angels and got hold of the falling hailstones. They in turn held them for another time to be used again during the time of Joshua forty-one years later, when God granted him a favour in his conflict with the Giveonite (Canaanite) invaders. The hailstones were more potent than the swords of the enemies and the Jewish army was victorious (Deutsch: 1998 247-248 n. 81). Thus the hailstones in WA3, scene 1, might also call to mind the later victory of Joshua. In the light of these examples, one could say that the frescoes commissioned by the Jewish community were based on interpretation and knowledge as opposed to reporting a record of their past.

On the other hand, the Jews of Dura were also making use of what they saw. This was particularly manifest in their choice of clothing, which was a combination of Parthian and Greek styles. For royalty and people of the court, Parthian fashion was employed. However, the artists portrayed Jewish characters in Greek attire, showing their close affiliation with everyday life of the time. In addition, the architectural features of the Synagogue, for example, the broad room style used for the Synagogue Hall, are of eastern style. It was in this vein that the Jews of Dura combined what they knew with what they saw to strengthen themselves, but at the same time to show acculturation to their environment.

Next, the two frames selected for special study will be reviewed. An example of a Biblical story about Jews in high positions in a foreign court is that of Esther. It is set in the days of Achasverous, considered to be the Persian monarch Xerxes I (486-465 B. C. E.) It is a Diaspora story about and for Jews, set during the Persian period, and gives a positive portrayal of Jewish survival and success in a foreign land. Esther is often considered to be the most secular of the biblical books, since there is no reference to God's name, to the Temple, to prayer or to dietary regulations. Nevertheless, Esther is a religious book, because it addresses the origin of the Jewish holiday of Purim (chapter 9). Moreover, this festival gives the Jewish people a joyful and optimistic outlook with regard to Jewish identity and Jewish continuity. The heroes of the story are Mordechai and Esther, who work as a team, one outside the palace and the other inside, and then they work together at the seat of power, which is the government. The first scene of the Mordechai and Esther panel (WC2) in the Dura-Europos Synagogue concerns itself with

the rivalry and hostility of Haman and Mordechai. Mordechai is the hero dressed in Persian royal attire with Parthian puffy hairstyle, who is shown sitting on a white horse facing the viewer and presented in a three-quarter view. This position shows a combination of Hellenistic and Achaemenian style. Haman, the slave, who is leading the horse, is depicted in a short tunic, bare-legged and shoeless, like a Persian stable groom.

There is a rosette depicted on the horse of Mordechai, a symbol of luck and protection which dates back to an ancient Mesopotamian tradition and is also seen in the art of the Achemenians in Persepolis. The horse's stance on four limbs, along with its heavy body, short haired-mane and small head, are Parthian characteristics. In addition, the Mordechai scene, as in typical Parthian representations, conveys no emotion or interaction among its characters. Royal Persian riders in the Achaemenian period all had diadems, and in the Synagogue painting Mordechai is wearing a red cap with a diadem. The posture of Mordechai as well as his costume together with the quiver filled with arrows at his side all exhibit more Parthian traits. It is worthwhile to note that quivers are generally found on scenes of military triumph. Therefore, it is not surprising that the artist was instructed to add this feature. As a result of similarities found between the Synagogue frescoes and parallels from other places in Dura and Palmyra, it could be surmised that local tradition was shaped from Parthian art.

Under the horse's belly there is a *dipinto* reading "Mordechai" written in Aramaic. This identifies the scene as Haman leading Mordechai. The Midrash tells an interesting story about the way Haman sold himself to become Mordechai's slave as a result of his poor planning of food provisions during a military siege under his command.

Subsequently, Mordechai was cheered as the victor and Haman was mocked when he was sold as a slave. The Jews of Dura evidently knew their Midrash and were painting from their knowledge, for probably the artist expected the viewer to think of this Midrashic story as well. However, their choice of subject matter was also a reflexion of the interaction between themselves and their neighbours. Greek comedy was familiar to the Jews of Dura, and as B. M. Knox says, "the proper function of comedy was not to advise, but to be outrageous..." (Knox 1992: 285-286). It is in this vein that the panel should be seen and understood. The story starts out with threat to the Jews, but then it has a happy ending. The Jews through their two representatives can for a short time wield the highest power in a great empire, where in reality they are a minority and subjects. As in comedy, the story underscores the notion that all is well with the world and with the place of Jews in it (Berlin 2001: xxii).

Scene two depicts the king on a throne shown frontally. His clothing and hairstyle indicate royalty and he is depicted in typical Parthian fashion. In fact, all royal figures shown in the Dura Synagogue frescoes wear the same type of attire, have the puffy Parthian hairstyle, and are depicted frontally. The king's throne is typical of the royal furniture, which have parallels in sculptures from Mesopotamia and Iran. However, once again, it could be pointed out that that the Jews were drawing on their knowledge from the *Targum Sheni* to *Esther,* which describes Achasverous' throne with lions and eagles. It was in this fashion that the throne was depicted, yet at the same time the artist drew on Mesopotamian tradition. The Queen, shown on the king's left, is sitting on a smaller throne with a high back, and has a foot stool under her feet. The Aramaic *dipinto* under

Esther's foot stool and another one on the third step of Achasverous' throne identify the characters. These *dipinti* were added to explain the narrative. Esther's dress, hairstyle, and the way she holds her veil are traits which are comparable to the goddesses from Palmyra of the first century C. E. Her crown evokes similarities to the *Tyche* of Dura from the Temple of Bel. The lower hip sash on Esther's dress as well as the portrayal of her jewelry have a parallel on a relief from north-west of Palmyra, which depicts the guardian spirits of Bet-Phasi'el, dated 191 C. E. There are also parallels to be found from Edessa which are comparable to representations in scene two. Another part of scene two shows four men standing next to the king. They are dressed in Greek *chiton* and *himation.* Their small heads and blank stare with wide open eyes convey timeless qualities. These characteristics appear to resemble the head of a statue from Susa (first to third century C. E.) executed in the Oriental tradition. There are differences of scholarly opinion with regard to the identity of these four characters, but it can be said they were representative of witnesses to the triumph of Mordechai. Moreover, the way they are shown standing has a parallel in the Konon frescoe at Dura. Consequently, local influence is manifest. The scroll border framing the frescoes of the Synagogue takes quotations from Antioch, Palmyra, and Cilicia. There is a Midrash in *Haftorah Mas'ei* (*Tz'enah Ur'enah, Bamidbar* p. 840) which says, "I planted you from a good vine" (Jeremiah 2:21). This is interpreted to mean that you came from good forefathers, from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Hebrew word for vine is *sorek,* which has a numerical value of 606. This number, when added to the seven Noachide commandments, amounts to 613, which is the number of commandments given to the Jews. In other words, the

Jews got from God as many commandments as a good vine. It is possible that the scroll border is a reference to the vine, representing the Law. Moreover, these borders in the frescoes of the Synagogue have three dots, which could allude to the three Patriarchs. Furthermore, since the number three has significance in Near Eastern tradition (Hachlili 1998: 422), it could also be a multicultural trait. Thus, for the Jewish community, these symbols are constant reminders of their heritage and at the same time they show accommodation and acculturation in the land where they live.

Hellenistic Jews enjoyed retelling Biblical tales. They were creative and adapted different forms to make the story interesting. In this fashion they expressed new insights. The Book of Esther can be seen as part of the literary world of the ancient Near East during the Persian period. However, at the same time it is a Jewish book concerning itself with Jewish experiences and desires. Thus the story of Mordechai and Esther was a good choice for the Jews of Dura to portray on one of the frescoes in the Synagogue.

First, the story of Esther and Mordechai explained the holiday of Purim, which became an established a tradition. Chapter 9, verse 27, states that "The Jews confirmed and undertook upon themselves, and upon their posterity, and upon those (converts) who join them, to observe these two days without fail, as they are written, and in their (proper) time, every year". Furthermore, the *Book of Esther* emphasizes the permanence of the holiday, in all places and in all times. In fact, as Ibn Ezra says, the holiday is also incumbent on Jews who live in a place where there were no Jews at the time of the events. In the beginning of the *Book of Esther*, one has the impression that the story was told a long time after the events had occurred. Near the end of the Book, there is a sense

that the narrator is looking back on the origin of the festival and noting the way its observance spread to all Jewish communities. Looking toward the future, he sees that the festival will be observed forever (Berlin 2001: 91). It is in this fashion that the Durene Jewish community were looking back, but at the same time, looking ahead to a continuous and promising future.

In the *Book of Esther*, it is written that in the twelfth month (*Esther* 9: 1), that is, the month of *Adar*, on the thirteenth day, as the king had commanded, the Jews assembled against their enemies, who had hoped to destroy them. Their plans were overturned because of Mordechai's decree, and it was the Jews who prevailed over their enemies. This is the most important reversal in the story, because it highlights the underlying theme of Jewish security in the Diaspora. The result of the events is given at the beginning. It is not a question of whether the Jews will win, but rather how they will win, and how great their victory will be (Berlin 2001: 83). For the small Jewish community in Dura-Europos, living in a strong pagan environment, with their existence threatened by larger powers, there could be no better encouragement to their morale than recalling an earlier victorious survival in Persian times.

In addition, the *Book of Esther* encourages pride in Jewish identity as well as solidarity within the Jewish community and with Jewish tradition. The Esther-Mordechai story also concerns itself with a scenario in which Jews were a minority in a larger society, and where it fell to the individual Jew, and not the state, to secure Jewish continuity. Moreover, the fact that the characters in the story are Diaspora Jews would make it easy for the Jews in Dura to identify with them.

The meaning of a panel such as Esther and Mordechai would also be most suitable to the circumstances of the Jewish community at Dura. Dura was an Oriental city with a Roman military garrison in its midst. The Jews, through their involvement with business, had a role within the society at large. The Jewish community in the 240s C. E. was affluent, as both pagan and Jewish merchants were providing supplies to the Roman army. In fact, Jewish traders and merchants were actively involved in regional commerce. Esther, like other Diaspora stories, bolsters the ethnic pride of the Jews under alien rule, for Esther and Mordechai had important places in the Persian court. The idea of a wise courtier in a foreign court shows Jewish success in a foreign land.

Finally, it may be worthy of note that the story of Esther has allusions to earlier biblical stories and a strong connection to the traditions of preexilic Israel. Esther, as a departure point, continues the story of Israel where the *Book of Kings* left off, which included the exile of Jehoiachin to Babylonia under Nebuchadnezzar. This was the sign for the end of the Judaean independence and the beginning of the exile (*Kings* II: 6). However, instead of continuing the story from the framework of the return of the exiles, Esther considers the community in exile, which is the Diaspora community (Berlin 2001: xxxvi). The fact that the *Book of Esther* tells a story about this Diaspora community of Persia shows that the Jews had good relations with the rulers of that empire.

The second frame to be reviewed will be the Exodus scene painted on the walls of the Dura Synagogue. An ancient Hebrew name for the second book of the Torah was *sefer yetsi'at mitsrayim*, "The Book of the Departure from Egypt", which expresses its main theme. The Jews of Alexandria in Egypt called this Book "Exodus", the Greek

name used in the Septuagint. The *Book of Exodus* is not the preservation and recording of the past for its own sake, but the gathering of certain historic events for didactic reasons. The focal points are the deeds of God on behalf of His people in times of injustice and cruelty, and in the act of liberation. There is but "a single Deity, who demands exclusive service and fidelity. Being the Creator of all that exists, He is wholly independent of his creations, and totally beyond the constraints of the world of nature, which is irresistibly under His governance". This is demonstrated by the miracle of the burning bush, the ten plagues and the dividing of the Sea of Reeds (Sarna 1991: xi-xiv). In fact, the Durene Jewish community, in addition to a panel depicting the Burning Bush (Panel I), also chose to portray in Panel WA3, scene 2, Exodus and the Crossing of the Red Sea, which also suggests some of the ten plagues.

The subject of this panel (WA3) was another good choice for the Synagogue walls at Dura, for its message has multi-cultural elements understood by the local Durene community. The later part of the Book of Genesis discusses the adjustment of the Israelites in Egypt. As a result of Joseph's good planning and business acumen, Egypt was saved from starvation during many years of famine. However, the Book of Exodus begins with the rise of a new pharaoh in Egypt who did not remember Joseph, and together with the Egyptian people felt no sense of obligation towards him (Exodus I: 8-9). This new turn in events triggered a reversal of fortune for the tribes of Israel (Sarna 1991: 3). The notion of reversal of fortune is a well known concept in Hellenistic times. It is worthwhile to note that the book of Exodus mentions only briefly the slavery and suffering of the Jewish people in Egypt. The main focus is on the details concerning the

process of liberation. Once again, the Jews were portraying their story on the frescoes from knowledge of the Pentateuch. They also highlighted their victory and reversal of fortune brought about by the hand of God.

In the first scene of WA3, Egypt is represented by a Roman city wall, with an open city-gate. Behind the door of the city-gate on the frescoe, the plague of darkness is alluded to, but the darkness behind the door also could imply the misery and hardships imposed on the Jews in Egypt. In fact, apart from the same depiction of darkness behind an open doorway that one may see in WC4, portraying Pharaoh and the infancy of Moses, there is no other scene suggesting maltreatment and suffering. Once again, the Jews of Dura knew their *Book of Exodus*. The city-gate is given importance, since that area is very significant in Near Eastern cities and towns for providing a communal setting. Simultaneously, Moses is portrayed using the city-gate to organize and lead the Children of Israel out of Egypt. The rounded Roman arch above the tympanum has a nude figure holding a spear and a globe. Because the statue was holding a globe, it may be deduced that it was an idol, and thus forbidden to Jews. This type of figure is a representation of an emperor, familiar in Greco-Roman art and made use of during the Roman Imperial Age. It is conceivable that the statue is representative of the emperor Hadrian, because he was repressive towards the Jews and forbade circumcision. This explanation may link together past and present. Firstly, the Jews were released from the city of Pharaoh, where they had suffered mistreatment, and secondly, they overcame the harsh edicts of Hadrian during their own era. As a result, the frescoe is a re-affirmation of Jewish identity, and it

underscores the idea that God's power extends beyond the Land of Israel and that divine providence will save the Jews of the Diaspora.

Roman characteristics are evident in the depictions of the Corinthian columns, representing the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud. These resemble columns in Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli (*ca* 135 C. E.). On the other hand, these pillars also represent an Achaemenian tradition of fire altars. The crenellated wall, which appear to be of ashlar masonry, is another Roman characteristic, also adopted by the Parthians. On the left of scene 1, Moses is seen standing and holding over his head a large staff in his right hand. Eastern and Western traits are combined in this pose, for Moses recalls the Greek Herakles holding a club. An Ancient Near Eastern tradition of depicting people of importance in larger scale and in the centre manifests itself twice in the representation of Moses in scene 2 of WA3. However, in scene 1, Moses is depicted following the Greek tradition of placing prominent people in the foreground. The portrayal of Moses in the Exodus panel is done in the typical Parthian frontal, stiff, static manner. The clothing shown on Moses, in both scene 1 and 2, is the Greek *chiton* and *himation.* He has short hair and no evidence of mustache. The dress and hairstyle are Greek in origin. A Roman trait becomes visible by the way the *himation* is rolled over Moses' arm on the frescoe. The portrait of Augustus of Prima Porta from early first century C. E. is shown in the same posture. Another Roman characteristic surfaces in scene 1, where four levels of Israelites are marching. The men appear to be organized as massed infantry, as portrayed on Trajan's column. The oval shields are Roman. However, the massed helmets of the soldiers show traits of Hellenistic style. The illusion of depth is another Hellenistic

characteristic, but this concept is adapted to the Eastern style featuring tiers or rows of figures in vertical depth with little importance attached to spatial effects.

The second scene in this panel, moving from right to left, shows a body of water filled with swimmers. In addition, a man can be seen connected by his action with the people in the water, followed by another man who is directing a multitude alongside a strip of water. This second scene, which is generally considered to portray the drowning of the Egyptians in the Sea of Reeds, shows the water in a vertical perspective. However, the swimmers are portrayed horizontally. This depiction is another Roman characteristic, which may be observed from the column of Marcus Aurelius in Roman Imperial art. In scene 2, the depiction indicates that Moses was not instructed to strike the sea, but rather to signal with his rod to the winds to blow back the water. Furthermore, this action by Moses is evident from the way he is holding his staff by his side. The two Hands of God are shown as the divine intervention separating the waters and thus allowing safe crossing on dry land for the Israelites. It is in the Dura frescoes that the depiction of the Hand of God is utilized for the first time in Jewish art.

Neoplatonic philosophy became important under the influence of the philosopher Plotinus. His teachings as seen in portraiture represent the inner emotions and spiritual qualities of a person. The depictions of Moses in scene 2 recall these aspects through their timeless and thoughtful expression.

As a symbol of fertility, the fish in WA3, scene 2, refer to the growing population of the Jews in Egypt. This immense fertility of the Jewish population is a sign of divine blessings given by God at Creation and after the Flood. According to the Midrash, fins

and scales are representative of Jewish survival, since they denote two important aspects of Jewish continuity. The Torah is compared to water, and the Jewish people to fish. Similarly, just as fish are not able to live outside of water, Jews cannot live without the Torah.

The *Midrash* underscores the point that the Jewish people of Dura were painting their Biblical stories from knowledge. As cited earlier, the splitting of the sea was a miracle. In fact, there were ten miracles involved. There was a gradual process of splitting the sea to help the Jewish people cross. This included a wall of water on each side of the opening, which was in the shape of twelve arches to shelter the Jewish people. This feature is shown on the frescoe by means of a curved line in scene 2 of the Exodus panel. This line was certainly not poor artwork, but intentional, and representative of Jewish knowledge of *Midrash* and Scripture. Moreover, these scenes emphasize the protection the Jews had in earlier times. Once again, when there is danger to their community, with the help of God they will survive.

In the discussion of the two panels, in chapter two, it was mentioned that there were certain links between the two frames. As a result of the survey, more connections surfaced between the Esther and the Exodus narrative. Both Esther and Exodus retell the escape of the Jews from a dangerous enemy, and explain the origin of a holiday to celebrate the escape. Passover is not mentioned in *Esther*, but Haman's decree was made known on the thirteenth day of the first month (*Esther* 3:12), which is thirteen Nisan, one day before the eve of Passover. Haman was impaled on sixteen Nisan, during Passover. Achasverous' sleepless night (*Esther* 6:1) was the "night of watching" that is, the first

night of Passover (*Exodus* 12:42). Later generations linked Pharaoh and Haman together with later tyrants who were seeking to harm the Jews. In fact, in the Rabbinic tradition, the deliverance of the Jews in the *Book of Esther* is looked upon as the deliverance of the Jews from Egypt (Berlin 2001: xxxvii-viii).

The Jews during their long history always had the Written Word without a need for any kind of illustration. However, the pagan temples at Dura used art, including frescoes, in the service of religion. Therefore, it stands to reason that the small Jewish community there would be part of this trend. Similarly, as noted extensively throughout this thesis, the local Durene characteristics were always prevalent in the frescoes of the Synagogue. However, this study has tried to show that the frescoes of the Synagogue, while adapting the methodology of the non-Jewish communities to show a commonality with the surrounding environment, were nevertheless designed for the Jews themselves. At all times, their Jewish roots and commitment to their faith is accentuated, although they were living in a society which for the most part practised pagan idol worship. Dura was under Roman hegemony, in which art and architecture formed the basis of the social and cultural world, and in which the individual's identity was measured in relation to that. In other words, images were the key in showing what it meant to be Roman (Elsner 1998: 91-92). Living under this type of influence and political conditions in which past circumstances seemed comparable and thus relevant to present concerns, the Jews of Dura turned inward and drew on their own stories to express their identity, but presented it in a style that was recognizable by and acceptable to their overseers. The main difference, as shown by the frescoes in the Dura Synagogue, is the use by the Jews in the

narratives of Scripture as well as many commentaries, such as the *Midrash* and others. Moreover, the paintings stand by themselves as a testimony to Jewish existence and identity. Fergus Millar states that "One of the most successful achievements of Graeco-Roman civilization was the removal of the memories and identities of the people whom it absorbed. Alone of all the people under Roman rule, the Jews not only had a long recorded history but kept it, re-interpreted it and acted on it" (Millar 1987: 147).

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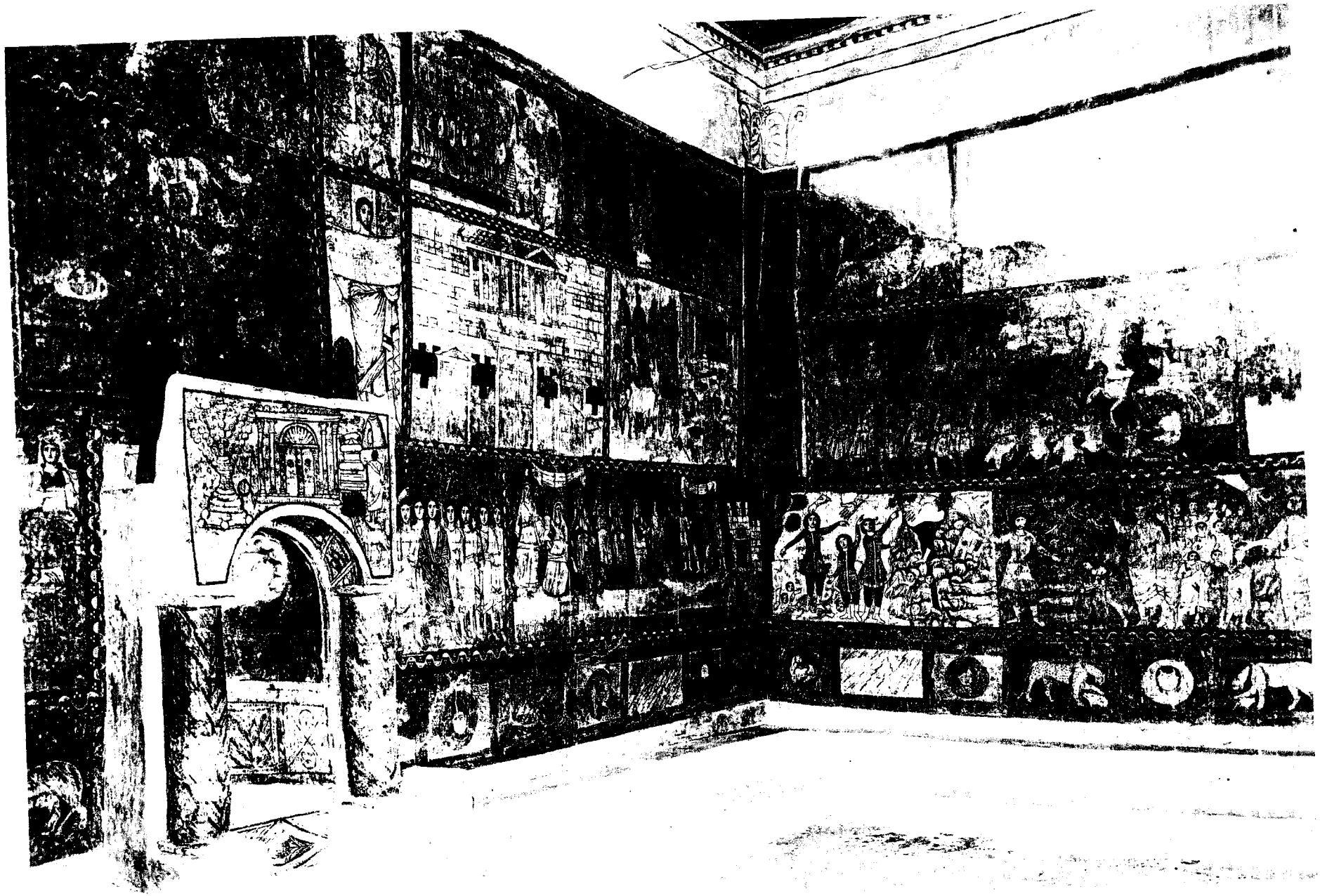
Illustrations

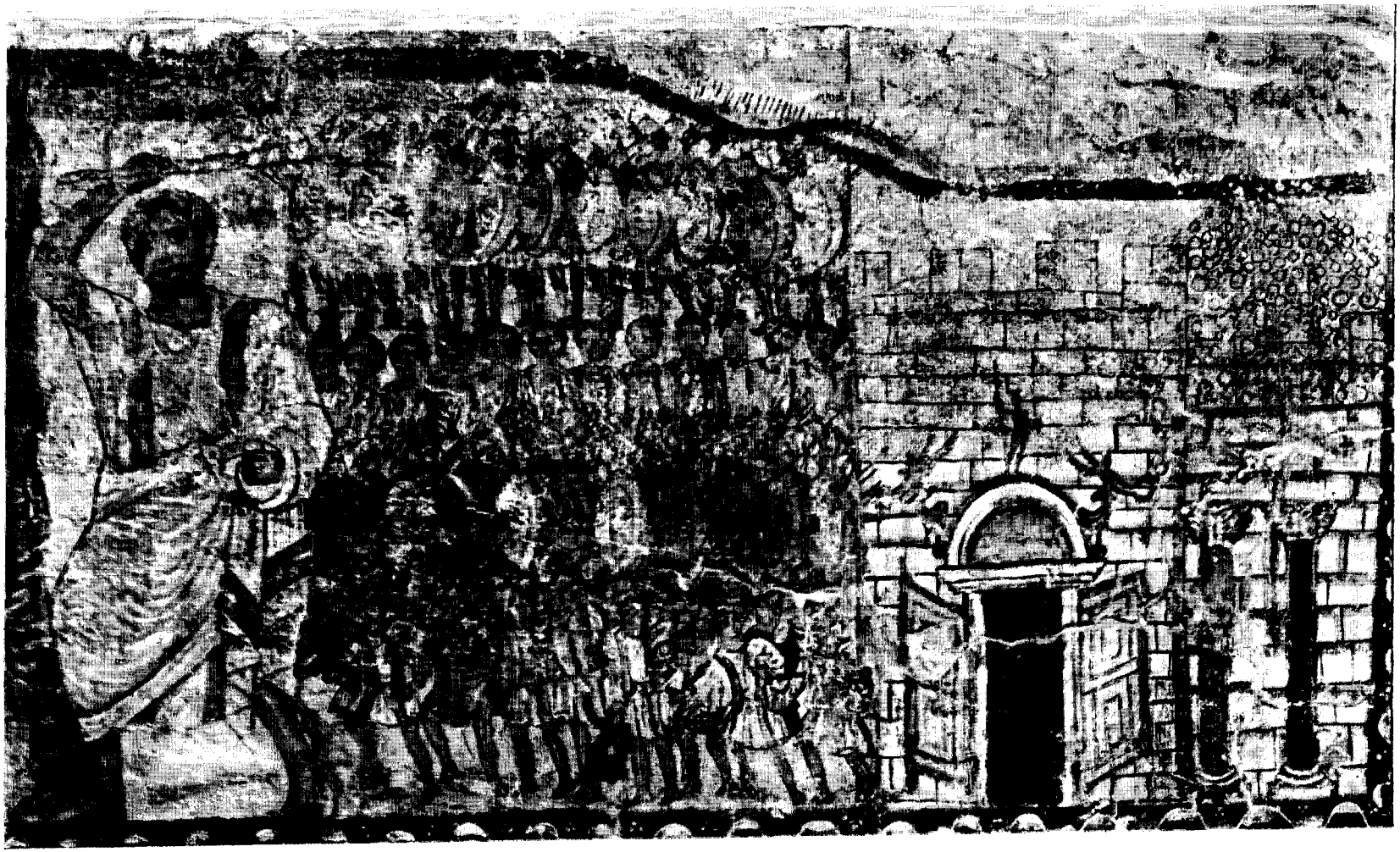


1. Dura Europos, synagogue, overall view

PLATE LXIV

PANEL WC 2. MORDECAI AND ESTHER, SCENE I

PANEL WC 2. MORDECAI AND ESTHER, SCENE 2



PANEL WA 3. EXODUS AND THE CROSSING OF THE RED SEA, SCENE I

PANEL WA 3. EXODUS AND THE CROSSING OF THE RED SEA, SCENE 2