THE JUDAISM OF THE SYNAGOGUES
(FOCUSING ON THE SYNAGOGUE OF DURA-EUROPOS)

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1 INTRODUCTION

There is a penalty for sharing my discoveries with the readers of this chapter: if I am to be honest, I must also inform them of the depths of our ignorance. Although the rabbinic and patristic literatures are vast, and although archaeological discoveries multiply, there are huge gaps in our knowledge. Thus, there is, in general, no reason to assume that in their synagogues the widely scattered Jews of antiquity, in the Roman, Parthian, and Persian empires and elsewhere, either followed or rejected the beliefs and practices described in the Mishnah, the Talmudim, and the rest of rabbinic literature.

Few texts tell us what those scattered Jews believed and did. Archaeology can uncover and identify synagogues, but only rarely can it tell us how they were used. For example, the overwhelming majority of the known ancient synagogue buildings contain no unequivocal evidence of a separate section for women. Should we infer that women were excluded from all such structures? Or that there were no restrictions on the presence of women? Only one known ancient synagogue has rather good evidence for a separate section for women. The variety of the buildings is such as to lead to the conclusion that local customs and local tastes determined the architecture of the synagogues and, probably, also the practices of the congregations.

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The Judaism of every ancient synagogue should be inferred as far as possible from the local evidence. Usually, that evidence, beyond the architecture of the building, is extremely sparse. In so many cases, nothing tells us when the synagogue was built, what officials presided, what rituals were performed, what prayers were said.

One ancient synagogue, the one at ancient Dura in Syria, stands as something of an exception to this rule (the local name of the town was "Dura"; when Alexander the Great conquered the area, the town received the Graeco-Macedonian name "Europos"). Even for that synagogue we do not know, for example, what regulations governed the presence of women. Inscriptions tell us that the structure in its final form (presumably without its paintings) was completed in the year 556 of the Seleucid era, in the second year of the Roman emperor Philippus, that is, in 245 C.E., after the vernal equinox.4

The inscriptions give the names and titles of officials at Dura, but we have to guess at their functions. A tiny parchment fragment gives us a piece of a grace after meals.5 An elaborate set of surviving wall-paintings lets us see something of the local practices with clothing and something of the community’s beliefs and hopes.

Although the paintings, now in the Damascus Museum, have deteriorated, early photographs and drawings and especially the copies made by the competent artist, Herbert Gute, let us know much of what originally stood on the walls.6 Some of the paintings

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4 Joseph Gutmann (editor), (The Dura-Europos Synagogue: a Re-evaluation [1932-1992] [“South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism,” edited by Jacob Neusner et al., Number 25; Atlanta, 1992], x-xi with xxxiii, n.1) condemns my dating and adheres to the 244/45 proposed by Carl H. Kraeling (The Synagogue, Final Report VIII, Part I of The Excavations at Dura-Europos [New Haven, 1956], 6, 223), but Kraeling stated his date without argument, and other scholars simply copied it. Mine has the following basis. The year 1 of the Babylonian Seleucid era used by the peoples of the Euphrates valley began in the early spring of 311 B.C.E. See Elias Bickerman, Chronology of the Ancient World (Ithaca, NY, 1968), 71; Richard A. Parker and Waldo H. Dubberstein, Babylonian Chronology, 626 B.C.-A.D. 75 (Providence, 1956), 37. Consequently, early spring, 1 C.E., is equivalent to the beginning of the year 312, and early spring, 245, is equivalent to the beginning of the year 556 of the Seleucid era. Furthermore, the second regnal year of the emperor Philippus began December 10, 244 (Ernst Stein, “Iulius 386,” Realencyclopadie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft, ed. by Pauly, Wissowa, et al., X [1919], 758), so that the completion of the synagogue came in 245 C.E., sometime after the beginning of spring.


6 Cf. my Semites, Iranians, Greeks and Romans: Studies in Their Interactions (Atlanta, 1990), 68-75.