THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW JEWISH ART IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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It is widely recognized that Jewish art in the pre-70 era, whatever its variety and levels of sophistication, was severely limited, in part owing to its popular and scattered contexts in the First Temple era and in part owing to the prevailing aniconic policy in Jewish society toward the end of the Second Temple period.1 By late antiquity, however, the nature and content of Jewish art had changed dramatically as Jews began to use figural representations of animals, humans, and even pagan mythological characters, biblical scenes, and a variety of religious symbols in their synagogues and cemeteries.

To explain this phenomenon, it has often been posited that the appearance of this new type of Jewish art was inextricably intertwined with the triumph of Christianity. Since the overwhelming majority of sites with Jewish artistic remains dates from the fourth century onward, it has been assumed that the challenges and threats presented by the new Verus Israel gave impetus to Jewish artistic creativity that found expression in the synagogues, cemeteries, and private homes of the period. Modern scholars’ efforts to compare and contrast various aspects of Jewish and Christian art from this era have often yielded interesting and illuminating insights.2

But what about earlier instances of similar Jewish art from the century before the ascendancy of Christianity? The well-known Dura Europos synagogue and the impressive necropoleis of Bet She’arim and Rome all date to the third century, the latter two continuing to function into the fourth and perhaps fifth centuries as well. These three

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sites offer a remarkable display of artistic expression unknown in earlier Israelite-Jewish history. What factors predating the rise of Christianity might have led to this significant spurt of creativity in Jewish art that stretched from Rome, through Palestine, to the eastern frontiers of the Roman Empire?

The answer, I would suggest, lies in a series of religious and cultural developments occurring throughout the Empire, though primarily in the East, during the first three centuries CE, which can explain the reinvention of Jewish artistic expression in dramatically new ways in the third century. Each of the three above-mentioned locales, widely separated throughout the Empire, was influenced by a different cultural context. We will begin our discussion by indicating the unique cultural context that contributed to the singularity of each and then turn to the finds from the sites themselves.

The Dura Europos Synagogue in Its Urban Religious Context

The religious ferment originating in the eastern provinces swept through the Roman Empire in the first three centuries CE; wave after wave of cults, many often referred to as mystery religions, succeeded in capturing the hearts and minds of countless individuals. Dura provides a rare look into the interaction between the forces at play in this city, which found expression, inter alia, in the local synagogue.3

Ironically, while Rome was pushing eastward, with one emperor after another (from Trajan to Gallienus, and later Julian) seeking to expand the empire’s territories in eastern Syria, Mesopotamia, and Babylonia, and while attempts were being made to spread the imperial cult and thus unite the various provinces religiously as well, a large number

3 These three centuries CE indeed witnessed the greatest penetration of eastern cults into the Empire, although Greek and Egyptian deities, as well as those from Asia Minor, appeared in Rome and Italy much earlier; see R. Turcan, *The Gods of Ancient Rome: Religion in Everyday Life from Archaic to Imperial Times* (New York, 2001), 105–54; B. Metzger, “Considerations of Methodology in the Study of the Mystery Religions and Early Christianity,” *HTR* 48 (1955): 1–20; and the comments of J.Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 1990), passim, and esp. pp. 99–115. A corollary of this development is the decline of the civic model of religion that had held sway for centuries, and with it the steady disappearance of social and political control over religion. For an enlightening example of this process with regard to Carthage, see J.B. Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustus to Constantine* (Oxford and New York, 1995).