

*SYMPOSIUM ON THE DURA-EUROPOS SYNAGOGUE PAINTINGS,
IN TRIBUTE TO DR. RACHEL WISCHNITZER, NOVEMBER, 1968:
THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF MORTON SMITH AND MEYER SCHAPIRO**

INTRODUCED AND EDITED BY STEVEN FINE

Academic conference lectures often afford important glimpses into the process of academic knowledge formation and performance in the period prior to publication. They are environments in which scholars try out new ideas and frequently take chances without the commitment implicit in publication. Conference invitations are often occasions to enter into and try on new areas of research and to formulate work for new audiences. Recordings and transcripts of academic conferences are, thus, important historical sources, reflecting the palimpsest nature of academic composition, presentation, and publication. When no publication results, they are often the only evidence of the conference having taken place and of the learning that took place.

On November 6, 1968 Yeshiva University held a conference on the campus of its Stern College for Women in New York, called, in a university press release, “Symposium on the Dura-Europos Synagogue Paintings, in tribute to Dr. Rachel Wischnitzer.” Long the “doyenne” of Jewish art scholarship, this event celebrated Wischnitzer’s retirement from Yeshiva University.¹ The participants included Dura excavator C. Bradford Welles (Yale University), art historian Blanche Brown (New York University), historian Morton Smith (Columbia University), philosopher David Sidorsky (Columbia

University), and art historian Meyer Schapiro (Columbia University), with Rachel Wischnitzer as moderator.² Shortly after the symposium, a young Vivian Mann, then teaching at Wichita State University, requested and received a recording of the conference, which she recently gave to me. The recording, both the original reel and in digitized form, now resides in the Yeshiva University archives. I am most pleased to present transcripts of two of the more significant contributions at this conference, those of Morton Smith and Meyer Schapiro, in this issue of *Images* honoring Vivian.

Morton Smith, (1915–1991), professor of Ancient History at Columbia University from 1957 to 1985, was an extremely influential, cutting-edge, and often provocative historian of ancient Judaism and Christianity. Smith’s knowledge of ancient Judaism, and his impact upon the development of Jewish studies during the second half of the twentieth century were profound. A former Episcopalian priest, Smith was deeply anti-clerical in his predilections, focusing his scholarship upon non-“orthodox” aspects of ancient Judaism and Christianity. In this sense, his work of “counter-history” was related to that of such New Testament scholars as Walter Bauer and E. R. Goodenough and his mentor and friend Gershom Scholem.³ Smith’s influence on

* The press release for this event is housed in the Yeshiva University archives. Many thanks to Shulamith Berger of the YU archives, Ellen Kastel of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) archives and Farris Wahbeh of the Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library for their kindness in the preparation of this article. This transcript is presented by permission of the Yeshiva University Archives, the JTS archives (Smith’s lecture) and the trustees of the Meyer Schapiro estate. Many thanks to Miriam Schapiro Groszof, emerita professor of Mathematics at Yeshiva University, for her insights and support of this project. I also thank Vivian Mann for her assistance in refining the transcription of Schapiro’s lecture.

¹ B. Narkiss, “Rachel Wischnitzer; Doyenne of Historians of Jewish Art,” in R. Wischnitzer, *From Dura Europos to Rembrandt: Studies in the History of Art*, (Jerusalem: Center for Jewish Art, 1990), 9–25. See also K. Feil, “A Scholar’s Life: Rachel

Wischnitzer and the Development of Jewish Art Scholarship in the Twentieth Century” (D.H.L. thesis, Jewish Theological Seminary, 1994).

² I list these scholars in order of appearance at the conference. According to the press release, Jacob Neusner was also scheduled to appear, though this did not occur. See R. Wischnitzer, “The ‘Closed Temple’ Panel in the Synagogue of Dura-Europos,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 91, no. 3 (1971), 372, n. 16, where the order begins, significantly, with Meyer Schapiro. Wischnitzer cites content from Smith’s lecture in this article. She provides a précis of the entire event in her “From My Archives,” *Journal of Jewish Art* 6 (1979), 13.

³ Smith’s correspondence with Scholem was recently published by G. Stroumsa, ed., *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem, Correspondence 1945–1982* (Leiden and Boston: E. J. Brill, 2008).

the academic study of Judaism and upon Jewish communal self-understanding is expressed in the work of his primary doctoral students, Jacob Neusner, Lee I. Levine, Shaye J. D. Cohen, and Seth Schwartz, each of whom studied and/or taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, where Smith's personal archives are housed today.⁴ Smith had a long and enduring interest in the Dura Europos synagogue, which he discussed in the context of seven distinct reviews produced serially with the publication of each section of E. R. Goodenough's thirteen volume *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York: Pantheon, 1954–68), and in a broad, often heated, correspondence with Goodenough about Dura that spanned almost two decades.⁵ Smith's lecture was composed in dialogue with Wischnitzer's early programmatic volume *The Messianic Theme in the Painting of the Dura Synagogue* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1949), with which he generally disagreed—even as he here suggests his own programmatic reading of the Dura paintings. While many of the themes of this paper are developed in his various reviews of Goodenough—he had not reviewed Wischnitzer's book, and, based upon the recordings, had never met her prior to the symposium—the abiding value of this talk rests in the more synthetic presentation that was made at this conference, where Smith's wit, sarcasm, good sense, and textual focus are evident. Smith spoke from a prepared text. The typed version of his

lecture is housed in his archives. The divergences from the typed version in the recording of Smith's presentation often add valuable explanatory material for the symposium audience. This transcript shows a preference for the oral presentation, while preserving, as far as possible, the syntax and spellings of the written text. Significant variants in the written text are presented in italics, and those in the oral presentation are underlined.⁶

Meyer Schapiro (1904–1996) received his undergraduate and graduate education at Columbia University and taught Art History at that institution from 1932 until his retirement in 1973. Born in Lithuania and raised in Brooklyn,⁷ this son of a former Orthodox rabbi turned Jewish “secularist” intellectual (*maskil*) and a traditionalist mother, maintained close Jewish communal and academic connections throughout his life. Schapiro tithed his income throughout his life, translated Yiddish poetry into English, late in life signed letters to Jewish colleagues in Hebrew, and, typical of his social group, described himself as “not a believer.”⁸ His scholarship and public lectures to Jewish audiences occasionally focused on Jewish subjects.⁹ Schapiro's Jewishness has been a subject of recent interest, including M. Olin's provocatively titled review essay, “Violating the Second Commandment's Taboo: Why Art Historian Meyer Schapiro Took on Bernard Berenson.”¹⁰

Schapiro lent his name and talents to two particularly significant Jewish book projects, com-

⁴ For broader discussions of Smith's oeuvre and influence see S. J. D. Cohen, “In Memoriam, Morton Smith” in *Josephus and History of the Greco-Roman Period: Essays in Memory of Morton Smith* (eds. F. Parente and J. Sievers; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 7–8; S. Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 35–46; A. Grafton, “Gospel Secrets: The Biblical Controversies of Morton Smith,” *The Nation*, January 26, 2009, www.thenation.com/coc/20090126/grafon/single (accessed January 27, 2009), and the bibliography cited by each.

⁵ *Anglican Theological Review* 36 (1954) 218–20; 37 (1955), 81–4; 39 (1957), 261–4; 42 (1960) 171–3; *Classical World* 59 (1965–6), 13; *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76 (1957), 324 ff.; “Goodenough's Jewish Symbols in Retrospect,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 86, no. 1 (1967), 53–68. See also Smith's obituary for Goodenough: “Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough (1893–1965),” *History of Religions*, 5, no. 2 (1966), 351–2. The correspondence is housed in the Morton Smith archive at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the E. R. Goodenough archive at Yale University. I hope to publish this correspondence in a separate publication.

⁶ Morton Smith Archive, box 13.

⁷ On Schapiro's life, with emphasis upon his Jewish identity, see H. Epstein, “Meyer Schapiro: A Passion to Know and to Make Known,” *Art News* (May, 1983):60–85; (Summer, 1983):84–95.

⁸ Epstein, “Schapiro” (Summer, 1983):91; J. Miller and R. I. Cohen, “A Collision of Cultures: The Jewish Museum and the Jewish Theological Seminary, 1904–1971,” in *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary* (ed. J. Wertheimer; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1997), 2:329. Schapiro's tithing was mentioned to me in the context of a lecture by Miriam Schapiro Grosz at Yeshiva University in October, 2009, entitled “My Father, Meyer Schapiro.” A recording of this program is housed in the Yeshiva University Archives.

⁹ Collected by D. Kuspit, “Meyer Schapiro's Jewish Unconscious” in *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History* (ed. C. M. Soussloff; Berkeley: University of California, 1999), 202–3; see also, M. Schapiro, *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1983), 27–34.

¹⁰ M. Olin, “Violating the Second Commandment's Taboo: Why Art Historian Meyer Schapiro Took on Bernard Berenson” *The Forward* (November 4, 1994). Prof. Olin tells me that this title was provided by the newspaper's editors. See also, L. Seidel, “Shalom Yehudin!: Meyer Schapiro's Early Years in Art History,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997):559–94 and Kuspit, *Schapiro's Jewish Unconscious*. A fuller study of Schapiro's Jewish identity will be possible once his archives are fully processed in 2010. See Seidel's review of *Meyer Schapiro Abroad* elsewhere in this issue.

posing an effusive preface to *Israel: Ancient Mosaics*, an exquisite oversized album in the prestigious UNESCO World Art Series (1960).¹¹ Despite the ecumenical title given to this article in his collected essays, “Ancient Mosaics in Israel: Late Antique Art—Pagan, Jewish, Christian,” this piece focused on Jewish mosaic art, particularly the Beth Alpha synagogue mosaic, which Schapiro purposefully ushered into UNESCO’s pantheon of “masterpieces of the world.” Schapiro expressed a transparent sense of delight in his introduction to the facsimile of the *Birds Head Haggadah* (1965–7)—itself the most important volume on medieval Jewish art of the post-War generation.¹² His introductions to these works as well as documents in his archives reflect a Jewish insider’s awareness, deep knowledge of the literature and monuments of Jewish art, and Schapiro’s attempt, which may be dated at least to the post-war period, to shepherd the integration of Jewish art—from late antique mosaics to medieval manuscripts and particularly modern artists, into the larger academic and museological conversation. This included support for museums and academic programs in New York (particularly The Jewish Museum) and in Israel,¹³ for refugee scholars such as Wischnitzer and my teacher the art historian Stephen S. Kayser,¹⁴ and for young scholars such as the art historians Mendel Metzger and Bezalel Narkiss, each of whom focused on medieval Hebrew manuscript illustrations. The significance of the Dura Europos synagogue to his own thinking and identity, and his commitments to both modernism and his deeply seated—though conflicted—New York-style Jewishness (*Yiddishkeit*, or perhaps as his daughter, Miriam Schapiro Groszof calls it, *Heimlichkeit*), are well expressed in Schapiro’s Yeshiva

University lecture, particularly in his approbation for Rachel Wischnitzer, and in various comments directed to this audience.¹⁵ The abiding value of this lecture resides in Schapiro’s deep and penetrating formal discussion of the synagogue “as painting,” an approach that has not been given sufficient attention in many recent analyses. Schapiro generally spoke from notes, and not from a written text.¹⁶ The version presented here, the last part of which is lost, is lightly edited to enhance readability.

MORTON SMITH ON THE DURA EUROPOS SYNAGOGUE

Professor Wischnitzer, Dean [David] Mirsky, Ladies and Gentlemen:

In paying tribute to Professor Wischnitzer’s work on the Dura Europos synagogue, I wish to recognize in particular its courage. It was an attempt to face the problem as a whole and to find a single theme to which all the paintings could be seen as contributory, and a single system of arrangement in which they would all have their proper places.

This shows more courage than I have. I am willing to admit that the paintings may have a single theme in principle of arrangement but I don’t see it. I see rather a number of problems and I want to point out briefly some of the elements which I think must be taken into consideration, and attempts to solve them.

First, although the building was clearly a synagogue, it contains some very surprising details: The representations of winged victories as acroteria of Aaron’s temple and of the closed temple in the paintings, the representations of Tyche-Fortuna on the doors of the closed temple and especially—especially

¹¹ M. Schapiro, “Ancient Mosaics in Israel: Late Antique Art—Pagan, Jewish, Christian,” in *Israel—Ancient Mosaics*, (ed. M. Schapiro and M. Avi-Yonah; New York: UNESCO and New York Graphic Society, 1960; repr. in M. Schapiro, *Late Antique, Early Christian and Medieval Art: Selected Papers* [New York: G. Braziller, 1979], 20–33).

¹² M. Spitzer, ed., *The Birds Head Haggadah of the Bezalel National Art Museum in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Tarshish Books, 1965–7), 2:15–19, rpt. “The Birds Head Haggadah: An Illustrated Hebrew Manuscript of ca. 1300,” in Schapiro *Late Antique*, 380–8.

¹³ Schapiro’s involvement in The Jewish Museum began in 1945 and he continued in an advisory role there and at JTS throughout his life, occasionally lecturing at the Jewish Museum. He served on the advisory committee that formulated Vivian Mann’s MA program in Jewish Art and Visual Culture

[conversation with Vivian Mann]; See Miller and Cohen “Collision of Cultures,” 329–30, 334–5, 341. Schapiro’s archives suggest that he was also involved with the Bezalel National Museum (later the Israel Museum, Jerusalem), the Museum of the Diaspora (Tel Aviv; see Epstein, “Schapiro,” 2:91), the Israel Academy for Arts and Sciences, the Center for Jewish Art of the Hebrew University and other Israeli cultural institutions.

¹⁴ See G. C. Grossman, “Dr. Stephen S. Kayser: A Personal Testimony,” in *A Crown for a King: Studies in Memory of Prof. Stephen S. Kayser* (ed. S. Fine, W. Kramer, and S. Sabar; Berkeley: Magnes Museum Press and Jerusalem: Gefen, 2000), 1–19.

¹⁵ Particularly telling is his glossing of “the beginning of our era” as “the AD era” (page 135).

¹⁶ This is made clear from the large numbers of lecture notes in his archives. Many thanks to Farris Wahbeh for this insight.

since a real temple of Tyche was just next door to the actual synagogue so there was no doubt about the fact that they knew she was being worshipped, the magical eyes and the heads of Flora on the ceiling all raise questions. The fact that the door sills contained foundation deposits of bones, reportedly human, which must have been put there at the time of the building, makes the question, especially purity law, rather acute.

In the original building, moreover, a man who came into the court from the street, had the entrance to the synagogue immediately on his right, but in front of him, on the far side of the court as he entered, was another room. It was beside the entrance to this room that the basin for washing stood, and in the middle of the floor of this further room there was a plaster block about two feet square and a foot high, having in its top a shallow depression marked by fire. In any other building this would be supposed the remains of an altar, and one would read such a floor plan as indicating the synagogue was for exoteric assemblies, the inner room for rites requiring purification and involving some burnt offering, at least of incense.

Such facts make one look more curiously at the paintings and their obvious divergences from the O[ld] T[estament]—Aaron, with a temple and a closed Temple, which nothing in the OT suffices to explain. When one looks elsewhere for explanations, the most obvious place to look is of course the material in the Targums and in rabbinic literature, especially that of Babylonia, so near in location and in date. And there is no doubt that this explains some details—the snake, for instance, in the sacrifice of the Baal priests reappears in rabbinic stories of the same episode. But even for such details one wonders whether or not the relationship is direct. Professor Neusner has argued that rabbinic influence in Babylonia at this time was still limited to a relatively small group. As for Palestine, the synagogue is unlike contemporary Palestinian types, and especially so in decoration. Nowhere else do we find such a wealth of pictorial and Biblical material. And nothing in rabbinic literature so far as I know it—which is down to a little after 200, that is within about 30 years of the synagogue's erection—nothing explains the major divergences. Kraeling has carefully collected parallels from the midrashim and the targums (usu-

ally of most uncertain date);¹⁷ they provide at best a peripheral commentary and it is worth noticing that they are mostly available only for pictures of which the Old Testament reference is, anyhow, reasonably clear. They explain modifications of detail and the familiar, not the unfamiliar.

The same may be said, I think, for the apocryphal and pseudepigraphic literature which, when it comes to details of Biblical exegesis, often has much in common with the rabbinic material. This argues that both literatures drew on the basis of common, popular, rather than specifically rabbinic, tradition. And here again it is such common tradition, rather than the particular works of the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha known to us, that was probably available in Dura. The works that have come down to us are largely Palestinian and Egyptian in origin and seem to have gone out of fashion a century earlier.

Even more remote would be the completely Hellenized Jewish literature of various sorts from pseudepigrapha like the Sibylline Oracles to philosophic and historical writers like Philo and Josephus. Here, too, there is a certain overlap in exegetic details which may come from common tradition. Beyond that it seems to me quite unlikely that the Jews of Dura read Philo or anyone like Philo. Dura was not an intellectual place. In the plentiful remains of papyri and parchments there was almost no literary material: A scrap of Herodotus, another scrap of Appian's history of the Mithradatic War (probably the reading of some Roman officer), a fragment from a dictionary, a piece of some Christian's copy of the Gospels and of some Jew's prayerbook—these are all that can be identified. Greek literary tradition knows of no writer from Dura; the excavators found lots of temples, a caravanserai, a military command post, baths, shops and private houses, but, so far as I know, no gymnasium—and at this time the gymnasium was the center for higher education. They found an amphitheater for gladiatorial games, but if I remember correctly, no theater.

So we come down from the literary to the popular level and look elsewhere for parallels. The magic eyes in the ceiling and the bones in the door sockets leave no doubt that members of the synagogue were practicing magic—we should have supposed this anyhow, since magic in this period of the ancient world is practically pandemic—but unfortunately

¹⁷ C. H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, with contributions by C. C. Torrey, C. B. Welles, and B. Geiger (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956).

we don't have much magical material from this area for another two centuries. Moreover, magical concerns even more than exegetic ones, would presumably be peripheral—that might explain details, but they would almost certainly not be the key to the whole composition. The most impressive—not to say depressive—characteristic of ancient magic is usually its triviality.

If one looked for something more systematic he might think of Christianity—but there is no trace of it. The Christians had a church at the other end of the next block, but there seems to have been even less exchange of ideas between the church and the synagogue than we should expect today. The Christian building also had painted walls in the same general style, but with iconography drawn almost entirely from the N[ew] T[estament]. Adam and Eve, and a scene which has been recognized by the eye of archeological faith as David killing Goliath, are the only exceptions. The general style appears also in neighboring pagan temples. If only the preservation of the paintings were adequate it might be possible to make out something of the fortunes of the local firm of fresco painters, which seems to have done a good business in the last years of the city, no doubt as a consequence to the growth of the Roman military establishment.

The question of local fashions leads to that of parallels from local paganism, which seems to have been a mixture of native Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman, Arabic, Parthian and Persian elements. Of these we can most easily recognize the Greco-Roman—Flora, Psyche, Victory, Tyche and probably divine figures on the doors of the closed temple, the remotely Dionysiac animals on the dados, and so on, as well as *typical* pagan groups taken over to service as elements in O[ld] T[estament] pictures—the three nymphs doing service as handmaids of Pharaoh's daughter in the finding of Moses are good examples. A good deal of this may be due to the local painters who were used to painting certain figures and, when they had to make up a scene, used the familiar figures to fill in, or as a matter of fact, even for the main figures: Moses stands in front of the burning bush (with his back turned to God Almighty) in the typical posture of an ancient orator for whom the audience is more important than the Deity. Two more orators doubling as prophets flank the resurrected dead in the Ezekiel picture, and the

resurrected themselves, in their costumes and gestures, are suspiciously like city counselors greeting an Emperor. That any intellectual significance is to be attached to most such parallels is unlikely, but even if it were it would illuminate, for the most part, only peripheral details: For the pictures as a whole it seems likely that the assimilation of this Judaism had not gone far beyond matters of costume, fashion and perhaps general *Weltanschauung*. The great majority of the pictures certainly come from the OT, so that brings us back to the possibility that the others or even the probability that the others come from the OT too, although we can't understand the means of their derivation. If we want to find a uniting element in the pictures beyond this common OT origin which may be plausibly supposed but not demonstrated, we have therefore to look to the OT to the content of the pictures themselves and as interpretations of the OT.

The problem here is the great diversity of subjects and the apparent discontinuity of most of the pictures. Kraeling's attempt for instance to discover "an interest in the actual continuity of the historical process"¹⁸—an attempt to retell the OT story—broke down on the discontinuity of the pictures as I point out in my review in JBL [66 (1957) 324ff.]. At that time I propose[d] to see in the pictures a collection of representations of the great works of God—the moments when He intervened more-or-less directly to save Israel or to punish sinners or to protect some righteous man or right some wrong. This would fit most of the scenes of which the subjects can be securely identified—Elijah's sacrifice, the punishment of the Baal prophets, the raising of the son of the widow who befriended Elijah, the triumph of Mordecai and Esther, the deliverance of the ark from the Philistines, the choice of David, the finding and adoption of Moses, the dream of Jacob, the resurrection of the dead, the giving of water in the Wilderness, the binding and deliverance of Isaac . . .

[Wischnitzer: Do you want to show the slides?]

Smith: No, I don't think, I suppose the audience is familiar and we lack time. They'll see them when Professor Shapiro talks anyhow. I am just going over the topics and you can see . . .]

. . . the *akeidah*, the deliverance from Egypt, the deliverance of the ark from the Philistines, the choice of David, the finding and adoption of Moses, the

¹⁸ Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 350. See similar language on p. 356.

dream of Jacob, the resurrection of the dead. You've got all of them, moments when God intervenes in history. No great connection, no single connection between them but rather great acts of the deity. Now, such disjointed collections of *aretai*, that is great deeds, and *epiphaneiai*—revelations—of various gods were popular in Greco-Roman religion at this time, and it would be understandable that Greco-Roman Jews should have collected from the OT similar stories, with which, in fact, it abounds. In this event the lack of apparent order would be explained. We have quite a lot of examples of them especially in literary core, collections of miracle stories, one miracle after another. You probably are familiar especially with the most, one of the groups that are best known, the four gospels which are collections of miracles of Jesus strung together without much relationship between one miracle and another. Here was a blind man and then there was a girl who was at the point of death and then there was a man possessed by a demon at another time, and so you go on from one great work to another. You have the same thing for instance for Isis and for Athena Lindias and for other deities too. It would be understandable that the Greco-Roman Jews should have collected from the OT similar stories with which in fact it abides. In this event, the lack of appropriate order in the synagogue paintings would be explained, but then it would be necessary to explain the order, and this is where the aretalogical theory falls short. For the pictures are undeniably centered on the Torah shrine, and some, at least, are arranged around it by parallelism. The section immediately over the shrine was repainted, not simply freshened up but extensively reworked and this suggests, as Goodenough argued, concern with its meaning and deliberate intent to find forms which would express precisely what was wanted. As it stands now, the section over the shrine seems to me the tree not of Jesse but of Abraham. From the sacrifice of Isaac and the sacrificial worship of Jerusalem at the bottom grows the vine of Israel strengthened by the blessings of Jacob, to bear David the psalmist and the Lion of Judah and eventually to flower in the messianic King and the regathering of the twelve tribes. The king is shown with his real guards on either side of him, as is Marcus Aurelius often in his column of the preceding century. This central panel is unquestionably set off by the long, narrow panels on either side of it with their enigmatic figures, and these are flanked by paintings of similar content—at the bottom we have two saved

babies on the outside, the son of the widow at one corner, Moses saved from the Nile, at the other and two Jews attaining royal power, Mordecai on one side, David on the other, in the pictures next to the Torah shrine, above these we have two temples an unmistakable antithesis and if you look at the whole front wall you see that with the high central panel and the broad base, these parallel pictures make a great triangle in the front wall, an area that is centered around the vine of Abraham over the Torah shrine. I can only suppose the Temple of Aaron is the tabernacle of the wilderness and the closed Temple the Temple of Solomon, which, since its destruction, is inaccessible in its archetype in heaven. If this analysis is correct, I suppose that therefore that I should agree with Professor Wischnitzer in seeing the Messianic hope of Israel as the central theme of the paintings, and I should say this theme, with the attached parallel pictures, justifying the Messianic hope by the examples of Mordecai and David and the "fact" of resurrection from the dead and by Moses' miraculous salvation, and looking backward from the worship to the past and forward to the restoration of the Temple. This theme of messianic hope has thus been developed in the big central triangle of the front wall and I would suggest the space around this in the other pictures filling the corners of the front wall and the side and rear walls were examples of filling in by representation of the mighty acts of God without, so far as I can see, apparent order in accordance with the fashion which we see exemplified in the aretology of Greco-Roman times which are contemporary with these paintings.

Thank you.

MEYER SCHAPIRO ON THE DURA EUROPOS SYNAGOGUE

Before I turn to the material of my talk, I want to express my appreciation of Mrs. Wischnitzer. Mrs. Wischnitzer is a unique scholar in the field of the History of Art. There have been many historians of art, some of great eminence, who were Jews. She is the only one, to my knowledge, who has for forty-fifty years consistently explored the field of Jewish art. It was widely recognized that this is not a major field. It does not have world historical importance. It is often a rather provincial and folkloric bypath. It does not involve the discovery of masters of great genius. Hence, to devote oneself to this field

is, it seems to me, an act of piety and dedication of an exceptional kind. Then, suddenly, in the most unexpected way, there came a sort of reward or confirmation of her interest in the unearthing of the synagogue of Dura; for here was a work of painting which was immediately an object of prime concern to all scholars in the field of early Christian art, late classical art, medieval art, and to some extent the history of religions. It was crucial for the whole history of art because it was the oldest example of a type of art which is developed later in the great Christian basilicas, in the cathedrals of the Middle Ages, [and] in Renaissance art; a type of art which is characterized by a highly organized, systematic decoration of the interior of a sacred building, with imagery which is organized on the basis of both theological and liturgical or ritual ideas—and, which depends, finally, on a sacred text. The decoration of Greek temples [or] of Egyptian temples cannot be deduced simply from a fixed standard text and a liturgy connected with the text. But a large part of Christian art, like the mosaics of San Vitale, like the great cycles of Old and New Testament decoration, and the decoration of the apses of the Christian churches—works of art which were the occasion for the production of sublime qualities of color and of form and of expression—these depend upon the concept of the work of art as bound to a sacred text and to a congregation and a community which performs prayers or liturgy within that space. That is a unique situation, and the oldest work of that kind that we know is the synagogue of Dura—at least, it is richer, more complete in that respect—than the contemporary small baptistery chamber in the same center of Dura. That centrality of Dura, then, most unexpected to all scholars in this field, making the study of Dura a problem for the new understanding of the whole subsequent tradition, is a question which is apart from the question of the intrinsic aesthetic value, can be paralleled by the daring and also very attractive thesis of an American historian of philosophy, Harry Wolfson.¹⁹ [Wolfson argues] that the whole history of philosophy can be divided into three periods. The first period of the Greeks, marked by daring independent speculation and reasoning in which the mind of the philosopher is free from the constraints of religion or dogma. Then a new period, which lasts from the beginning of our era,

the A.D. era, until the seventeenth century, in which the major problems of philosophy and the answers to them cannot in their large systematic character, be separated from the theological commitments of the philosopher. He must make his philosophy, finally, into a whole, which bears upon doctrines already set in advance to which he is committed. Then, according to Wolfson, this change which has been instituted by Philo, the first philosopher, who inheriting the whole of Greek wisdom and knowing the great Greek philosophers, introduced the relevance of theology, the Bible, the [sacred] texts, the necessity of consistency within this framework—that came to an end with Spinoza. The history of philosophy is, therefore, punctuated at two major points by Jewish philosophers, Philo at the beginning of this era and then Spinoza at the beginning of the modern era. Spinoza, for him, was the first philosopher who dared to philosophize completely systematically, consistently—without appealing to the authority of a sacred book or feeling the necessity of squaring his conclusions and his methods with what a member of a religious group believes. That is, the beginning of a purely secular philosophy, so to speak. Now I do not know if this is a correct account of the history of philosophy, and everyone is bound to ask, Isn't it a coincidence that a Jew made this hypothesis? But then, perhaps, only a Jew could discover this sort of relationship, so the arguments would work both ways.

At any rate, we are confronted by the paintings of the synagogue of Dura, then, as the first considerable complex of painting in which a large interior has been decorated with images, organized around a set of ideas, which come from not just the religion, not just the liturgy, but from sacred books, from a canonical text. That is not quite the system of decoration on Greek sarcophagi or on Greek and Roman temples—and yet it has been supposed that there did exist sacred books of antiquity and that even in one cult, Mithraism, sacred books—written scrolls—might have provided the models or the themes for the decoration of the Mithraic temples. But, that has never been proved, it is only a conjecture of the great scholar Franz Cumont, who contributed so much to our knowledge of Mithraism. I shall not go further into this aspect of Dura. It is a problem which is difficult to resolve because we

¹⁹ H. A. Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).

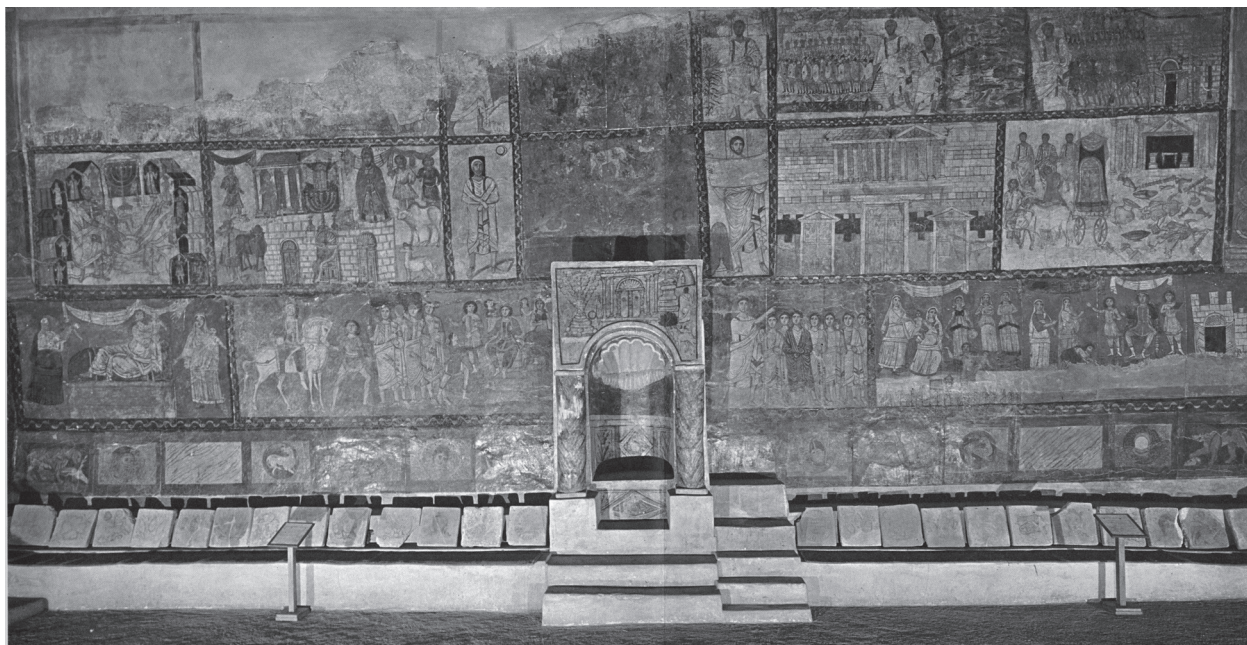


Fig. 1. Dura Europos Synagogue, western wall, reconstructed in the Syrian National Museum, Damascus (photograph by Fred Andereg, after E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* [New York: Pantheon, 1964], 8, fig. 1).

have so few works of that time. We do not know whether there existed in the second century A.D., or the beginning of the third century A.D., among the numerous cults in Mesopotamia and western Iran or in the eastern Greek speaking regions or in the Near East, some sects, some cults which had sacred books and which undertook to decorate their places of assembly or their places of burial with themes and with an ordering of themes depending upon the unity of ideas in their sacred book or a selection based upon it.

What I wish to do this evening, to show a few slides to illustrate characteristics of the painting of Dura which belonged to Dura as painting rather than as religious illustration or as imagery. But no doubt, some of you, committed to the thesis that all form is bound up to a definite content and that form is always an expression of some underlying content—which is a hypothesis, a respectable one—it is very useful, sometimes, in discovering hidden relationships, but nevertheless is an assumption. It is not something that one can easily demonstrate by pointing to these relations in a clear concrete manner. I would like to show you, first of all, a view of the interior of the Dura synagogue, the west wall in particular and to describe it in such a way that we will be able to see . . . (fig. 1). The wall offers the painter and what has been called his “philosopher advisor,” with an extensive surface which he can use

in many possible ways. What method does he use to space his pictures? What principle guides him? One can observe in the banding horizontal zones, a similarity to old oriental monuments in which scenes are developed horizontally in series, processions of figures in an obvious parallelism across the field. There is also a Greek method, which is somewhat different from the old oriental method, which sets single scenes in closed frames with an ornament around the four sides and sometimes defines the broad horizontal fields into a great many small fields. That relationship of the Greek method and the oriental method is quite evident, and from that alone we could infer that the paintings of the synagogue of Dura belong to a world in which old oriental and Greek methods meet. However, instead of pointing out details of classical character and of oriental character in the paintings of Dura—that has been done by everyone who has studied the paints of the synagogue of Dura—I would like call attention (next slide please, [fig. 2]) to certain characteristics which are of a more independent, local, spontaneous character and yet which we recognize very readily as somehow universal or as occurring in many other places at least.

Among the figures which wear a Greek-type of costume and which are drawn in a manner that reminds us strongly of Greek and Roman works such as Mrs. [Blanche] Brown has shown you [in her lec-



Fig. 2. Abraham(?), Dura Europos Synagogue (photograph by Fred Andereg, after E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* [New York: Pantheon, 1964], 11, pl. V).

ture], among them are certain figures whose postures are very unlike classical postures. For example, this figure of Abraham appears before us with his arms folded across each other, his hands high and covered by the cloth. That axis, that is formed by the clothing, by the drapes, which have a rather un-organic character—they do not present the aspect of a real

body, are carried down in folds which zigzag in a symmetrical very regular, rhythmical way . . . and the feet stand apart without that expected grace of a classical figure which relaxes on one leg while carrying the main weight of the body on the other leg. This air of rigidity and self-immobilizing posture, with the inhibiting of gesture is connected with some



Fig. 3. "Ezra," (identified by Smith as Moses), *Dura Europos Synagogue* (photograph by Fred Andereg, after E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* [New York: Pantheon, 1964], 11, pl. V).

meaning of the body. It is a spontaneous invention of a posture, which is highly expressive and characterizes a sacred figure at a moment of revelation or some sort of religious experience; it is a mode of expressing extreme humility or acceptance or participation, a posture which, I believe, will hardly

be found in classical Greek or Roman works. It does not appear on any of the thirty to forty pictures that Mrs. Brown showed you. Next slide.

The figure of Ezra (fig. 3), or one who has been identified as Ezra—we are not all together certain about the names of some of these figures. Ezra is

shown in a classical robe, this time with the contrast of the two legs; one which bears the weight, the other which is more relaxed, flowing on one side, loops on the other side—hanging a type of balance which is very classical in spirit. The Romans and Greeks love to represent human beings as partially bound to physics in their postures and partially free, ready to move, showing the beginning of a gesture or of an action. This figure, set in that posture, carries before it a huge scroll, which makes a cross with the body and which is much more pronounced as an element than either the head or any other part of himself. The idea of subordinating the appearance of the body to an object which is not human, which is not animal but which nevertheless represents the basic meaning of this figure—it is Ezra reading or exposing the Law to the Jews upon their return and rewriting or copying this, so to speak—creating a canonical example of the law—that is a conception which is foreign to the Greeks who did not know a sacred book and did not represent a figure whose book belonged to the whole people as such rather than representing an individual creation. As a result, the form of the figure is in contrast with the form of the big bare exposed horizontal—which opposes its vertical. It is a new kind of architecture, an inspired conception that belongs to the specific moment of religious experience or religious recognition of the meaning of a figure who belongs to the canonical tradition, to the sacred book, and itself is, as it were, the bearer of the sacred book, the renewer of the sacred book. Next slide please (fig. 1).

Let us return to the form of the wall as a whole. A wall painting is a complex problem of planning, of dividing a wall surface so that it does two things. It must provide the adequate space for the clear representation of a series of themes or images; but it must also appeal to the eye as a wall with colors. How does the artist conceive that wall? He adopts a solution which at first looks rather classical, in that there is a central axis, a main line, which is that of the Torah niche, and then he draws horizontal and vertical lines in order to provide a great many panels in which to set his themes—and in doing that, he seeks symmetry. He balances, as has been pointed out [in Morton Smith's lecture], one set of themes by another, but also fields by another. For example,

above this arch-niche [the Torah shrine], there are the four figures of Abraham, Ezra, and Moses and another, which are strictly symmetrical in respect to each other. Then, as has been observed again, there is the theme of Elijah and the widow's son with the Esther story and then the anointing of David and the story of the infant Moses saved. You will observe that the backgrounds of the outer themes are red and red below and the strong background of the middle axis red and red again. There is, then, in this seemingly random collection of subjects, apart from their meanings, apart from the correspondences of the stories themselves, as examples of divine intervention, as has been said, or as containing some messianic element within them; there is an order based upon [a] central axis and upon a symmetry which is reinforced by arbitrarily chosen accents of color—strong reds at two ends [in the Purim and baby Moses panels], strong reds in the middle above [the Torah shrine]. When you enter, your eye immediately experiences the harmony or order of the whole through choices which are like the choice of tones, of words in a poem, of rhymes or of a recurrence which is placed strategically in order to accentuate the most important theme or to give a bounded, closed, clearly distributed character to the whole . . . [the recording here is lost].

[Professor Schapiro then continues with the placement of the individual scenes on the western wall of the synagogue (figs. 1).] . . . Now, this vertical line [that divides the image of WC 1;²⁰ Elijah Reviving the Widow's Child in the lower band from WC 2; the Purim scene to its right] is to the right of the vertical above [in the middle band, that separates from WB 1; The Wilderness Encampment from WB 2; Aaron in the Tabernacle] and more than that, the artist has narrowed the two uppermost scenes [in the upper band] by painting imitation pilasters, flat architectural applied members [to the far left and right] in the upper two fields, but he [the artist] does not carry them down to the bottom. There is, therefore, constructed an independent architecture which is not a constructive architecture and is not the result of the masonry or the way in which the wall itself has been built. It is a completely free layout of elements, which the artist has devised in order to make the scenes work with the eye in a

²⁰ Kraeling's designations, which correspond to figure 4.

particular way. I shall not be able to talk about that or investigate that now—but I wish to emphasize the fact that . . . given the large seeming order and symmetry and centralized character, there appear a large number of arbitrary breaks with it, deviation from it, which balance themselves out somehow. Notice also that if we look upon these variables and horizontals as jointings of masonry, so the whole wall is composed in layers like the walls of the outside of the building—that each joint is really a rectangle, that the awning around each scene is not continuous all the way across but moves . . . along horizontally, goes down and around that way on many of the scenes. And that effect tends to overcome the simple horizontal vertical division. You may describe this then as a system in which there is an asymmetry or an un-axial character of certain elements a staggering of the verticals with respect to one another on the different storeys.

What does this kind of artistic play mean? Is it the result of a high order of sophisticated design in which an artist tries to avoid the perfectly regular and smooth, correct the coldness of classical design in which beginning with a fixed framework everything follows from it and is fitted into it. Or is it, as some have observed, the result of a lack of artistic skill, the inability to devise a strict scheme which will serve throughout and needs, therefore, to what one may call rather an empirical approach, the artist working piecemeal having a broad idea of the layout . . . finishing one scene and then looking for room for the next and then room for the one after that and until finally the whole is completed. Without holding strictly to a design that has been set out fully in advance. The latter type of form is what we see particularly in folk art, in samplers, in designs made [in] homemade work, in which one starts at one corner and finishes at the opposite in stages—with only a broad or rough idea of what the final outcome will be. Next slide please (fig. 4).

However, there is one type of actual construction at that time, one plan of buildings of the middle of the third century, in nearby Iran—of which the inhabitants of Dura were surely conscious, since their whole economy depended in part on it—and toward which they turned also because of the great struggles between Persia, the new Sasanian monarchy, and the Romans at that very moment. Well, in the decade of the 240s this great palace of the new Sasanian ruler, Shapur [I, in Ctesiphon], shows on the façade, beside an immense central barrel vault

of which the arch is exposed today—great walls, flanking walls, with niches and engaged shafts. You will notice if you try to follow through the forms of these shafts that although in some cases there is a clear closure of units—big shafts, embrace three niches or one niche or two niches. On the next stage, the vertical lines do not coincide strictly with the one below; and then above, there are still more staggering of elements—though they are not in strict alignment. Here again, the question arises, is that a willed artistic solution of a high order due to a pace or flickering effect as opposed to the strictly aligned effect and constructive effect of elements which are always arranged according to fixed axes—that show up in every stage of the building in a simple sequence? Or, as I said, is it a choice based upon an entirely different principle. In any case, it is remarkable to observe how in dividing the wall in Dura, the artist chooses a method of subdivision and alignment with staggering of the verticals and horizontals on the different levels, a solution which occurs also in nearby Iran, in the palace of the great Sasanian ruler. Next slide please. . . .

For the folkloristic and relatively primitive home-made aspect of the design of the whole wall, there is striking evidence within certain of the themes. Where the artist has to represent a crowd, a throng, many closely packed figures—a subject which represents for us a relative disorder or randomness of objects, figures thrown together—the artist tends on the contrary to align them in an extremely regular way, perhaps because in certain instances he wishes to express the quality of a disciplined army, of a marching group which has its own military rhythm. But notice how in the crossing of the Red Sea (fig. 5), the army of Israel is shown in such a way that you can count: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, and so on. These ten all are painted reddish, they carry standards, which in contrast to the roundness of the heads are a little squared, also to be read in that way. Then in the costume, there is a figure in yellow, a figure in red, a figure in yellow, a figure in red. The rhythm changes from A1, A2, A3, A4, A5 to A1, B1, A2, B2, A3, B3, and so on. Then there is a third rhythm in the shield, then the red and the yellow, a red and a blue. A red and a yellow. A red and a blue. It is therefore AB, AC, AB, AC instead of AB, AB. There are, therefore, three types of rhythm, three kinds of couplings of elements beginning with sheer repetition without change . . . [The recording ends here].



Fig. 4. Palace of Shapur I in Ctesiphon (photograph by the American Colony, Jerusalem, Photography Department, 1932).



Fig. 5. Moses at the Red Sea, Dura Europos Synagogue (photograph by Fred Andereg, after E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* [New York: Pantheon, 1964], 11, pl. XIV).