

The Significance of the Dura-Europos Synagogue

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The Dura-Europos synagogue (Fig. 1) is a remarkable creation of the Hellenistic period. Its discovery in 1932 radically changed the art historical approach toward both synagogue architecture and the faith of Judaism itself.[1] Previously, evidence that suggested Hellenistic religions (pagan cults) played a role in Judaism was repressed, and the building's discovery has provided proof that certain aspects of Hellenistic culture and religion did indeed affect Judaism. This finding would ultimately reshape ideas about both synagogue architecture and the Jewish religion itself.[2] The fact that the synagogue does not follow the later Byzantine types of the third and fourth centuries reveals it as a unique and provocative example worthy of extra scholarly attention within both historical and art historical discourses.[3] Crucial aspects of the analysis of the building, relating to the geography and location of its construction, the architecture itself, as well as the frescoes within, reveal a fascinating picture that is still in need of interpretation.

IMAGE COMING SOON Fig. 1. Dura-Europos Synagogue. Syria. c. 3rd Century

Dura-Europos was built in the third century in the city of Dura, on the Euphrates River, in present day Syria. The city itself had a military purpose as Joseph Guttman explains, and was constructed mainly as a means to deter Sasanian attacks while simultaneously supplying goods to the Roman army. Furthermore, it was built without any future projections pertaining to the intellectual or cultural life of the city.[4] This is important in understanding the syn-

agogue's significance as it accounts more broadly for the specific types of architecture revealed to us by archeologists. Dura-Europos' construction, like the buildings surrounding it, has a cube-like appearance created by its high walls and flat roof.[5] In fact, the uniform appearance resulted from the conversion of a private home into the synagogue, enabling the synagogue to blend in with other residences.[6] In effect, by blending in with its surroundings, Dura's appearance lends to its less-than-obtrusive character, a fact significant for two reasons. Primarily, it demonstrates the lack of wealth of the Jewish community in a hierarchy dominated by the Romans themselves. Secondly, it demonstrates a need among Roman Jews to conceal their religion from the rest of the community as those of Jewish faith were victims of persecution during the course of the Roman Empire.[7] Judaic monotheism was incomprehensible to the Romans, which made their way of life possible only through seclusion. In the year 70 the Romans destroyed the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem; this building was and is still central in Jewish faith. While both synagogues were able to co-exist for a time, there was an almost consistent anti-Judaic sentiment within the Roman Empire. The fact that the Dura-Europos synagogue looked like a typical house and was on the outskirts of the Empire suggests that the Romans did not know it was a synagogue. This can be asserted because Christians used the same tactic of disguising their places of worship as when Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire, before 313.

The first presumption about the Jewish community is further justified through analysis of the synagogue's architecture itself. The most definitive evidence pertaining to the size and wealth of the Jewish population lies in the structure's location. The synagogue is situated just inside the western wall of the city, an area in Roman cities usually occupied by poorer residents. The centrally organized Roman city reflects the hierarchal organization of its layout from center to periphery, as according to the wealth of its inhabitants.[8] Dura occupied only the central portion of the block and, as revealed by further excavations of the surrounding site, shared its walls with a Christian house of worship. Additionally, worship houses of mystery cults have also been uncovered in the area. [9] This demonstrates the Jewish community's lack of control over the location of the synagogue. Had they been given the choice, they would likely have preferred a location separate from the Roman religious cults. This included Christianity, which was considered a cult among Jews of the time. Furthermore, suggestive of the lack of economic and social power, the synagogue does not conform to Talmudic law, wherein it is stipulated that a synagogue must be placed

at the highest point in a given city.[10] It should be noted that Talmudic law was written by the spiritual leaders of the Jewish faith (rabbis) and was closely followed by people of the Jewish faith. Thus, if the Jews in Dura had alternatives (economic means as well as power) it can be safely assumed that the Jewish community would not have chosen this site, when it clearly contradicts the proscriptions and teachings of the Jewish law. There is ample evidence that the details of the synagogue's construction grew out of a spirit of necessity and adaptation to local conditions, rather than as a result of deliberate choice.

A deeper analysis of the synagogue, particularly its renovations, has revealed a greater understanding of the history of Judaism and the corresponding transformations within the faith itself. Given that the structure dates to the Hellenistic period, there is a general correspondence in the peristyle construction; Dura-Europos maintains the physical characteristics of the style of the period[11] (Peristyle buildings are generally square in shape with a central room and a colonnade that encircles the entire building). In the year 245 the building was remodeled but maintained its original stylistic integrity, however it was enlarged and altered (Fig.2).[12] Additions included a forecourt placed on the same axis in the centre room, and more rooms added by taking over one of the adjacent houses.[13] Moreover, the alterations made to the prayer room (the center room) expanded the synagogue's capacity, and the Torah niche was permanently installed in the wall facing Jerusalem.[14] This enabled individuals to worship the scrolls and Jerusalem at the same time. This particular modification had repercussions on the understanding of the history of Judaism, as it indicates the beginning of directional worship. This is to say that the remodeling demonstrates an increased interest in the direction of the Holy Land, and the use of this element in prayer itself. Before this discovery, the emphasis on Jerusalem in Judaic ritual was thought to be the norm when in fact it was not. [15] Thus, the remodeling of Dura suggests that directional worship in the Jewish faith is a practice that has developed over time, not implemented at the development of the faith as it began to disperse geographically. Further, it suggests that Jewish centers outside of Jerusalem were previously not as bound to the faith in Jerusalem as once believed.

IMAGE COMING SOON Fig. 2. Dura-Europos Synagogue after renovations, Syria. c. 245.

The style and modification of the synagogue has provided scholars with other

grounds for re-evaluation of the history of Judaism in interesting social terms as well. This was evinced by the architectural layout, which allows for insights into the place of women within the synagogue.[16] Dura-Europos had only one prayer room, and there has been no evidence of a means of segregation between males and females. In the Jewish tradition, females are separated from the males during worship, yet the fact that at Dura there was no separation of the sexes has provided historians with the idea that female galleries, which are a common element in synagogues of this period, were not universal.[17] This missing architectural element raises three possibilities of how the services at Dura-Europos were conducted. These possibilities include, for one, that women worshipped in the assembly hall with men but entered through another entrance; second, that women went only as far as the adjoining room; and last, that women were excluded from the synagogue altogether.[18] Carl Kraeling advances the idea that the first possibility is the most plausible, as other synagogues have employed the use of a portable partition.[19] In his and others' opinions, this synagogue may have used these same measures. However, as there is a lack of any physical evidence of the use of a portable screen, how women were integrated into the service, (if in fact they were) remains ambiguous illustrating that Judaism, as a faith, did not always have a universal and concrete manner of dealing with issues of faith with regards to gender. Hence, the historical understanding of Judaism previously conceived before the unearthing of this synagogue is no longer acceptable.

The frescoes found in the synagogue have had a similar effect, if not greater, upon the understanding of Judaism in the 20th century. The wall paintings uncovered something about the faith that went previously unrecognized when discrepancies were revealed between Jewish tradition and the synagogue, namely, that Dura-Europos did not follow the second of the Ten Commandments, 'thou shalt not make graven images.' [20] No precedent for such artwork in the Jewish tradition is known.[21] Hence, the notion that Jewish laws against the depiction of images were upheld across centuries was dispelled with the excavation Dura-Europos, revealing that Jews in this period were directly influenced by the Hellenistic culture in which they were immersed.[22] That discovery lends to the notion that when one culture is immersed within another they are exposed to the influences of the dominant culture, and the Jewish population of Dura is no exception to this phenomenon. The strongly representational art on the walls of the synagogue are undeniable characteristics of other Hellenistic religions and cults, and for this reason demonstrates that Judaism drew

upon external societal influences to convey its messages and ideas.[23] This assertion is further illustrated by the readings of the frescoes advanced by scholars over the years. On the west and most famous wall of the synagogue (Fig. 3), is a painted figure of Orpheus playing to surrounding animals near a great tree that leads up to the ceiling (i.e. heaven).[24] Judaism borrowed the figure of Orpheus from the Greeks: he represents the “power of divine song to quiet human savagery.”[25] At Dura, Orpheus was a manifestation of the biblical hero David, and was presented as such because, according to the Jewish appropriation of the legend, Orpheus converted to strict monotheism (which was interpreted to be Judaism).[26] Therefore, Orpheus can be equated to David, as both individuals are said to be powerfully influential in the spread and success of the religion, a clear bond between Judaism and Hellenistic culture.

IMAGE COMING SOON Fig. 3. Wall with Torah niche, from Dura-Europos, Syria. C.244-45.

The other widely-accepted interpretation of the Dura wall painting is a messianic one.[27] The Jewish tradition stipulates that there will be the coming of an individual, the Messiah, who is appointed by God himself to liberate the people of Israel from their persecutors and restore the promised land to them, and ultimately to establish God’s way. On the wall containing the Torah niche (the west wall), the frescoes with the most prevalent messianic themes are depictions of the blessing of Jacob and his son, the Biblical story which relays the Messianic prophecy.[28] This idea is reinforced by the placement of the Messiah on his throne located just above the latter fresco. The painting, as explained by Stern, demonstrates an expression of “Messianic hopes of the Jewish community of Dura,” nothing less than the assertion of religious identity, not just simply a way of advertising their faith, a tactic of Hellenistic religious cults.[29] Rather, they are an expression of hope that their situation would be rectified and the nation of Israel would one day be restored. Moreover, the fact that frescoes disappeared in synagogues indicates a tightening up of the religious faith which may also be said of the introduction of directional worship. It is arguable that around the time of the renovation at Dura there was a movement of unification of the Jewish tradition, which would in turn give rise to the recognizable form of Judaism we know today.

In conclusion, as demonstrated through the analysis of the Dura-Europos synagogue, several facets of Judaism were understood differently after its discovery

and study. In particular, the discovery forced historians and art historians alike to reevaluate their understandings pertaining to both historical and practical Judaism. That is, the faith as it is known today has not always been the self-contained and traditional entity it is often projected as having been. The synagogue at Dura-Europos indicates that the prescriptions of Talmudic law had to be adapted given the relation of Jewish people with Roman culture. As revealed by the location, style and layouts of the synagogue, the Jews of Dura were in a position of subservience within the economic and political realms of the community. As well, the renovation of the synagogue indicates that there was a movement to redirect and connect worship with Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish faith. Perhaps the greatest testament to the former version of Judaism is the presence of the frescos, which not only exhibit a direct influence of the dominant culture upon the Jewish faith, but also exhibit a Messianic hope, which can be applied to the specific community of Dura and the Jewish community at large. The lack of evidence of any other building containing representational images after this point along the structural changes of Dura-Europos mark this building as the beginning of Judaism as we know it today.

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Endnotes

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- 5 Seager, 151
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27 H. Stern, "The Orpheus in the Synagogue of Dura-Europos" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 21.5(1958): 1.

28 Ibid. 2-3

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