How would worshippers of one of the gods or goddesses of Dura-Europos—Baal Shamin’ or Hadad, Gad or Mithras, Zeus Kyrios, Adonis, Tyche or Nemesis—have reacted, should they have penetrated, perhaps after attending a nearby temple, into the interior of the Synagogue, through its doorway that opened onto a narrow street adjacent to the east-facing town wall, a couple of blocks away from the main gate? Perhaps overwhelmed at first by the highly colored (as they were in those days) paintings that covered every inch of the walls, they would have quickly taken in the somewhat unfamiliar Torah shrine construction, centrally positioned on the west wall facing them, and then their eyes would have been drawn to a particularly disturbing panel, two to the right of the shrine, where two male cult statues of familiar local type (looking rather like the painted Adonis familiar from a local temple)? are shown flat on their faces outside a cultic building whose door is standing wide open. The two statues evidently represent the same image at different moments. The second statue has his head and some extremities detached from the torso, and both obviously have tumbled out of the temple along with assorted cultic utensils, all in total disarray. This unusual scene appears within a sequence representing the dramatic story of the capture of the Ark of the Covenant and its fate among the Philistines. It is the longest surviving sequence in the middle register (B) of the west wall, which is the widest of the three registers that carry the narrative panels around the Synagogue.

The picture of the toppling of the Philistine God Dagon is a highpoint of the Dura synagogue’s art, described by Carl H. Kraeling as “the most spirited and provocative” of those still visible. In fact, two scenes are combined into one in this panel (WB4, fig. 7.12), based on dramatic events recounted in 1 Samuel 4–6. The Israelites were twice disastrously defeated by the Philistines at Eben-Ezer. Their most sacred object, the Ark of the Covenant—which had been with them through their wilderness travels and housed, by divine commandment, the tablets of the Ten Commandments given at Sinai—not only failed to rescue them when they brought it to the battlefield but also was itself traumatically captured and placed beside the statue of Dagon in his temple at Ashdod. Two nights in succession, the Ark caused the cult statue to fall flat on its face; the second time the head and extremities were found lying separately on the threshold. Following this, the Ashdodites, who had in addition been afflicted with tumors and their land stricken, decided to move the Ark elsewhere. But it wreaked havoc wherever it went. After seven months, the decision was made to send
the Ark back to its owners in a cart drawn by two cows, heading for Beth Shemesh and accompanied to the border by drivers. The Philistines would also indemnify and honor the God of Israel, whose protection of his people had indeed been overwhelmingly demonstrated. The same panel also covers this sequel, while the scene of the battle itself, though a Jewish defeat, is portrayed with relish at the west end of the much more damaged north wall in a panel (NB1) that leads straight on to the more prominent west wall scene. The Ark is garlanded and decorated for its return, the cows are goaded along by carters in Iranian dress, and other figures similarly garbed may represent the priests and diviners of the Philistines.

Would those local visitors have been offended by the depiction in the Synagogue of a prone and broken cult statue, one whose appearance was readily identifiable in appearance with a member of the local pantheon? Did the story of Dagon’s destruction (albeit temporary) speak of polytheism mocked by monotheism? In modern terms, this image would be profoundly insulting, a visual blasphemy on what was most sacred to the faith of others. On the other hand, ancient visitors might well have been awed and impressed by such a display of overwhelming divine might. Would the visitors have gone on to look around at the wealth of pictorial evidence in the prayer hall attesting to this Deity’s other triumphs and great deeds, a veritable pictorial aretology? Might they then have set themselves to wondering whether it would not be prudent to show respect to this Lord of Lords, just as the Philistines had had to do in the end (though our viewers could hardly have known that without being told); or like Heliodorus in 2 Maccabees (3:21–28), when he proclaimed the greatness of Israel’s god after experiencing to his cost the holy angels’ protection of the Temple against its enemies? While Heliodorus’ story was enshrined in a Greek-Jewish text—again not within the scope of pagans at Dura—such happenings spoke to anyone who lived in a world of many gods. And what would they have to do—the visitors, might, finally, have asked—to annex this deity to their pantheon? The answer to this last question was to be found, no doubt, in the very place in which they were standing.

In this pictorial sequence, it is the Ark itself rather than the curtained Tabernacle (or Tent of Meeting) that is portrayed. The Tabernacle of Exodus 26—which was the precursor of the Jerusalem Temple and, as Pamela Berger writes in this volume, so often merged with it in imagination and literature—is indeed notably depicted in the investiture ceremony of Aaron the High Priest in another of the Synagogue’s celebrated scenes (WB2, fig. 7.8), where Aaron’s name is written in Greek lettering over his ceremonially (though incorrectly) clad figure. By contrast, in the Ark sequence, it is the box that makes repeat appearances, represented not quite as the elaborate object with the gold overlay, carrying poles, and cherubim that are set forth in great detail in the orders given in Exodus (25:10–22) but rather in its own quite distinctive manner—as a tall, oblong chest with a curved top and a surface patterned as though studded with decorations and sometimes partly covered by a yellowish cloth. There are minor variations in the depic-

Figure 8.1: Wall painting of the Battle of Ebenezer, Synagogue, NB1, ca. 245–256 CE. National Museum of Damascus. After Goodenough, pl. XIX
tions. On the battlefield of Eben-Ezer, where it also occupies a dominant position, the Ark stands uncovered (NB1, fig. 8.1). Some scholars have suggested that Ark and Tabernacle/Temple together would have constituted the subject matter of the entirety of register B, going all the way around the Synagogue, but of course we cannot be sure.

With talismanic and almost magical powers, to add to its profound religious content, the Ark, at least until it was lost after the first Temple's destruction, continued to be treasured—the key symbol of Israelite national identity, embodying equally the Israelites' commitment to the Covenant and God's commitment to them. The memory of its potency remains in the Torah service of the modern synagogue. Yet this highly distinctive sacred object, an artifact that served unique purposes for a people that saw itself as unique, was at the same time not unintelligible; as it is visualized, it is reminiscent of the aniconic cult images of the Near East, and, indeed, it is precisely at Dura that the unique dedication of a small altar to Zeus Betylos was found. Functionally, the way in which the traveling holy chest served Israel would be recognizable in its essentials, if not in its refinements, to the devotees of many ancient religions. That so modest an object could have been so efficacious made excellent sense. The narrative sequence at Dura ensured that viewers could understand the thing in action even without knowing the full story: the decapitated Dagon statue and the tumbling cult objects spoke for themselves. These pictures had the capacity effectively to engage outsiders and to elicit the admiration of strangers.

Amid the entire surviving repertoire in the painted Synagogue, the picture of Dagon in pieces would undoubtedly have been the most arresting for worshippers of any other god. For one thing, it is the most immediately expressive in its meaning, even if not in the full scope of its allusion. Other embodiments of the triumph of the God of Israel could not have leapt out in quite so immediate a way at a viewer not familiar with scripture. Nonetheless, a similar message of victory snatched out of the teeth of disaster by divine intervention is encapsulated in other scenes. Thus in two panels on the south wall (SC 3 and 4), one might see the priests of Baal, in purple-edged toga, discomfited by Elijah's ability to raise fire on the altar on Mount Carmel. On the top band of the focal west wall, Israel's foundational salvific event was represented—the miracle that enabled the Israelite army to cross the Red Sea and the Egyptian troops to be all too graphically drowned (WA3, fig. 8.2). Inside Moses' legs are the explanatory words "Moses when he split the Red Sea" in Aramaic (the earliest words read, according to Clark Hopkins' account, when the Synagogue was uncovered). Jä Elsner was the first to react fully to the impact of Dura's "actively anti-pagan imagery." He noted an engagement not only with the "explicit rebuttal of non-Jewish gods" but also with explicitly showing their failure, and, as he saw it, "denigrating their
religions." This last may be a step too far. "Denigration" is a loaded word, which already hints at a more modern reaction. But whether the implications be understood in Elsner's terms or in a more nuanced way, a fundamental question has to be addressed. Moving from the hypothetical to the real, we must ask whether non-Jews are likely actually to have seen these images. Were adherents of Dura's other gods and goddesses even aware of how the Jews were depicting a revered cult statue? Would they have entered the Synagogue? Then again, from the other side, was it expected by the congregation, its leaders, and the painters, that adherents of pagan cults be present in their midst, at least on some occasions? Behind that, there lies the large, general question: how should we relate the range of surviving pictures in the Synagogue program to its Dura setting?

Extracting meaning from an image is hazardous at every turn—that hardly needs saying. In our case, the community for whom the Synagogue was built, and for whom the images were painted, is truly an unknown quantity. Only some 60 percent of the pictorial program of the Dura synagogue has survived, according to estimates. No literature attests to Jewish life in Dura; the synagogue stands alone. That is not altogether surprising, for the Jewish diaspora of the Greco-Roman East after 70 CE in its totality is lamentably served by our surviving evidence. As for Dura, we lack literary sources also for its non-Jewish world. We are very far from accessing minds and hearts. If any of the scenes on the Synagogue walls might seem to be making their statements loud and clear, the disintegration of Dagon would be among them; even here interpretation will depend on the iconographic code that is applied, the context of artists and viewers that is imagined, our estimation of how this one image might be connected or not connected to the rest of the program, and to an extent even the viewer's subjective reaction. Recent commentators, notably Annabel Wharton, have emphasized the multivalency of the Dura images and have gone on to match up their many-faced iconography not only to the polysemic character of Jewish midrashic discourse but thence to the multi-ethnic, multicultural society from which the images sprang. That ascription of open-endedness, too, is no more than an interpretation—one which sees fit to give credit to the gamut of possible readings rather than to prioritize a single message out of many.

For all that, the inadequacy of the evidence has not greatly curtailed attempts at figuring out what the pictures are intended to convey, whether individually or as a program. It is, I think, for a rather different reason that the specific question with which I opened, how worshippers of local deities might have reacted to a shocking and seemingly provocative picture of the wreckage of a familiar-looking sacred image, has not arisen. Since its discovery, the Dura synagogue has been understood, one way or another, as an exclusively Jewish space. Although that is perhaps understandable, it is not without consequences. Whether the Jews in question be Joseph Gutmann's exponents of a developed and formalized liturgy, not too far from that which we know today; or, in a newer reading, Steven Fine's pupils and followers of the rabbinic sages; or even Erwin Goodenough's distinctive brand of Hellenistic, Philonic mystics with their own elaborate allegorical language, their Judaism, in its local manifestation, has been envisaged as a world sufficient unto itself for its adherents, as they huddled around their Synagogue. It may seem odd to include in this list the highly syncretistic form of the Judaism that Goodenough reconstructed. In fact, however, he devoted the three final volumes of his opus magnum on Jewish symbols to the Dura synagogue, as a manifest instance of that syncretism, so that for him the merger between systems had taken place centuries earlier and in the setting of the Hellenistic culture of Alexandria, then to be transmitted among Jews and for Jews. It was seemingly
not an ongoing phenomenon in the wider world. Thus, one way or another, the Dura Jews were marked out as "a people apart," as "doing their own thing" so to speak.

Several historical factors have conspired to build up the image of the Dura synagogue as an exclusive Jewish space. First, there was the amazement that greeted the Synagogue's discovery in the early winter of 1932, in the advanced stages of the work of the Yale-French expedition. It was, of course, astonishing, especially at that stage, to find a hitherto unsuspected edifice of this scale and significance and in so good a state of preservation that its west wall had retained a large part of its dense design. But it was so much more of a surprise that this edifice, with its Torah shrine and its exclusive thematic immersion in Hebrew Bible and post-biblical interpretation, was manifestly a synagogue. There was absolutely no parallel to a pictorial program of this kind on the walls (and ceiling) of any ancient Jewish structure anywhere. Astonishment was greatly increased by the entirely free and profuse depiction of living beings and animals; moreover, although these artists had stopped short of depicting the Deity, they had allowed themselves to represent divine deliverance by means of entirely physical hands descending from above. The more un-Jewish, as it were, some of this seemed to be in its contravention of the prohibition of images in the second commandment, the more it demanded explanation in Jewish terms; thus, investigation and hypothesis settled within the sphere of Judaism, however conceived and however elastic (as it was in Goodenough's picture). And the assumption was that Jews, of whatever hue, had comfortably (or less comfortably) ensconced themselves within their strict boundaries by the time Christianity began its onward march. Now that the explosion in study of the Jewish diaspora in the Greco-Roman world in the last thirty years has corrected this picture, we can think afresh about the Jews of Dura.

Quite rapidly, at least one of the discoverers' problems was dissolved—that of the flouting of the second commandment. The first discoveries of mosaic synagogue floors in the Galilee predated the excavation of the Dura synagogue. There were quite enough human and animal images at Beth Alpha (1928) and Na'aran (1918) to remove any shadow of doubt about their complete acceptability, at least in two dimensions, within post-70 communities located in the heartland of Jewish life. Beth Alpha had revealed a vivid representation of Abraham's binding of Isaac, matched by the one above the Torah shrine painted already for a program prior to the final one in the Synagogue at Dura. Perhaps the most unexpected Galilean motif was the zodiac wheel, with human and animal signs sometimes surrounding a personified sun driving his four-horse chariot. It was thus already clear that the second commandment was taken in radically different ways in different circles of Jews at different times and that there was a very marked liberalization during late antiquity as compared with the strictness prevalent in many circles of the late Second Temple period (between roughly the beginning of the third century BCE and 70 CE). Again, in the necropolis of Beth She'arim, burials associated with known rabbinic families were found in juxtaposition not just with sculpted animals but also with scenes indisputably drawn from Greek mythology. The question of the second commandment thus slipped easily out of the discussion. But the terms had been set of enquiries that looked into the rich world of late-antique Judaism—as was indeed quite proper—but that forgot to look from there out into the context of Dura and to seek methods of comparison and contextualization.

Whereas some problems fell away, the perception of the Dura synagogue as an exclusively Jewish space retained its hold. The textuality of the images, with their dependence on a good knowledge of scripture for full comprehension and their need for decoding in many matters of detail, suggested an in-group mentality.
It was an irresistible challenge to find an explanation of the program as a whole in terms of Jewish doctrine or theology, as Rachel Wischnitzer sought to do with her carefully worked-out ascription of an overarching Messianism to the artists’ vision. The location and ordering of the scenes—partially intelligible, and often recalcitrant and seemingly random—was intriguingly explained by Joseph Gutmann in terms of the sequence of liturgical elements in traditional Jewish worship. The search for a large theory thus also in due course lost its appeal but left its mark: with the complete program unknown, it was perhaps not surprising that speculation about choices made by the synagogue’s leaders, patrons, or artists, in relation to subject matter, ordering, emphasis and iconographical detail, could not be made to stick.

In the 1960s, a second great sensation in synagogue archaeology occurred, when a very substantial synagogue was discovered in the great city of Sardis in Lydia (inland Asia Minor). The last phase of this synagogue belonged firmly in the world of late antiquity, dating to some three hundred years after the end of that of Dura, which is securely dated by the fall of the town to the Sasanians in 256 CE. Nonetheless, the Sardis synagogue, better-preserved than most (and speedily restored), had much in common with others in the region that were becoming known through excavation, and it rapidly became emblematic of the outward-looking spirit now ascribed to Greek-speaking diaspora Jews as a whole. Comparisons and contrasts were naturally drawn with the Dura find, notably by Andrew Seager, who was employed as an architect on the Sardis project. The Sardis synagogue was not only very much larger—accommodating perhaps one thousand worshippers rather than the one hundred twenty-five odd that could, according to estimates, be seated on benches at Dura—it also appeared to its discoverers to be offering an invitation to the city at large. Its entrance opened onto the same street as the entrance to the imposing and very important gymnasium of the city, and the two were almost adjacent. The sizeable forecourt contained a water fountain listed in a civic inventory. Its eighty or so donor inscriptions included the names of councillors of the city and of sympathizers with Judaism. The small size and peripheral location of the Dura synagogue were perhaps accentuated in the consideration of this contrast, just as rather too much was probably made of the openness and cosmopolitan character of the synagogue of Sardis.

Regional geography has also contributed to narrowing the lens through which the Dura synagogue is viewed. The great rabbinic centers of late antiquity of Babylon and the southern part of Mesopotamia have been pulled into the picture, even though the hinterland of the synagogue is more likely to lie in Palmyra, 230 kilometers to the west, whence many influences and personnel came to Dura, as well as in conurbations of the north Euphrates zone, such as Edessa and Nisibis, where Jews are known to have lived in number. If the Dura synagogue paintings hailed from any tradition—and indeed it is unlikely that they came, as it were, out of nowhere and stood entirely on their own—then it is in those northern cities that the lost precursors must be sought.

Also taken as an indicator of separateness is the predominance of the square ("Assyrian") Hebrew script as the vehicle for Aramaic writing in the epigraphy of the Synagogue (pl. 31). That choice does seem indicative—marking out the language pattern here as different from that of the rest of Dura and suggesting that the Jewish texts would not be, and were not intended to be, read by outsiders coming with a different linguistic formation. The Hebrew language itself figures rather little, but a papyrus fragment of a Hebrew prayer found outside the Synagogue has been given renewed attention by Steven Fine. This is a text closely related to the birkat ha-mazon (the grace after meals) in the form in which it later became established. The
text presumably belonged to the Synagogue community—perhaps serving as a guide or as an educational tool—or else to an individual worshipper. Fine understands the fragment’s liturgical affinities as rabbinic, and it is indeed a small and easy step—even if not an inevitable one—to hook up both this prayer and the Synagogue with the rabbis of Babylonia, where academies for many centuries produced the learning and lore that went into the Babylonian Talmud (the foundation stone of nearly all subsequent Judaism). The prayer fragment, whoever it belonged to, has seemed a tangible confirmation of some participation by the Synagogue in that same rabbinic Judaism. Even if this association be granted, however, support is lacking for the big claim that Jewish religious life in Dura fitted the rabbinic mold in its manifestations or that it responded to and obeyed the writ of the rabbis.

Such reservations imply no lack of appreciation of the striking individual references to aspects of Jewish tradition that have been discovered in and around the Dura synagogue, including the case of that remarkable prayer fragment. Fascinating parallels with Midrashic texts, both earlier and later, and with the Aramaic Targum (especially with the so-called Targum Pseudo-Jonathan) have been revealed, as well as with Greek-Jewish writings in the shape of the remains of the (probably) Alexandrian Jewish dramatist, Ezekiel the Tragedian. There is a vivid example in the second of the two scenes of Elijah and the priests of Baal, where a little figure inside the altar on which the priests are trying to raise fire is being attacked by a huge serpent. The figure is indisputably a man called Hiel, who, according to Midrash Rabbah to Exodus 15:15, concealed himself in the altar with a view to fraudulently igniting the fire; divine intervention, however, led to his being consumed by a snake. Pamela Berger discusses another clearcut case, the representation of the non-biblical legend of Miriam’s well in the wilderness from which Moses makes water flow to the twelve tribal leaders in panel WB1. And when the Dura artist shows a topless Pharaoh’s daughter in person, rather than her handmaid, lifting out of the Nile the baby Moses (WC 4, fig. 8.3), he echoes a tradition that has come into the Greek-Jewish sphere in the Exegese of Ezekiel the Tragedian. The list of such allusions amounts to a dozen at least, and it may well still grow. What these parallels signify, in terms of access to oral or written tradition, to popular story telling or to teaching and preaching is another matter. It is also worth noting that at least one prominent scholar, Philip Alexander, proposes now to remove even the Targumists from the sphere of the rabbinic movement. And as for the Hellenistic works whose interpretations figure at Dura, they are quite obviously as far from the rabbis as could be.

New studies of other aspects of the Dura synagogue have scarcely shifted the entrenched picture of a very insular Jewish community. Elsner, as we have seen, spotted the startling triumphalist vein in the Synagogue, but supposed, if only by default, that this engagement was intended for internal consumption (a
private revenge, as it were). Others speak explicitly of the reassurance generated by the recurrent theology of Jewish victory and of the discomfiture of enemies, serving it is supposed, to boost morale and confidence within the group.

The lines of interpretation, past and present, that have been sketched here are diverse. My purpose has been not to critique theories for their own sake but simply to show how it came about that Jewish connections were pursued to the exclusion of others. This is more or less how matters have stood. As Pamela Berger writes in the conclusion to her essay in this volume, it is high time for a change: there is ample room for reassessment of the competitive dimension of the Dura synagogue.

The border town of Dura-Europos stands out as a meeting place of ethnicities, cultures, cults, and languages,24 a small place whose houses of worship were in close proximity to one another.25 It was a town whose paintings show their subjects in a remarkable array of costumes: Parthian trousers, Persian gowns, Greek himatia, and Roman togas are juxtaposed, mingling comfortably (and quite likely without special significance),26 and where some nine languages or sub-languages were in use.27 It is paradoxical indeed that in Dura, of all places, the Synagogue community has been judged so very exclusive and closed-off, not only in relation to the majority, polytheistic society but even vis-a-vis the tiny Christian community whose limited surviving art, so far as we can tell, suggests a similar interest to that of the Jews in rejoicing over victory against the odds, as in its scenes of David and Goliath or of the healing of the paralytic (pl. 19).28 Lucinda Dirven explores, but largely rejects, the possibility that competition might have been a motivating force in the interaction between religious groups at Dura. Cults, she asserts, were family-based affairs here—as attested by the small scale, domestic character of their sites of worship—and the Synagogue, she suggests, fits more than comfortably into this pattern. She finds the popular marketplace model of religious diversity inappropriate to the interrelationship of cults in a small and relatively remote frontier town, so different, in her view, from the bigger cities of the Roman East.29 But this inference from archaeology is less persuasive when set against the tangible evidence of Christianity’s successful spread through the Roman Empire and the Near East during the first three centuries CE, for monumental church building started in earnest only at the very end of this period and took root slowly. Before that, the Christian message was announced precisely in house churches, homes, and philosophical schools, and displayed in preaching, healing, and miracles done in the open, or even in meeting places and places of worship frequented by others, like the synagogues of Greece and Asia Minor and the Athenian altar to the “unknown God” in the Book of Acts. Nevertheless, the news spread. Although gatherings of Christians could be denounced as secret conclaves by their enemies, as reported in the famous letter (Letters 10:96) on the Christians written by Pliny the Younger as governor of Bithynia to the Emperor Trajan, in reality their very nature and raison d’être were to be open. If house churches were accessible, so could the Dura synagogue have been. Whatever limitations this small town had, still, habits, attitudes, and relationships formed in the mixed societies of, say, Corinth, Ephesus, Antioch, or Palmyra, would have come with members of those Jewish communities who had reason to move thence to the Euphrates frontier. In a smaller world, groups are in fact more interdependent: it is harder for people to avoid their neighbors, and there is no reason why religious practices must exist in a zone exempt from these normal rules.30

So much for context—both as regards the nature of Dura itself and in the wider world of the Jewish diaspora of the time. The lessons about integration into civic life that we have learned from the synagogue
excavation at Sardis and elsewhere, and successfully applied to Jewish communities elsewhere over several centuries, should also extend to Dura. Beyond that, there is the macroclimate of the first half of the third century CE, in some respects perhaps the most fluid and open period in the religious life of the Greco-Roman world, offering new-found scope for individual choice. Pagan philosophy and monotheism were closely intertwined. In practice, objects and systems of veneration and worship from diverse and seemingly opposed traditions might comfortably mingle, as statues of Abraham did with those of Christ and Orpheus just a few years before the final redecoration of the Dura synagogue, in the lararium of Alexander Severus. From this emperor's biographer, we also learn that Alexander was sometimes dubbed "the Archisynagogus," that is to say, "head of the synagogue" (Historia Augusta, Life of Severus, 28–29).

The art of the Dura-Europos synagogue shares in the common artistic idiom with an ease that bespeaks more than the mechanical fact of common workshops and artisans or of pattern books. Such visual familiarity would make those new to the Synagogue feel quite at home; furthermore, we find images that are unexpected in a Synagogue but comfortable for those accustomed to Greek art. They would be happy to spot Pharaoh's daughter standing in the water, nymphet-like, naked to the waist (WC4, fig. 8.3), nude figures with nude children on the doors of a building with its doors closed that looks to be the Jerusalem Temple (fig. 7.11), and victory statues attached to the corners of the Temple's pediment (WB3, fig. 7.10). More Roman than Greek, in the scene of Aaron's investiture, the inaugural sacrifice of the Tabernacle is shown. Here, a priest is raising his knife to kill an animal, possibly the ritual red heifer, in the usual style in which Roman sacrificers are depicted. Again, the masks and baskets of the dado that ran round the Synagogue above the three narrative registers are a standard part of a classicizing repertoire, but in this case it is perhaps less surprising to find them in a synagogue. We should not forget that Greek remained the dominant language of Dura-Europos from its Hellenistic foundation to its end. It is also, along with Aramaic, well-represented among the dedicatory inscriptions of the Synagogue's ceiling tiles (pls. 31, 32).

While narrative sequences may be to a degree opaque to the un instructed, individual images can speak very clearly, as we have already seen. Moses, the great leader, teacher, and prophet, was better known to Greek, Roman, and oriental non-Jewish (and non-Christian) writers than any other figure in Jewish scripture and tradition. So we would expect him to be highly visible in a pictorial program that targeted outsiders as well as insiders, and that is exactly what we find. Here, the baby Moses lies in the arms of Pharaoh's daughter; there, the miracle-working Moses with his rod parts the Red Sea; and again with that same magic wand, we see him drawing water for the tribes from the wilderness well. And here is Moses alone, standing at a schematic burning bush, his boots off his feet and placed neatly beside him (wing panel 1, fig. 8.4). This image is one of the four elongated standing figures that surround the Torah niche and date back to the preceding synagogue, painted some decades before the final edifice was built and decorated in the 240s.
There is a good case to be made for the three other figures in the set representing Moses as well, in three different situations, and especially so in the case of the most famous of them, a solemn man reading from an unfurled scroll (the prototype of many later Christian representations). The identification for all four images as Moses in different guises was strongly supported by Goodenough, Avi-Yonah, and others. Different identifications have also been offered, notably, for the man with the scroll, Samuel the prophet (taking account of the name of the Synagogue’s main donor, the archon, elder and priest Samuel son of Yeda'ya), or even the prophet of the destruction, Jeremiah; but all with very little supporting argument.

The Dura synagogue paintings are inclined to militarization. A number of panels show more armed men and weapons than would be required by scripture, an obvious route to popular appeal in any ancient society and especially in a garrison town. The scene of the parting of the Red Sea evokes, among other things, a confrontation between armies. The Eben-Ezer defeat was far from an obvious moment to pick from the saga of the Ark in 1 Samuel. Jerusalem bristles with ramparts in the closed Temple panel.

Yet deeds of valor alone are manifestly insufficient. Equally unmistakable, and even more impressive, are the Synagogue’s representations of mighty deeds of the supernatural kind and of divine intervention, concentrating particularly in register C. The Israelites may be armed, Moses may wave his wand, but we are awed by the overhanging hand of God and understand what force is truly behind the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea. This is a God who, visibly, again and again, saves and redeems.

He also resurrects, and the Dura resurrection scenes are among the most vivid, graphic, and self-explanatory in the repertoire. Thus, Elijah revives the widow of Zarephath (WC1, fig. 8.5) in a panel illustrating 1 Kings 17:17–24, and we see, successively from left to right in the panel, the dead baby handed over by his mother in dark robes to the prophet who reclines on a fancy couch; the baby revived in the prophet’s arms; and an upright, living baby in the hands of a tranquil mother in light robes. Over their head, hangs the divine hand. The sequence speaks a universal language.

Again, in the Valley of the Dry Bones panel, to see the massed dead laid out as naked corpses, then to observe their detached limbs strewn over the ground, and lastly to find three clothed men standing tall and whole, having been revived by a solemnly gesturing prophet (as in Ezekiel 37) with the aid of fluttering winged angels and a separate divine hand over each section of the scene, and a hill (presumably the Mount of Olives) standing at its center, is to remain in no doubt whatsoever as to what superhuman wonders have been wrought and of what this might mean for each and every one of the God of Israel’s followers.
Furthermore, it is hard to overlook the obvious fact that the scenes of bodily resurrection, graphically shown as such, were particularly significant to Christians. We should not exclude the possibility of the Synagogue receiving also members of the small Christian community in this period of the “parting of the ways” between Jews and Christians. The Dura church had room for not much more than some sixty participants seated on benches, so the Synagogue was by comparison spacious. The resurrection images appealed to Christians on their central theological territory, re-appropriating key biblical moments and even outdoing their own narratives. Herbert Kessler traced the appearance at Dura of passages important to Jewish-Christian literary controversy; but, once again, he did not concern himself with how this might have been expected to play itself out on the ground; and he brushed aside any thought of actual engagement between the two groups.\(^{36}\)

To add to what we see, it is wonderful that we have unique written evidence of the ability of the resurrection images to arouse emotion. This comes in the shape of two graffiti in Middle Persian expressing, precisely, reactions to the Elijah miracle. One has been deciphered and translated to say “when Hormuzd the scribe came and he looked at the pictures...living...the dead.” And the second, above Elijah’s right thigh, reads, “praise, praise to the gods (?) , for life, life eternally.” Unlike, as was once mooted, to be pre-invasion Sasanian inspectors, the authors of these graffiti, along with a dozen or so others, are evidently simple visitors from the East somewhere during that small window of time between the completion of the final stage of the decorations and the fall of Dura-Europos. A third pious exclamation (among a number of graffiti written on the Esther panel) gives us the two Persian names of the writer, who describes himself as a scribe, and seems to say that he came “to the house” and records that “he liked the picture.”\(^{37}\) Whether these visitors were Jews, as Steven Fine prefers to think, or non-Jews, is unclear.\(^{38}\) A re-reading of the texts might well yield better information, but for the moment we can comfortably say that we have here the concrete attestation of those very pagan visitors that we have been conjuring up—in this case not Greeks or Romans or Palmyrenes but Iranians. If proof were available, these few sentences would truly constitute a historian’s dream. Either way, the pull of the Synagogue as well as the religious power of its images and, especially, the overwhelming impressiveness of its miracles, are vividly attested in these invariable little texts.

Needless to say, the powers and prowess of the God of Israel are a central concern already of the Hebrew Bible. This inescapable theme is expanded upon in countless ways and poetized in prayer, and it looms large in the Synagogue ritual down to this day. It did not take the artists of Dura-Europos to dig it out. But its graphic representation in Dura’s Synagogue readily generated pride and hope in the people whose God could and did do so much for them. Undeniably, then, the imagined battle between divinities with which I opened this essay has meaning in itself; no competition with, or for, the current worshippers of other gods need follow in its wake, and I would not claim that what we have seen can only make sense in terms of putative outside observers. Yet the cumulative impression of form, content, and local environment, together with the wider context of the marketplace of religions that defined the second and third centuries CE in the Roman Empire, and the suggestion of the graffiti, do together make up a strong case for a reading that goes beyond the immediate constituency of Dura’s Jewish worshippers. Such a reading has the merit, too, of bringing the Dura synagogue into line with the wider synagogue world of the Greek-speaking Jewish diaspora, where non-Jewish patrons and donors are well attested and Christian interest documented. The interpretation offered here will no doubt be further tested in the light of our changing picture of the worshippers in Dura’s other cults.
Notes


12 Surveyed in Pierre Prigent, L’image dans le Judaïsme: du II au Vème Siècle, Le Monde de la Bible 24 (Geneva: Labor
et Fides, 1991), 23–73.


15 Tom Kraabel’s approach was influential, see Thomas Kraabel, J. Andrew Overman, and Robert S. MacLennan, Diaspora Jews and Judaism: Essays in Honor of, and in Dialogue with, A. Thomas Kraabel (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992), 237–56. For all aspects of the synagogues, the fundamental study is Lee I. Levine, The Ancient Synagogue: the First Thousand Years (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).


22 See Berger in this volume.


27 Kaizer, "Religion and Language in Dura-Europos."


31 See the studies in Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome,* 301–478.


33 On Dura artisans and workshops, see the suggestion of Robin M. Jensen, "The Dura Europos Synagogue," 184–86; and Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Diaspora,* 425–27.


