

The Central Composition of the West Wall of the Synagogue of Dura-Europos

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I. Introduction

We grieve over the death of our teacher, Elias Bickerman, but he lives on not only in his scholarly works but also in us, his students, and in our works. I have repeatedly acknowledged my debt to him because so much of my research is built directly upon his. Our teacher's brilliance extended to interpreting enigmatic aspects of paintings on religious topics so as to cast light on what human beings did and believed in antiquity.¹ He made a significant contribution to the study of the paintings of the synagogue of Dura-Europos.² I am pleased to offer this article as one more tribute to him. In it I return to the paintings of the synagogue of Dura-Europos, a topic on which I began to publish long ago and promised to publish more.³ Even now I shall treat only some of the paintings.

Archaeological and historical evidence shows that the town of Dura (or Europos as it was called by Macedonians and other speakers of Greek) in the third century C.E. was a heavily fortified Roman army post. Shapur I, king of Persia, the second ruler of the Sassanian dynasty, marched westward and upstream along the Euphrates River, seeking to reconquer the empire which had been held by the Old Persian Achaemenian dynasty until it fell to Alexander the Great in the 330s B.C.E.⁴ The Roman force at Dura prepared well to resist. To enable the already strong western wall to resist enemy efforts to

1 E.g., his "Héliodore au temple de Jérusalem," in his *Studies in Jewish and Christian History*, Part II (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 159–91; "Sur la théologie de l'art figuratif: à propos de l'ouvrage de E. R. Goodenough," *Syria* 44 (1967), 131–61.

2 See his "Symbolism in the Dura Synagogue," *Harvard Theological Review* 58 (1965), 127–51. There is also his treatment of the synagogue in his review of *The Excavations at Dura-Europos: Preliminary report of Sixth Season of Work, October 1932–March 1933*, ed. by M. I. Rostovtzeff, A. R. Bellinger, C. Hopkins, and C. B. Welles, *Syria* 18 (1937), 220–21.

3 Began: in my review of *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, Vols. IX–XI: *Symbolism in the Dura Synagogue*, by Erwin R. Goodenough, *JNES* 28 (1969), 212–18. Promised: in the same review, 215.

4 Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos* (New Haven and London, 1979), 251, 261–64.

undermine it, the defenders filled the street adjacent to the wall with an earth embankment. At first they took care to protect the walls of the buildings along the street from the pressure of the embankment by buttressing them on the inside with packed earth, but finally they took off the roofs and filled the roofless walls with debris, further to thicken the defence-works. Even so, the city fell, possibly in 256 but more likely in 257, never to rise again. However, the burial of the buildings along the city wall preserved them and their paintings, including the synagogue.⁵

The synagogue with the paintings was an enlargement of an earlier structure. Inscribed ceiling tiles date the completion of the enlarged building to the second year of the Emperor Philip and the year 556 of the Seleucid Era (245/6 C.E.).⁶ The paintings of the synagogue were executed between the completion of the enlarged building in 245/6 and some time when visitors who wrote in Middle Persian painted and dated their approving comments on the walls, perhaps in 253/4.⁷

The west wall of the synagogue was the one facing Jerusalem. In the center of that wall, just above the floor was the niche in which the Torah-scroll was kept. Like Daniel in Babylon-by-the-Euphrates (Dan. 6:11), the Jews in Dura-by-the-Euphrates prayed facing in the direction of Jerusalem. In so doing, they would see the paintings of the west wall and especially those in its center, above the Torah niche. Indeed, a symmetry in design and in concepts can be shown to exist in the paintings of the west wall, further directing the eye of the worshiper to the central composition above the niche.⁸ By "central composition" I mean the four conspicuous portraits, each of a single standing man, and everything between them.⁹ Erwin R. Goodenough called the area between the four portraits the "reredos"¹⁰ (a name useful for its brevity). In the synagogue of Dura the central composition occupied a place similar to the mural decoration of the apse in the Christian churches of the fourth century and later.

Unfortunately, the reredos is not among the best-preserved portions of the paintings on the west wall. Upper parts of it were destroyed long before it was excavated. The ancient artist or artists¹¹ revised the reredos more than once, not by removing paint but by adding more, so that the composition had several layers of paint.¹² The excavators reported that the figures were at first clear, but exposure to sun, heat, and air almost

5 Ibid., 239-49; Carl H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue* ("The Excavations at Dura-Europos," Final Report VIII, Part I; New Haven, 1956), 4-5; David MacDonald, "Dating the Fall of Dura-Europos," *Historia* 35 (1986), 63-64.

6 Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 5-6, 263.

7 Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 291-92, 297-307; on the uncertainty of the dates of the painted comments in Middle Persian, see MacDonald, "Dating," *Historia* 35 (1986), 61-63.

8 See for the present my review, *JNES* 28 (1969), 214-15.

9 See fig. 1, reproduced with the permission of the Princeton University Press from Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (13 vols.; "Bollingen Series," XXXVII; New York, 1953-68), XI (1964), Pl. I (photograph by Fred Anderegge). On the central composition, see also Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 62-64, 67, 214-29, with bibliography on pp. 215, 227; Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, IX, 78-123. Goodenough's visual observations of what is in the paintings are always valuable; as for interpreting their meaning, he is mostly correct on the four portraits and mostly wrong on the scenes of the reredos.

10 Ibid., IX, 78.

11 From now on, I shall use the singular, leaving open the possibility that there was more than one painter.

12 For the efforts of scholars to reconstruct the stages of the painting, see below.

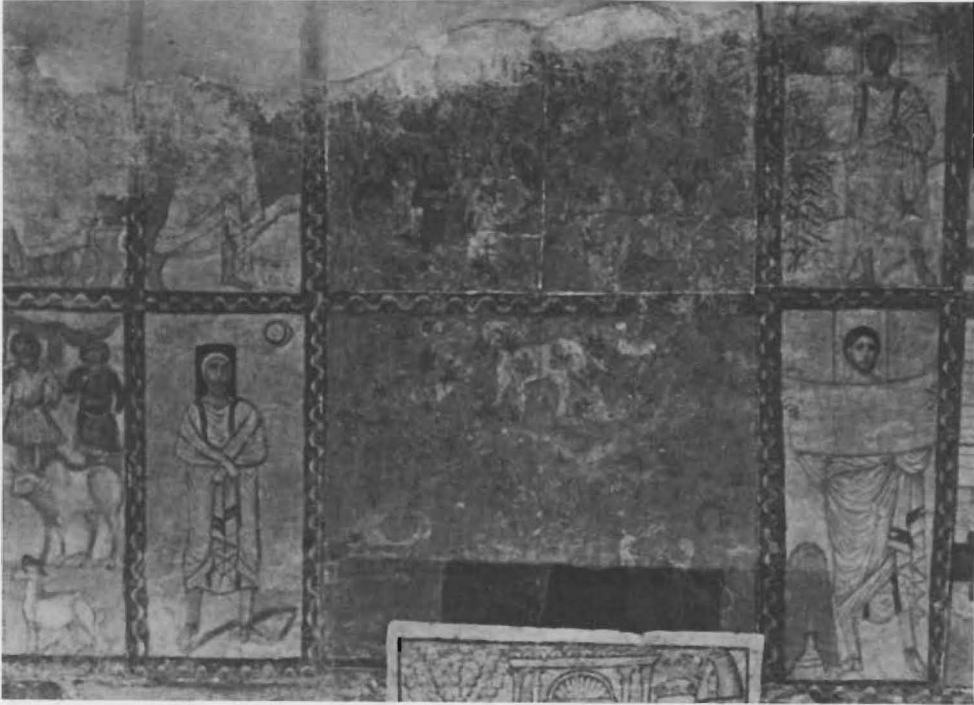


Fig. 1

immediately began to bring about cracking and fading. One result was that part of the lower layers became visible. The pictures are not frescoes painted on absorbent, still-wet plaster. Rather, the paint is powdery tempera which was brushed onto dry plaster, so that the layers of pigment even at the moment of application could readily mix with one another and may have mixed even more when Henry Pearson put a preservative varnish over the paintings. Pearson also partly restored them before setting them up permanently in the Damascus museum.¹³ The work of a restorer may save what was originally there, but it may also represent merely what was in his imagination. No record remains to tell us precisely what Pearson did. Hence, the best evidence for the content of the reredos and, indeed, for all the paintings of the synagogue, is usually in the early photographs and drawings, especially the drawings of Herbert Gute.¹⁴

All observers agree that first to be painted was the great "tree-vine," a tree with branches and leaves like a grapevine, but without grapes, which spread to the top of the

13 See Clark Hopkins, "The Excavation of the Dura Synagogue Paintings," in Joseph Gutmann (ed.), *The Dura-Europos Synagogue: a re-evaluation (1932-1972)* ("Religion and the Arts," I Chambersburg, PA: American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), 15, 17.

14 See Goodenough, IX, 78-79; Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 217.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

reredos area.¹⁵ At an early stage and perhaps from the beginning, at either side of the foot of the tree-vine was a set of objects, very faint now because both were later painted out. To the left was an ornate table with an elliptic object on top and a round object underneath it; to the right seemed to be a rampant pair of lions with perhaps a small

15 Fig. 6 is Gute's meticulous painting of the reredos as he saw it in 1933-34; on Gute's skill, see Hopkins, *Discovery*, 180, 208, and Goodenough, IX, 79. Gute held that originally the tree may have grown out of a vase as in the later drawing (fig. 3) which he made on the basis of fig. 6 at Goodenough's request; Gute believed that he saw the handle of such a vase painted "on" (I think he meant "showing through") the left "rampant lion." If so, the vase necessarily was painted out when the "rampant lions" were put in. Goodenough quotes this view of Gute with approval (IX, 79). Nothing, however, compels us to take the trace observed by Gute as a vase-handle. The ancient Near Eastern parallels I shall bring below go far to refute Gute's conjecture. Fig. 5 shows the lower and middle sections of the reredos as sketched by Robert Du Mesnil du Buisson in 1932-33 (on his activity, see Hopkins, *Discovery*, pp. 119, 129-36, 211); probably Du Mesnil was much less accurate than Gute, but he drew during the year when the paintings were discovered, "when much may have been visible that later disappeared" (Goodenough, IX, 79). Figs. 2 and 4 were drawn by H. Pearson in 1934-35 to give his conception of the earliest design in the reredos. Figs. 2-6 are taken from Goodenough, XI, figs. 73-77, 323, with the permission of the Yale University Art Gallery, Dura-Europos Collection.

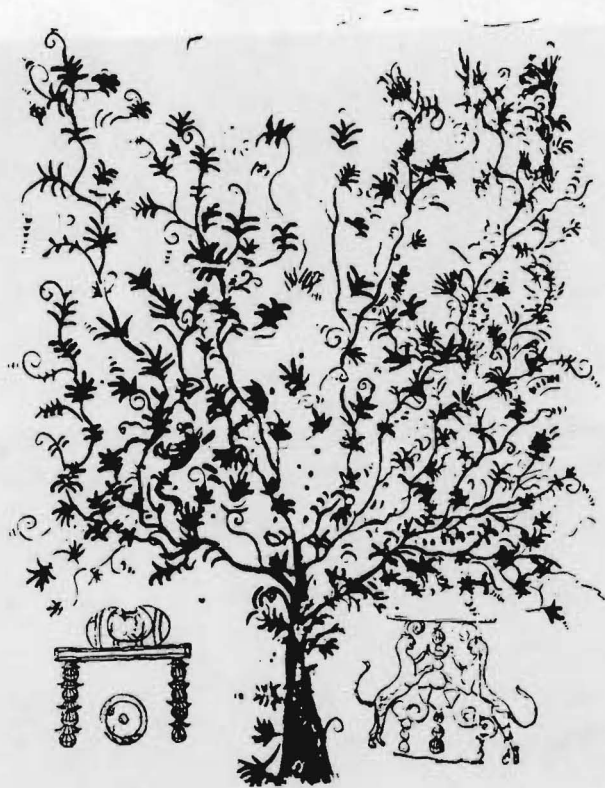


Fig. 4

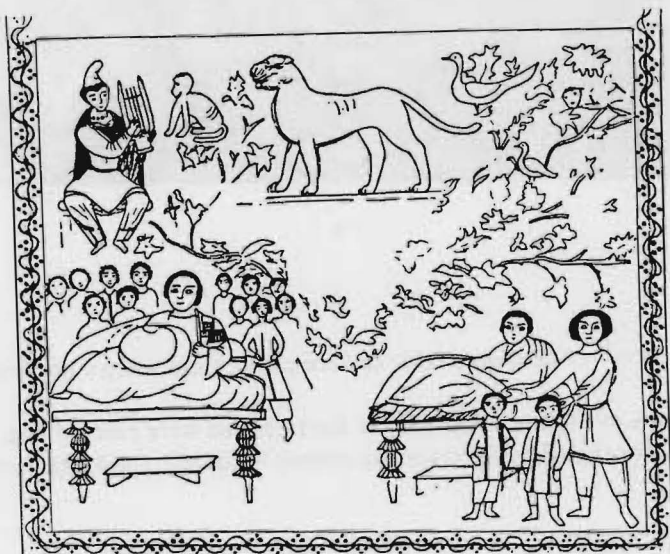


Fig. 5



Fig. 6

crater behind them¹⁶ or perhaps a table surface above them and a complicated structure between them.¹⁷

The two sets of objects at the foot of the tree-vine were painted out. Drawn right across the space occupied by them are two scenes: to the left, the dying Jacob blesses his

16 Fig. 3 (Gute).

17 Figs. 2 and 4 (Pearson).

twelve sons; to the right, he blesses his grandchildren, Ephraim and Manasseh, in the presence of their father, Joseph.¹⁸ Just above those scenes, apparently painted across or amid the spreading branches of the tree-vine is a figure wearing the Phrygian cap and playing the lyre to a set of peacefully-listening wild beasts, clearly after the pattern of Greco-Roman portrayals of Orpheus. The lyre-player is at the left, with an eagle to the left of his head and the rest of the beasts standing to the right of him. Observers disagree on their number and identity, but not about the conspicuous lion in the center of the field.¹⁹ Kraeling insists that the lyre-player sits upon a throne and wears the costume of a Persian king, including the long-sleeved tunic ornamented down the front and at the hem with yellow bands, trousers similarly ornamented, soft white boots, and even the Phrygian cap, the same garb as is worn by King Ahasuerus and by Mordecai in the scene just to the left of the Torah-niche.²⁰

Still higher, painted amid or across the branches and leaves of the tree-vine is an enthroned figure, clothed and posed as a Persian king, with two men in himation and striped chiton standing close by in front of him on either side. Grouped around the king and his two attendants are twelve or thirteen figures wearing Persian-style tunics and trousers. As seen by Gute, seven stand in a front row, in line with the two attendants, four to the left and three to the right; and in the back row, in a line on a level behind the king, three stand to the left and three to the right.

A schematic spiraling vine stem with grapes but without leaves frames all the paintings of the synagogue (except those of the bottom dado). The part of this border-pattern which separates the top two registers of paintings continues straight across the branches and leaves of the tree-vine on a line just above the centered lion and just below the king's two attendants. It thus divides the reredos into an upper and a lower zone.²¹

18 Fig. 6.

19 See Robert Comte Du Mesnil du Buisson, *Les Peintures de la synagogue de Doura-Europos* ("Scripta Pontificii instituti biblici," 86; Roma, 1939), 48–51; André Grabar, "Le Thème religieux des fresques de la Synagogue de Doura," *RHR* 123 (1941), 170–72; Henri Stern, "The Orpheus in the Synagogue of Dura-Europos," *JWCI* 21 (1958), 1–6; Goodenough, IX, 89–93; Kraeling (*Synagogue*, 223–25) agrees in part on the influence of the classical Orpheus figure on the designer of the reredos, but Kraeling has doubts based upon his conception of the stages by which the painting arose. Goodenough (IX, 92–93) and Stern ("Un Nouvel Orphée-David," *CRAI*, 1970, 63–76) argued against Kraeling's skepticism, but Sister Charles Murray ("The Christian Orpheus," *CA* 26 [1977], 19–27) vigorously restated Kraeling's case against theirs. There can, however, be no doubt that the final composition of the reredos has too much in common with the classical Orpheus scene for the resemblance to be coincidental, and even Kraeling admitted that it influenced the designer. I hope my present article will settle the matter.

20 *Synagogue*, 223–24 (including n. 889); other observers fail to notice the throne or the ornamenting of the tunic. Du Mesnil (*Peintures*, 50) seems to agree that the lyre-player's apparel is royal but inaccurately asserts that the usual garb of Orpheus happens to be identical with the Persian royal costume. Stern is unsure that the throne is there (*JWCI* 21 [1958], 2); Moshe Barasch denies that the lyre-player is sitting upon it ("The David Mosaic at Gaza," *EI* 10 [1971], 97 [in Hebrew]). One should also note that as seen by Kraeling and Du Mesnil and perhaps by Gute, the lyre-player has the same posture with spread knees as do the kings in the other paintings of the synagogue. But the posture with spread knees is also typical of the classical Orpheus scene. See the examples presented or cited in Henri Stern, "La Mosaïque d'Orphée de Blanzy-lès-Fismes (Aisne)," *Gallia* 13 (1955), 41–77 (of the printed illustrations, only figs. 17 and 19 do not have Orpheus' knees spread), and R. M. Harrison, "An Orpheus Mosaic at Ptolemais in Cyrenaica," *JRS* 52 (1962), 13–18.

21 See fig. 6.

To the left and right of each zone of the reredos are two framed “wing-panels,” each containing a picture of a standing man who wears a striped chiton and a fringed himation. The head and shoulders of the man in the upper left panel do not survive. In all three other panels, the head is framed by a rectangular space. The designer appreciated symmetry: though the arms of the men pictured vary in position, the legs are symmetrically posed in the two horizontal pairs, as are the removed boots of the two upper figures. An Aramaic label identifies the man in the upper right panel as “Moses son of Levi,” and it is easy to recognize him as a portrayal of Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:1–5).²²

In view of the nature of the powdery paint, it is not surprising that observers have disagreed on the order of painting, though all agree that a tree-vine was painted first and that the table and “rampant lions” and the things accessory to them stood early in the painting and were later painted out. Du Mesnil was at Dura when the paintings were discovered in 1932 and sketched them while they were fresh. He believed that the king and his two attendants and the surrounding figures in trousers were painted after the tree-vine and later still were covered over with vine-leaves in an effort to conceal them, supposedly in response to objections to the portrayal of human figures in a synagogue or to the apparent deification of the presumably-human king (in the pagan temples of Dura, a portrait of the deity to be worshiped occupies a comparable position).²³

Carl H. Kraeling visited Dura briefly in 1934, but his two detailed accounts of the reredos were based upon his observation of the restored original as set up in Damascus, upon the early sketches and photographs, and upon his own consultations with Pearson.²⁴ In his first account, in *Report VI*, Kraeling expressed his belief that the original tree-vine had its branches spread in circular fashion to produce on high a vertical medallion, the upper part of which contained the enthroned king and his two attendants, whereas the lower part contained the lion and other animals. To the left and right of the trunk stood the table and the “rampant lions.” Then, everything except the central medallion was painted out, covered with a red wash. The border pattern separating registers and scenes was drawn across the field. Above it, said Kraeling, nothing was left of the tree-vine. Thereafter, the figures in trousers were added around the king and his attendants, the “Orpheus” was drawn to the left of the animals, the blessing-scenes were put in to the right and left of the tree-vine, and the tree-vine itself seems to have been reinforced in a darker shade of green. The four flanking portraits, he implied, belong to this later stage, for he wrote that the underpainting ran at one point into the neighboring portrait panel.²⁵ Nevertheless, he admitted²⁶ that “the overpainting preserved most of the elements of the underpainting in some form or other.” At this point Kraeling said nothing of what Du Mesnil observed as the effort to cover over the king and his attendants with vine-leaves.

22 See fig. 1, in which, however, the Aramaic label is not visible; on it, see Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 229, 271.

23 Du Mesnil at Dura: see n. 15; his observations: *Peintures*, 27–28, 43–45, 48–52.

24 Visit: Hopkins, *Discovery*, 215, and cf. Goodenough, IX, 79; detailed accounts: *Report VI*, 367–71, and *Synagogue*, 62–64, 67, 214–19. Bases: *Report VI*, 367, and *Synagogue*, 62 (n. 148), 214–19 *passim*, and Goodenough, IX, 79.

25 *Report VI*, 367.

26 *Ibid.*, 370.

Kraeling changed his mind on some topics in his later account. For one thing, he tried to explain the numerous holes which scar the surface of the reredos, mostly in the vicinity of the trunk of the tree-vine and its spreading branches.²⁷ He held that most of the holes received the wooden pegs supporting applied plaster rosettes, which supposedly represented blossoms on the tree-vine. Fragments of plaster rosettes were indeed found on the floor of the chamber. A few of the holes, he said, received the nails that anchored a canopy over the Torah shrine. According to him, the rosettes were removed when the tree-vine was entirely painted out by the red wash or "cover coat." If so, the craftsmen proceeded inconsistently: only three of the holes were filled in with plaster and painted over. The rest were left open and daubed heavily with the red wash.²⁸

Nothing proves (or disproves) that there was a canopy over the Torah-niche. If the worshipers wanted one, it could have been attached even after the paintings were complete, at the price of covering up or defacing a small part of the lower reredos. Goodenough demolished Kraeling's theory on the holes and rosettes: "It is inconceivable that the rosettes taken from the tree painting would have been kept for several years lying on the synagogue floor." Nothing connects the rosettes with the tree-vine. They cannot have represented blossoms, for "[many of] the holes were made in the trunk or below the branches in spaces beside the trunk."²⁹ There is no evidence to tell us why and how the holes came to be there. Clearly the painter was usually not disturbed by their presence, for he applied his paint right over the open holes.

Kraeling's untenable theory on the holes and rosettes plus (unspecified) features of the distribution of the foliage drove him to abandon his earlier position, that the top of the original reredos showed within the spreading branches of the tree-vine a "medallion" containing the king and his two attendants and below them the lion and other animals. Rather, king, attendants, and lion were added in a second stage.³⁰ Indeed, the area around the king's left leg is painted over the three filled holes.

Kraeling now believed that the reredos in this second stage was not yet divided into two parts by the border pattern but it already was framed by the four flanking portraits in the "wing panels"; presumably the border pattern, too, framed both the reredos and each of the wing panels. Thereafter, Kraeling held, the canopy and rosettes were removed, the border pattern was drawn across the reredos, dividing it into two registers, and the table and the "rampant lions" at the lower left and the lower right were covered over with the red wash. Across the bottom of the reredos were drawn the two blessing scenes. At the top of the lower register, over the red wash, the lyre-player was painted to the left of the lion and, over his shoulder a large yellow bird, and perhaps other animals around the lion. Above the dividing border pattern, the figures in trousers were painted around the king.³¹

27 *Synagogue*, 63 and n. 152 there; 218, n. 862, and Pl. XXXIV with overleaf. Not all the holes can be connected with the tree. One cluster of them is far off to the lower right, near the upper paw of the right "rampant feline," and two single holes are off to the lower left, one by the right end of the couch supporting Jacob, another on the elliptic object resting on the table.

28 *Ibid.*, 218, n. 862.

29 Goodenough, IX, 83, n. 23.

30 *Synagogue*, 218, n. 862.

31 *Ibid.*, 221-25.

Kraeling was now aware of the confusing state of the reredos, which led Du Mesnil to suppose that vine-leaves were painted in a last stage to obscure objectionable human figures. According to Kraeling, the powdery paint tended to flake off the hard plaster and thus brought to light again the original tree and the symbols at its foot, and “It is possible that before the Synagogue was buried in the embankment, its elders, bowing to necessity, sanctioned a reintroduction of the tree design in the central area.”³²

Goodenough’s superb powers of visual observation and painstaking efforts to seek out the best witnesses require that we present his views here. Rightly, he put greatest reliance on the careful copies which Gute, a good artist, made of the paintings in 1933–34, when they were still relatively fresh.³³ Goodenough believed that originally there was only the tree-vine, which perhaps grew out of a vase.³⁴ If the vase was ever there, it was then painted out, and the table and the rampant felines and their associated objects were put in.³⁵ Perhaps even then, perhaps a bit later, the king and his two attendants were painted directly across the upper branches of the tree-vine.³⁶ At about the same time, the lyre-player and the listening animals were drawn across the middle branches of the tree-vine as a single composition. If the lyre-player, unlike the lion, is painted over the red cover coat, Goodenough argues that the lion indeed was painted before that coat was put on, but the coat was applied almost immediately after the lion was painted, and for the purpose of accommodating the lyre-player.³⁷

Disagreeing with Kraeling, Goodenough held that the tree-vine was never completely covered over: the red wash obliterated only the upper part of the tree-vine at either side of the king and his attendants and also the two original sets of figures at the foot of the trunk.³⁸ From that point on, Goodenough’s descriptions of the insertion of the dividing border-pattern, the blessing scenes, and the standing figures in trousers substantially agree with Kraeling’s.

We thus have important disagreements among competent observers. Did the designer of the reredos ever intend to have the tree-vine obliterated? Did he intend from the first to have the lyre-player be a part of the composition which included the lion? Were the worshipers ever so embarrassed by the figures of the king and the “Orpheus” that they wanted to obscure them by vine-leaves? The last question is easy to answer: the “repainted leaves” hide little if anything; the red wash shows how the painters could obliterate scenes if so ordered. If the reredos was objectionable, why were the four wing-panel portraits or the other paintings of the synagogue so acceptable that no vine-leaves were painted across them?

We should also ask, was the tree-vine ever intended to stand either alone or merely accompanied by the original figures at its base? The Torah contains an emphatic prohibition of planting “an asherah, any tree” by the altar of the LORD (Deut. 16:21).

32 *Ibid.*, 227, n. 898.

33 See nn. 9, 15.

34 See n. 15.

35 Goodenough, IX, 79–81.

36 *Ibid.*, 83, 92 (par. 3).

37 *Ibid.*, 89–92. On the view of Sister Charles Murray, see n. 19.

38 *Ibid.*, 104.

An asherah was a tree or stump representing a deity.³⁹ In a pagan shrine, an image of the god to be worshiped would occupy the reredos. A tree, an asherah, would seem to be unacceptable in a position where it could be taken as a representation of the LORD! One might reply that the synagogue of Dura is unique. Without it we never would have assumed that Jews could construe so loosely the prohibition on images in the Ten Commandments. Therefore, for the present we cannot exclude that originally the designer intended the reredos to contain little if anything more than the tree-vine.

Controversy reigns also in the discussions of the meaning of the compositions within the reredos and the wing-panels, though observers agree that Jacob's deathbed blessings stand at the foot of the reredos and the upper right wing-panel depicts Moses at the burning bush (an Aramaic label identifies him as "Moses son of Levi"). But who are the figures in the other three wing-panels? What is the meaning of the tree-vine, the painted-out figures at its base, the lyre-player and the animals, the king and his two attendants, and the standing figures in trousers?

I believe that despite the gaps in our information on the Jews in the third century C.E. we possess sufficient clues to solve these problems. Not all the paintings at Dura are enigmatic. Easily understood scenes, some identified by written captions,⁴⁰ strongly suggest that there is a scriptural basis for every one of the paintings. We know something of the aspirations of Jews of the time. We know something of how they read scripture as promising fulfillment of those aspirations. On the basis of that knowledge, I shall first (in Part II) suggest a straightforward interpretation of all the details of the reredos which ties them into a coherent whole. Then (in Parts III and IV), I shall confirm that interpretation and seek answers to the remaining problems of the reredos and wing-panels through a detailed study of the position of the paintings in the history of ancient Near Eastern and early Christian and Jewish art. In this manner I shall be able to identify and explain the enigmatic scenes of the central composition and shall demonstrate that the final plan of the reredos was from the first in the mind which directed the hands of the painter and that other factors than changes in the designer's intentions are responsible for the strange stages in the artist's execution of those intentions.

II. *What Jewish Aspirations and Scriptural Interpretations are Expressed in the Reredos?*

From the first century B.C.E. on, Jewish beliefs in a Messiah descended from David who would rule over a liberated Israel become more and more evident.⁴¹ Josephus

39 Asherah: Du Mesnil du Buisson, *Etudes sur les dieux phéniciens hérités par l'Empire romain* (Leiden, 1970), 32, 58–59. See, however, Morton Smith, "The Image of God," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 40 (1957–58), 497–512. Smith presents evidence to show that the seven-branched menorah and a similarly-shaped tree were used as symbolic images of the God of the Jews. Even if he is right, the tree-vine of the Dura synagogue and its setting bear no resemblance to the examples presented by Smith.

40 E.g., the Exodus scene at the top right of the west wall.

41 Beginning with Psalms of Solomon 17:21–43, 18:6–7. See n. 2 of my article, "How the Authors in I and II Maccabees Treated the "Messianic" Promises," to be published by the Cambridge University Press in

passed in almost complete silence over such beliefs and their role in the Jewish revolt of 66–70 C.E., surely because they would have evoked the contempt and hostility of his Graeco-Roman audience. He took care, however, to assert that the crucial verse, Num. 24:17, was fulfilled, not by a Jewish monarch, but by Vespasian.⁴² Furthermore, he published a version of his *Jewish War* in Aramaic and implied he did so with a view to the Jews living in Babylonia.⁴³ We may infer that he intended to counter their messianic hopes.⁴⁴

The disastrous defeat of 70 C.E. did not put an end to the messianic hopes among the Jews, based as they were on irrevocable scriptural promises, as we can see from the books of II Baruch and IV Esdras and from statements ascribed to Tannaim. Perhaps messianic notions were involved in the rising of the Jews of Mesopotamia against Trajan.⁴⁵ Around 132 C.E. Rabbi ^עAqiba quoted the same Num. 24:17 as referring to Bar Kokheba and his revolt against the Romans.⁴⁶ The near silence of the Mishnah on messianic hopes suggests that its compiler, Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, working early in the third century C.E., wished to avoid the danger that faith in those hopes might lead to yet another disastrous war against hopeless odds. Surely the Patriarch continued to believe the irrevocable scriptural promises, but his Mishnah did not have to serve as a reminder of them. Otherwise, it is clear that the disastrous end of Bar Kokheba's revolt did not quench the fire of the messianic hopes among Jews in the Holy Land or in Mesopotamia.⁴⁷

Several prophets predicted a last great war pitting the gentile powers against each other and/or the Chosen People.⁴⁸ By the first century C.E., this war, which would immediately precede the Messianic era came to be called the "War of Gog and Magog," a name derived from a popular misreading of Ezek. 38:2, as if Gog and Magog were rival powers.⁴⁹ The superpowers of the period of the Dura synagogue were Rome and

Judaisms and Their Messiahs, ed. by Jacob Neusner. See also the contributions of de Jonge, van der Woude, and Grundman to the article "chriō ktī," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI, 1964–76), IX (1974), 513–14, 515–16, 517–34, 537–50, 566–69, 572–73; Joseph Klausner's survey of the early rabbinic sources is convenient but antiquated (*The Messianic Idea in Israel* [New York, 1955], 391–517).

42 *BJ* vi 5.4.312–13.

43 *BJ* i 1.1–4.3–12.

44 Cf., however, Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, Vol. I (2nd printing, revised; Leiden, 1969), pp. 69–70.

45 See *ibid.*, 78.

46 *JT Ta'anit* 4:5, 68d, *Lam. Rabbah* on 2:2.

47 See Neusner, I, 85, 151 (n. 3), and Vol. II (Leiden, 1966), 52–57, 71, 159–60, 167–68, 197, 205–6, 214 (n. 3), 238–40, 286. In this article I use "Mesopotamia" in the broad sense, to mean the entire Tigris-Euphrates valley, including both Dura and the area of dense Jewish settlement in Babylonia farther downstream.

48 Ezek. 38, Joel 3:9–14, Hag. 2:22, Zech. 12:1–9, 14:2, 13.

49 See Rev. 20:8, *Sibylline Oracles* iii 319–22; Klausner, 375–76, 398, 401, 422, 450, 464, 496–501; and the statement of R. El'azar bar Abina at *Gen. Rabbah* 42:4. The scene of the "Ark in Battle" in the register above the Ezekiel sequence on the north wall of the Dura synagogue depicts the War of Gog and Magog, as I hope to demonstrate elsewhere. The painting shows a *drawn battle*, in which the powers dominating Israel are destroying each other while the people of the Torah stand by in quiet confidence and faith. For the present, in confirmation of my theory it is enough to contrast that scene with the cameo depicting the *victory* only a few years later of the Sassanian Shapur I over the Roman emperor Valerian (Roman Ghirshman, *Persian Art: the Parthian and Sassanian Dynasties* [New York, 1962], Pl. 195).

the Iranian empires, first that of the Parthians and then, after 224, that of the Sassanian Persian dynasty. The repeated clashes of the rival superpowers gave rise in the minds of Jews to the belief that the War of Gog and Magog would be a war between Rome and Parthia or Sassanian Persia.⁵⁰ All Mesopotamian Jewry lived near the theater of those wars, and Dura was a strategic Roman border post facing the rival power throughout the time that the Jews there could look at the paintings on the walls of their synagogue.

It is, then, a legitimate working hypothesis to assume that there is a messianic theme to the reredos. We shall find ample confirmation for that hypothesis in the rest of this article. Now let us examine the contents of the reredos.

The tree-vine is peculiar: though its branches and leaves are those of a grapevine, it has no fruit. The hands that painted the synagogue were obviously familiar with fruitbearing vines, for the border pattern consists of a spiral vine-stem with grapes. Du Mesnil and Goodenough insist that part of the tree-vine survived or was repainted into the final composition, and even Kraeling admitted that possibility. Yet the king and his attendants and the Orpheus were painted right across the tree-vine. Can we not infer that the designer intended those figures to be viewed as the fruit?

The vine grows up as if from the blessing scenes. We have our working hypothesis (that the paintings have a messianic theme); we know how the messianic texts of scripture were being read at the time of the Dura synagogue; we have access to how the Orpheus myth was interpreted then. On this basis we are led directly to the following provisional interpretation of the reredos.

The tree-vine symbolizes Israel and her destiny.⁵¹ The tree-vine seems to sprout from the Torah-niche. At the end of the first book of the Torah, in Jacob's deathbed benedictions, the vine appears in a part of his blessing to Judah (Gen. 49:10–11) that was taken as a messianic prophecy, very likely already by the writer of Zech. 9:9.⁵²

The first "fruit" to be displayed on the rising vine of Israel's destiny is the Orpheus scene, known to have been taken in the Greco-Roman world as a symbol of the taming of the violent and savage forces in the world which peaceloving human beings long for.⁵³ The royal Orpheus image in the tree-vine rising from Jacob's blessing to Judah fits well the messianic prediction at Isa. 11:1–9 of a royal "shoot from the trunk of Jesse" (father of David and descendant of Judah). With the coming of that "shoot" even carnivorous beasts will be tamed and will turn into harmless herbivores. Nothing is said in Isa. 11 to indicate that the king's musical ability will be the force that tames the beasts. On the other hand, nothing in the Orpheus myth hints that Orpheus was a king, yet the lyre-player of the reredos probably sits on a throne and wears the same garb as Persian

50 Neusner, I, 31 (n. 1), 84–85; cf. III (Leiden, 1968), 182, and IV (1969), 35, 53–54, 68, 319, 375.

51 See Jer. 2:21, Hos. 10:1, Ezek. 19:10–14, Psa. 80:9–20, and cf. Isa. 5:1–7. Babylonian Jews are reported to have recited the following prayer formula (based upon Psa. 80:9–11) which received the disapproval of rabbinic authorities: "A vine from Egypt our God brought out, and he drove out nations and planted it; he watered it with water from Sinai and with streams from Horeb. Blessed art Thou, O LORD, who lovest Israel" (B. M. Lewin, *Otzar ha-Gaonim* [Haifa, 5688=1928–], Vol. I, Part I, 71, and Part II, 73). See also Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 63, n. 150.

52 See *Gen. Rabbah* 98:8–9, 99:8, *BT Berakot* 57a, *Targum Onqelos* Gen. 49:10, *LXX Gen.* 49:10 (perhaps); Adolf Posnanski, *Schilo: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Messiaslehre* (Leipzig, 1904–); Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (7 vols.; Philadelphia, 1909–38), V, 367–68 (n. 388).

53 Goodenough, IX, 93; Stern, *JWCI* 21 (1958), 4, and *CRAI*, 1970, 78–79.

King Ahasuerus in the center left painting of the bottom register of the west wall.⁵⁴ Surely, then, the lyre-player is the king predicted by Isa. 11:1-9, with the image of Orpheus' musicianship borrowed to symbolize the power by which that wonderful king's presence will tame the beasts.⁵⁵ Because one or more trees usually appeared in the pagan Orpheus scene,⁵⁶ the messianic figure symbolized by that scene and based upon Isa. 11:1-9 was all the more easily integrated into a composition tied together by a tree-vine.

To explain why there are two blessing scenes at the base of the tree-vine and why the king above is surrounded by thirteen standing figures in the garb of Persian commoners, we need only bear in mind the stories of the strife between Joseph and his brothers in Genesis and the history of the rivalry between Israel and Judah in the books of Samuel and Kings and combine those two factors with Isa. 11:11-13. In many periods Jacob's descendants have been troubled by the propensity of their nation to be split into quarreling factions.

The biblical narrative presents Jacob as foreseeing that the descendants of each of his sons will maintain a separate tribal identity (Gen. 49:3-26), though within the structure of a single nation (Gen. 49:2, 28). In the separate scene of his blessings to Joseph's sons, he foresaw a distinct glorious destiny for the Joseph tribes, especially Ephraim (Gen. 48:3-4, 9-22), even though he was to include them within the structure of the single nation (Gen. 49:22-26 in Gen. 49:1-28). Isa. 11:11-13 predicts that in the time of the wonderful king God himself will gather together the scattered tribes of Jacob's descendants; though Ephraim and Judah will continue to maintain their separate identities (and so, we may infer, will the tribes which follow the leadership of those two), the twelve or thirteen tribes will henceforth live together in harmony, an idea well symbolized by the twelve or thirteen subjects standing in obedient order around their king.

Nothing in scripture suggested that the prophetic promises⁵⁷ of the return of the "Lost Ten Tribes," the ones led by Ephraim had been revoked. The Jews of Dura lived not far from the valley of the Habur river, to which the Lost Tribes had been exiled (2 Kgs. 17:6), and because of that fact were probably all the more conscious of the destiny promised by the prophets and by dying Jacob to Ephraim and to the tribes subordinated to his. Thus we can account for the appearance of both sets of blessings at the base of the tree-vine and for the presence of all twelve or thirteen tribes around the messianic king at the top.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ See n. 20.

⁵⁵ When I announced this interpretation in my review, *JNES* 28 (1969), 217, I was not aware that Henri Stern had elaborated it before me, in *JWCI* 21 (1958), 4-6. Stern, however, in his articles has not noted that the top scene of the reredos, the king and his subjects, also is derived from Isa. 11 (vss. 11-13).

⁵⁶ See the examples presented or cited in Stern, *Gallia* 13 (1955), 41-77, and Harrison, *JRS* 52 (1962), 13-18. Trees are also found in Christian Orpheus scenes; see Stern, "Orphée dans l'art paléochrétien," *CA* 23 (1974), 2, 4, 6, 8.

⁵⁷ E.g., Isa. 11:11-16, 27:12-13, Jer. 31, etc.

⁵⁸ Nothing in the reredos can be taken to symbolize the Messiah descended from Joseph who is found in rabbinic traditions (see Klausner, 400-401, 483-501), so that those traditions can hardly explain the inclusion of Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons (contrast A. Grabar, *RHR* 123 [1941], 168-69).

We have now identified and explained all figures in the reredos except for the king's two attendants who are dressed in chiton and himation. A group of texts gave rise to the vine figure as a symbol for Israel and her destiny. Otherwise, however, the reredos is an illustration of only Gen. 49 and Isa. 11. We have yet to ascertain the meaning of the three wing panels other than the one at the upper right.

III. *What Can the Jewish and Christian Art and Literature of the First Six Centuries Tell Us About the Enigmatic Aspects of the Reredos?*

A. The Orpheus Composition

Dura was a provincial outpost with a relatively small Jewish community which can hardly have been distinguished for artistry and intellectuality. If its synagogue exhibits elaborate artistic and theological schemes, they must be derived from traditions formulated in centers culturally more favored, traditions which can be expected to have had their origins in times well before the mid-third century C.E. and to have persisted into times long after.⁵⁹

Pieces of Jewish and Christian art have been discovered which strikingly confirm my interpretation of the Orpheus scene of the reredos and also cast light on the traditions which gave rise to it. Good articles by Henri Stern and Moshe Barasch have treated important aspects of this evidence.⁶⁰ However, there are still problems to be solved.

Outstanding among the discoveries is the mosaic of a royal Orpheus in the floor of the central nave, near the entrance, of the ancient synagogue of Gaza. The mosaic is dated by an inscription to 508/9 C.E.⁶¹ The Orpheus scene was fragmentary even when first discovered and photographed⁶² and has suffered badly since. The royal lyre-player wears a jeweled diadem, a long, sleeved purple tunic, and a cloth-of-gold mantle. Around his head is a nimbus (halo). He sits upon an elaborate throne. The clothing, the throne, and the nimbus are typical of portrayals of Byzantine emperors. A Hebrew label, "David," identifies the king. To the right survive the front two thirds of a meekly listening lion and an undulating fragment which probably is an elephant's trunk but may perhaps be a snake.⁶³

The mosaic of Gaza should be a decisive refutation of Kraeling's doubts⁶⁴ about the extent and integrity of the Orpheus composition in the Dura reredos.⁶⁵ Barasch rightly

59 Cf. Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 321, 385-402; Heinz-Ludwig Hempel, "Zum Problem der Anfänge der AT-Illustration," *ZAW* 69 (1957), 120-29; Mary Lee Thompson, "Hypothetical Models of the Dura Paintings," in *The Dura-Europos Synagogue: a Re-evaluation (1932-1972)*, ed. by Joseph Gutmann ("Religion and the Arts," 1; Missoula, Mont., 1973), 31-77; André Grabar, *Martyrium* (Paris, 1946), II, 20, 116-17, 166-67, 233-34.

60 Stern, *CRAI*, 1970, 63-79, and "Orphée dans l'art paléochrétien," *CA* 23 (1974), 1-16; Barasch, *EI* 10 (1971), 94-99 (in Hebrew, with English summary on xi).

61 Stern, *CRAI*, 1970, 63-65.

62 See fig. 7, reproduced from *Qadmoniot* 1 (1968), 124, with the permission of the Israel Exploration Society.

63 Stern, *CRAI*, 1970, 70; Barasch, *EI* 10 (1971), 97.

64 See above, with n. 19.

65 So Stern, *CRAI*, 1970, 72-76, but see Sister Murray's view, cited in n. 19.



Fig. 7

noted a peculiarity of the Gaza mosaic: numerous are artistic representations of Orpheus, a non-royal lyre-player, amid listening wild beasts; so are portrayals of enthroned kings and emperors playing musical instruments; rare indeed are portrayals of the royal lyre-player in the presence of listening beasts.⁶⁶ Stern took pains⁶⁷ (wrongly, I think) to dispute Kraeling's assertion that the "Orpheus" of the reredos is presented as a king. Barasch in his study made use of the article in which Stern presented this view. We may infer that Barasch agreed with Stern, and that is why he could assert that the Gaza mosaic is unusual as an "early example, perhaps the *only* one [italics mine]" in which the royal motif is mixed with what he calls the "pastoral," i.e., the (originally non-royal) Orpheus playing to beasts.⁶⁸

66 *EI* 10 (1971), 95, with demonstration following in the remainder of the article.

67 *JWCI* 21 (1958), 3-4; cf. Goodenough, IX, 93(last paragraph)-94.

68 *EI* 10 (1971), 95.

As we shall see, the Jewish, Christian, and Near Eastern parallels strongly confirm the view that the Dura "Orpheus," too, is royal. Scholars before me⁶⁹ have realized that a royal Orpheus playing to wild beasts cannot represent the "historical David" of the books of Samuel, Chronicles, and Psalms (including the apocryphal 11QPs^a 151A).⁷⁰ The David of those books is said to have played to God,⁷¹ to men,⁷² to sheep,⁷³ but not to wild beasts. Far from taming wild beasts, that David claims to have killed them.⁷⁴

Hence, despite the label in the Gaza mosaic, the royal Orpheus there cannot represent the historical David. Rather, he is the Messiah predicted in Isa. 11:1-9.⁷⁵ The Messiah, too, will be called "David" and may indeed be the resurrected King David himself.⁷⁶ We shall find repeatedly, in the Jewish and Christian art from the third century C.E. well into the middle ages, important scenes that primarily depict, not the historical figures of the biblical narratives, but eschatological personalities.

It would, indeed, have been impolitic for Jews of Gaza, living under the Christian Eastern Roman Empire, to have labeled the mosaic depicting their Messiah with the Hebrew word *Māšīah* ("Messiah"). The Messiah of the Jews was supposed to put an end to the Roman Empire! It was much safer to label him, correctly but ambiguously, as David. Thus, at provincial Dura in the mid-third century C.E., Jews were using the figure of the messianic royal Orpheus, and Jews at Gaza were still using that figure in the sixth. Clearly the persistent figure must have been created before the mid-third century at some more favored center of Judaism.

No other examples are known of the use of Orpheus in Jewish art, but Christians, too, saw messianic prophecy in Isa. 11:1-9. If Jews could use Orpheus to represent their Messiah, could not Christians do so, too, to represent their Christ? Indeed, they did!

A very important early piece of evidence has not been cited in this connection, probably because of Stern's mostly-correct reluctance to attribute Orpheus compositions

69 E.g., Du Mesnil, *Peintures*, 50; Stern, *JWCI* 21 (1958), 3. Furthermore, according to Stern (*ibid.*), the biblical David's instrument was the harp (Hebrew *kinnor*, Greek *kinyra*), not the lyre (Greek *lyra*, *kithara*). He is probably right about David in Byzantine iconography, but elsewhere the distinction cannot be pressed. At 1 Chron 25:1 the LXX renders Hebrew *kinnor* by *kinyra*; Aquila, by *kithara*; and Symmachus, by *lyra*! Similarly instructive are the differences of the three Greek translations at Psa. 90(91):3, 136(137):2, 146(147):7, and 150:3. See also Paul Corby Finney, "Orpheus-David: a Connection in Iconography between Greco-Roman Judaism and Early Christianity?" *JJA* 5 (1978), 7, n. 5.

70 For the text, see James A. Sanders (ed.), *The Psalms Scroll of Qumrân Cave 11 (11QPs^a)* ("Discoveries in the Judaean Desert of Jordan," IV; Oxford, 1965), 49, 54-60. The reading and meaning of vss. 2-3 are a matter of controversy. See my review of Sanders' edition, *JNES* 26 (1967); Finney, *JJA* 5 (1978), 13, n. 22; and Frank Moore Cross, "David, Orpheus, and Psalm 151:3-4," *BASOR* 231 (Oct., 1978), 69-71. Whatever the correct reading in vss. 2-3, there would still be nothing of Orpheus in the piece, any more than there is in Psa. 148:6-9. David, the shepherd, plays before sheep, not wild beasts. He tames nothing. The sheep do no more than the domestic animals in Psa. 148:9.

71 Psa. 57:9, 71:22, 108:3.

72 1 Sam. 16:16-23.

73 1QPs^a 151A.

74 1 Sam. 17:34-36.

75 See above. One should not object to having the Messiah appear in two scenes of the reredos (cf. the objection of Stern, *JWCI* 21 [1958], 3, par. 6, to Kraepling's suggestion that David appears twice). Isa. 11:1-9 and Isa. 11:11-13 are separated by a space in the Masoretic Text; even without the space, verses 1-9 and 11-13 easily lead to two separate scenes. Jacob, too, appears in two scenes of the reredos.

76 Jer. 30:9, Ezek. 34:23-24; BT *Sanh.* 98b.

of the fourth and fifth centuries to Christians unless there is positive evidence.⁷⁷ The Orpheus mosaic at Ptolemais in Cyrenaica shows the lyre-player surrounded by wild beasts. He wears the usual Phrygian cap, but around his head also is a blue nimbus. He wears a dark red chlamys, pinned over his right shoulder and falling to the ankles, and bright yellow slippers. R. M. Harrison, who published the mosaic,⁷⁸ remarked on how not only the costume and the nimbus but also the formal posture of the lyre-player (in contrast to his casual pose in all other Orpheus scenes known to Harrison) were identical to the costume and posture of Theodosius I and his sons on a silver diptych of 388 C.E.⁷⁹

Indeed, the “dark red” of the chlamys is probably the imperial purple, and the bright yellow of the slippers probably represents cloth-of-gold. Harrison dates the mosaic to the late fourth or early fifth century.⁸⁰ The Orpheus of Ptolemais thus is an example of the royal or imperial Orpheus from the age of Theodosius I and his sons, when the Roman Empire was thoroughly Christian, including Cyrenaica. There are no other pagan examples of the royal Orpheus. I see no reason to doubt that the mosaic of Ptolemais is Christian.⁸¹ Two and one half centuries younger than the Dura reredos, it is the earliest Christian example of the royal Orpheus known to me.

Despite the destruction that must have been perpetrated by iconoclasts, significant remnants survive of Christian representations of the messianic royal Orpheus, dating from the fifth through the early seventh century. Some of them bear captions which show conclusively that the figure is derived from Isa. 11:1–9.⁸² David as the royal Orpheus charming the wild beasts is also attested in the Qurʾān and in the commentary on it by Tabari (838–923 C.E.) and, a century later, by the Persian author Hujviri.⁸³ We can assume that Muhammad and the Muslims took the figure from Christians.

Jewish and Christian use of the Orpheus figure has been a puzzle for scholars. The Jewish examples at Dura and Gaza both came as surprises. Specialists in early Christian art have long asked, “Why is Orpheus the only figure from Greek mythology that appears uninterpolated, without Christian window-dressing, in the pictorial repertoire of the third and fourth century Christianity?”⁸⁴

For us, the question should be rephrased, because the Jewish Orpheus figure and many instances of the Christian one differ from the pagan in an important respect: those Jewish and Christian examples have a *royal* lyre-player. We have seen how Jews and Christians could come to adopt Orpheus and his beasts and transform him into the royal lyre-player to represent the Messiah of Isa. 11:1–9. This, indeed, is the sole

77 See *CA* 23 (1974), I, 14(last paragraph)–16.

78 *JRS* 52 (1962), 13–18.

79 *Ibid.*, 16–17. On the imperial or royal connotations of the nimbus, see Adolf Krücke, *Der Nimbus und verwandte Attribute in der frühchristlichen Kunst* (“Zur Kunstgeschichte des Auslandes,” Heft XXXV; Strassburg, 1905), 72–73.

80 *JRS* 52 (1962), 16.

81 Cf. Harrison, *ibid.*, 17–18.

82 See Stern, *JWCI* 21 (1958), 4–6; for further details and dates, see R. de Vaux, “Une Mosaïque byzantine à Maʿin (Transjordanie),” *RB* 47 (1938), 227–58 and Plates, esp. 223–34, 256, and Pl. XI, 1; Doro Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (Princeton, 1947), 359–60.

83 Stern, *CRAI*, 1970, 77. On some medieval Byzantine texts and illuminations, see below.

84 Finney, *JJA* 5 (1958), 15; cf. Stern, *CA* 23 (1974), 8, 15.

pathway known to me by which Jews and Christians could come naturally to use Orpheus as they used no other figure in pagan mythology.⁸⁵

There is a series of non-royal Christian Orpheus scenes, on walls of catacombs at Rome and on sculptured sarcophagi in Italy and Sardinia. The series begins ca. 220 C.E., before the time of the Dura synagogue, and extends down to ca. 400. On six of these nine pieces (including the earliest one, the catacomb painting of ca. 220) the lyre-player is shown only amid peaceful animals like sheep, goats, inoffensive birds, or a domestic dog. Two catacomb paintings show Orpheus amid the classical mixture of carnivorous beasts and peaceful herbivores and birds. Stern refused to commit himself on yet another catacomb painting, of which the section which probably contained quadrupeds has been destroyed, but since it shows a (carnivorous) eagle, we may assume that it had the classical mixture.⁸⁶

We ask again, why was early Christian art hospitable to Orpheus as it was to no other figure from pagan mythology? Furthermore, the tamed wild beasts could hardly be objectionable to peace-loving Christians. Why, then, are carnivores excluded from some of the scenes? These questions can be answered if the Orpheus scene first entered Christian art through the royal Messiah figure of Isa. 11:1-9. Once that had happened, even the non-royal Orpheus could represent the Messiah who tames the beasts. We have seen that the royal Orpheus for Jews could be David himself. For Christians, the non-royal Orpheus could be young David, ancestor of Jesus the Christ, prefiguring his glorious descendant. Young David was no king; he was both shepherd and musician. Scripture says nothing of his playing to wild beasts, and 11QPs^a 151A says he played to sheep; either or both of these facts would account for the absence of carnivores from six of the Christian scenes. If our reasoning is correct, the nine Christian scenes attest the existence of the royal messianic Orpheus from ca. 220, from a time earlier than the Dura synagogue.

The earliest example of the royal Orpheus known to us is the Jewish figure at Dura. The Christian non-royal examples allow us to push the origin of the figure back toward the late second century, a period at which it is extremely difficult to believe that Jews would borrow from the harried and despised Christians. Did Jews invent the royal Orpheus, and did Christians take him from them? Did the adherents of the two religions invent him independently? Stern argued well for the view that Christians took him from Jews.⁸⁷ We shall find clear signs that Christians borrowed from the Jewish artistic traditions which gave rise to the scene at the top of the reredos, and those borrowings would lend further plausibility to Stern's view. Nevertheless, there is no direct evidence. No examples of the royal Orpheus have been found in the catacombs or on the Christian sarcophagi. Stern's view is thus attractive but not proved.⁸⁸

Once the Orpheus figure was naturalized in Christian art, it could be confused with that of the Good Shepherd or with that of the king-musician (who is not shown with

85 On the unlikelihood of other proposed pathways of art and literature by which Jews and Christians might have come to use Orpheus, see Stern, *CA* 23 (1974), 8-12.

86 Stern, *CA* 23 (1974), 1-8.

87 *CA* 23 (1974), 12-15.

88 Cf. Finney, *JJA* 8 (1978), 8-15.

wild beasts and was originally entirely distinct from Orpheus).⁸⁹ In this manner we can understand some Byzantine illuminations cited by Stern,⁹⁰ six of which show David playing to human figures and sheep and a dog, and three of which show Orpheus surrounded by the classical mixture of carnivorous and harmless animals. The two musicians are similarly attired; each has a nimbus around his head and plays a harp, not a lyre. Similarly, Georgios Pisides, deacon of Saint Sophia in Constantinople in the early seventh century, addressing God in a poem calls the Psalmist David "Thy Orpheus," and five centuries later, Euthymios Zigabenos in his introduction to his commentary on the Psalms calls David "our Orpheus . . . the shepherd . . . and prophet and king."⁹¹

B. The Wing Panels and the Top of the Reredos

The theological and artistic schemes known to us through the topmost part of the Dura reredos and through the wing panels had still more vivid reverberations in Christian art, reverberations which enable us to identify enigmatic parts of the central composition. The paintings of the Christian building at Dura contribute nothing to the understanding of the central composition of the synagogue. Few are the early decorated churches which survived the ravages of time and iconoclasts. Outstanding among those survivors are a set of basilicas from the reign of Justinian in the sixth century C.E.: the church of St. Mary at the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai, that of San Vitale at Ravenna, and that of San Apollinare in Classe, which in the sixth century stood in a suburb of Ravenna.⁹²

I am not the first to notice that in the church at the monastery on Mount Sinai there is a repetition of a pattern of the Dura synagogue which is too precise to be a coincidence: over the apse mosaic, to the left there is a mosaic of Moses at the burning bush, and to the right there is one of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments from the hand of God above.⁹³ The mutilated upper left panel at Dura is indeed easily restorable as a picture of Moses receiving the Torah or the Ten Commandments.⁹⁴ Greek- and

89 Barasch, *EI* 10 (1971), 97-99.

90 *CA* 23 (1974), 14.

91 *Ibid.*, 12-14; the correct references to the sources are Georgios Pisides, *Hexaemeron* 90-91, *PG*, XCII, 1438, and Euthymios Zigabenos, *PG*, CXXVIII, 41.

92 On the date, 549, of the apse-mosaic of San Apollinare in Classe, see Erich Dinkler, *Das Apsismosaik von S. Apollinare in Classe* ("Wissenschaftliche Abhandlungen der Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen"; Köln und Opladen, 1964), 12-14, 21-22. Inscriptions date the apse-mosaic of Mount Sinai between 548 and 565 (*ibid.*, 26). Dinkler's book is excellent. Had he perceived the parallels between San Apollinare and the Dura synagogue, he might have left no room for my present article.

93 See figs. 8 and 9, reproduced with the permission of the University of Michigan Press from George H. Forsyth and Kurt Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: the Church and Fortress of Justinian* (Ann Arbor, 1973), Plates CXXXVI and CXXXVII. Previous recognition that the Moses panels of the church stand in the same tradition as the wing panels of Dura: André Grabar, *Martyrium: Recherches sur le culte des reliques et l'art chrétien antique* (2 vols.; Paris, 1943-46), II, 116-17, 166-67; *CA* 5 (1951), 10; Forsyth-Weitzmann, 15.

94 Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 230-33; Goodenough, IX, 112. At Sinai Moses received not only the tablets of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 32:15-16) but also the scroll of the Book of the Covenant, the Torah (Exod. 24:7).

Coptic-speaking Christians read from left to right; the Aramaic-speaking Jews or Dura read from right to left. Hence, the reversal of left and right in the disposition of the scenes is just what one would expect.

Again, at Mount Sinai in both pictures Moses wears himation and striped chiton. As at Dura there is a partial symmetry: Moses at the bush stands at the left of the panel and looks to the left, while his arms slant down to the right toward his left foot, from which he is removing the shoe; Moses receiving the Commandments stands at the right of the panel and looks to the left, while his arms slant up to the left to receive the tables. As at Dura, the figure in the panel horizontally opposite to Moses at the burning bush is barefoot. Though nothing is said in Exod. 19:18–20:15 about the removal of shoes, one would assume that Moses learned from his experience reported in Exod. 3:2–5 to remove his shoes at the holy place of Mount Sinai.

There is another close parallel to this same pattern in the church of San Vitale.⁹⁵ The main body of the church is an octagon, to the eastern side of which is attached the U-shaped structure of the presbyterium (the space containing the altar) and apse. On the south wall of the presbyterium, by the pillar immediately adjoining the apse, is a picture of Moses (identified by a Latin label) removing his shoes at flaming Mount Sinai as he looks up leftward toward the hand of God. No burning bush is shown, so that the scene probably represents Exod. 20:18 rather than, or in addition to, Exod. 3:2–5. Directly below this scene of Moses is another of him as a shepherd tending the flock of his father-in-law. On the north wall of the presbyterium, by the pillar immediately adjoining the apse, is a labeled picture of Moses on Mount Sinai receiving a scroll from the hand of God, which is above him to the right.⁹⁶ Directly below this scene of Moses is a depiction of white- and black-bearded men standing at the foot of the mountain; we may assume they represent the Israelites (Exod. 19:17–25). All three of these Moseses have a nimbus and wear the himation and the striped chiton.

Should we not recognize at Dura, at Mount Sinai, and at Ravenna a shared tradition of religious art, one which frames the central composition with pictures of Moses? Should we not complete the headless picture in the upper left panel at Dura so as to make him a Moses receiving the tablets of the Ten Commandments or the scroll of the Torah from the hand of God? Should we not assume that the rectangular space around the head in the Dura wing panels has the same function as the nimbus at San Vitale?⁹⁷ Should we not assume that as at San Vitale, so at Dura, the four wing panels either show Moses or a scene associated with him?⁹⁸

95 Noticed first by Georg Kretschmar, "Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach dem Verhältnis zwischen jüdischer und christlicher Kunst in der Antike" in *Abraham unser Vater: Festschrift für Otto Michel* (Leiden, 1963), 303–8, reprinted in *No Graven Images: Studies in Art and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Joseph Gutmann (New York, 1971), 164–69. My description follows Kretschmar's.

96 On the scroll, see n. 94.

97 See n. 79.

98 See Goodenough's arguments (IX, 110–18) for taking all four figures in the wing panels as Moses. I believe that at Dura figures in fringed himation and striped chiton are either angels or prophets; see for the present Goodenough, IX, 126–27, 159–62. The evidence at San Vitale is ambiguous, because at the west end of the north and south walls of the presbyterium appear labeled pictures of Jeremiah proffering an open scroll (cf. Jer. 36) and of Isaiah holding a closed one (cf. Isa. 8:16). Both prophets wear the himation and the striped



Fig. 8

We should! But my predecessors have not observed the full extent of how the traditions exhibited in the synagogue of Dura controlled the central compositions of our three important sixth-century churches.⁹⁹ In fact, not only the framing Moses-scenes but also the main apse-mosaics of the churches stand in the same tradition as the central

chiton. Could not these scenes suggest that the men in the two lower wing panels of Dura are not Moses but some other prophet?

In fact, however, the evidence from San Vitale helps confirm Goodenough's arguments for identifying the men in the two lower wing panels as Moses. The scrolls in the hands of the Isaiah and the Jeremiah at San Vitale are quite different from the one in the lower right wing panel at Dura. Jeremiah proffers his scroll; the figure at Dura reads from his. Goodenough is wrong when he says (IX, 114) that Jeremiah at San Vitale reads his scroll "in the same mystic pose" as the man in the Dura wing panel. If the scroll in that panel does not fit Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel (who ate his: Ezek. 2:9-3:3), how can the prophet who holds it and reads from it be anyone but Moses? As Goodenough recognized (IX, 115-18), the fact that three of the four wing panels represent Moses makes it probable that the lower left panel too, represents him, at the time of his death.

⁹⁹ Kretschmar in *Festschrift Michel*, 307-13, came closest; cf. A. Grabar, *Martyrium*, II, 164-67.



Fig. 9

composition at Dura! There are good reasons why scholars have not perceived the connection. On the one hand, the apse-mosaics at Mount Sinai and at San Apollinare are clearly based upon the Transfiguration story from the New Testament (Matt. 17:1–9, Mark 9:2–10, Luke 9:28–36), so that one might not think of looking for a Jewish prototype. On the other hand, at San Vitale one cannot view the Moses-scenes on the walls of the presbyterium simultaneously with the apse-composition, which shows the Christ as *kosmokrator*, as king enthroned upon the world sphere, a type drawn from Roman imperial iconography, needing no Jewish antecedents.¹⁰⁰

The strands of tradition which gave rise to the Transfiguration story are intricate and matter for controversy, and I cannot treat them in detail here.¹⁰¹ Whatever other purposes the versions of the Transfiguration in the three Synoptic Gospels may serve, in

100 See Carl-Otto Nordström, *Ravennastudien* ("Figura," 4; Stockholm, 1953), Tafel 22b and 89 (with n. 3).

101 See the commentaries to the passages in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and Morton Smith, "The Origin and History of the Transfiguration Story," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 35, 1 (Fall, 1980), 39–44.

their settings they have the function of validating the claim that Jesus was the Messiah against the evidence of events that might seem to prove otherwise.¹⁰²

In Matthew and Mark Jesus strangely imposes temporary secrecy upon Peter, James, and John concerning what they have witnessed; in Luke, just as strangely, the three, without being so commanded, tell no one of what they have seen. In the passage which follows immediately in Matthew (17:10-13) and Mark (9:11-13), Jesus' own disciples seem to object to this imposition of silence, asking, "Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must first come?" Luke appears to have found the disciples' question and Jesus' answer superfluous and omitted both, very likely because he had already told in 1:17 of John the Baptist as a reincarnation of Elijah. The narrative in all three versions is very strange if it was not written against the background of a belief that when the Messiah came (surely a public event!), Elijah and Moses would be with him.¹⁰³ By the Transfiguration story, early Christians could claim that Elijah and Moses had indeed come with Jesus, but the witnesses to their coming long had said nothing of it, and, if that fact seemed strange, Matthew and Mark ascribed it to the Christ's own command.

The belief in the coming of Elijah to usher in the messianic age is well known and has its origin in Mal. 3:23. That prophecy itself surely drew on the fact that Elijah is not reported to have died but to have ridden up to heaven in a fiery chariot (1 Kgs. 2:1-11).¹⁰⁴ Moses' death and burial, however, are recorded in Deut. 34:5-6. But prophets had promised a miraculous Second Exodus, and surely someone would function as its Moses.¹⁰⁵ Believers in resurrection would have no trouble having Moses himself return to usher in the messianic era; doubters of resurrection could look forward to a second Moses just as they could to a second David.¹⁰⁶ The expectations that a Moses would be active in the messianic age could also find support in Deut. 18:15-18. Jews so much desired the first Moses to be able, like Elijah, to return without having to be resurrected, that they created stories about Moses' assumption alive into heaven.¹⁰⁷

Now let us look at the apses of Mount Sinai and San Apollinare. In the center at Mount Sinai¹⁰⁸ stands Jesus the Christ, shown in a radiant mandorla (almond-shaped enclosure),¹⁰⁹ with a radiant nimbus around his head. A set of medallions surrounds the entire scene of the apse. In the medallion directly above Jesus is a luminous cross. In the medallion directly below him are the head and shoulders of King David, Jesus' ancestor in Christian belief. King David is shown clothed as a Byzantine emperor, with the facial

102 See the passages which immediately precede the story (Matt. 16:13-28, Mark 8:27-9:1, Luke 9:18-27).

103 Cf. Rev. 11:3-15, where verse 6 shows that the two witnesses are Elijah, who shut up the sky and stopped the rain in the time of King Ahab, and Moses, who brought plagues upon Egypt, and see Howard M. Teeple, *The Mosaic Eschatological Prophet* ("JBL Monograph Series," Vol. X; Philadelphia, 1957), 8, 44, 108-9.

104 See *ibid.*, 3-9 (sources cited from Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Rabbinic Literature, and New Testament).

105 See *ibid.*, 29-31.

106 See *ibid.*, 43-48, 63-68, 74-93, 100-101, 107, 120-21, and above, n. 76.

107 See *ibid.*, 41-43.

108 See fig. 10, reproduced with the permission of the University of Michigan Press from Forsyth-Weitzmann, Pl. CIII. Cf. the description of Dinkler, 26-27.

109 On the mandorla or aureole, see A. Grabar, *Martyrium*, II, 191-93.

features of the emperor Justinian, who was reigning when the mosaic was made.¹¹⁰ To say the least, then, Jesus the Christ is portrayed with splendor equal to the royal or the imperial. To the left of him stands a man in himation and striped chiton, labeled in Greek as Elijah. To the right of Jesus stands another, similarly dressed, labeled as Moses. Kneeling or crouching near Jesus' feet are John, Peter, and James, the three disciples who witnessed the Transfiguration.

More complicated is the apse-mosaic at San Apollinare.¹¹¹ Let us first consider its aspects which have obvious parallels at Mount Sinai. In the center of the apse at San Apollinare, where Jesus stands at Mount Sinai, is a jewel-studded Latin cross of gold, set upon a star-spangled night-sky-blue circular background which itself is surrounded by a red jewel-studded gloriole. At least the upper parts of the gloriole and its contents appear to be floating among clouds, though its bottom may touch the ground. At the junction of the beams of the cross is a bust of the Christ. Dinkler presents evidence that emperors and members of their families were the first to have their portraits set thus at the junction of the beams of a cross. He holds that there is no earlier example known of placing a picture of the Christ himself in that position.¹¹² Just above the top of the vertical beam is the Greek word *ICHTHYS* ("fish"), acronym in Greek for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." Just below the bottom of the vertical beam are the Latin words *Salus Mundi* ("Salvation of the World").¹¹³ To the left and right of the horizontal beam of the cross are the alpha and omega of Rev. 22:13. Surely the cross is shown in more than royal splendor. High in the clouds above the cross is the hand of God.

To the left of the gloriole is a man shown only from the waist up, for the lower part of his body is immersed in the clouds. He wears a himation and a striped chiton and is labeled in Latin as Moses. To the right of the gloriole stands a similar figure, labeled as Elijah. Below, in a predominantly green landscape, studded with trees and flowering bushes, the three disciples who witnessed the Transfiguration are symbolized by three lambs. Such sheep-figures are common in Jewish biblical and post-biblical books, where human Israelites led by figures who are superhuman in some sense (kings by divine right, prophets speaking in God's name, or God Himself) are described as sheep under the care of a shepherd.¹¹⁴ The image persists in the New Testament¹¹⁵ and is quick to appear in early Christian art.¹¹⁶

Let us pause to assemble our clues. We know that Jews and early Christians believed that when the Messiah came, Moses and Elijah would accompany him. At both Dura and Mount Sinai we have Moses-scenes framing a depiction of a royal personality flanked by two figures in himation and striped chiton. At Mount Sinai the royal personality is the Messiah of the Christians. San Apollinare lacks the framing Moses-scenes, but the same two figures flank the royal cross. At both Mount Sinai and San

110 See Forsyth-Weitzmann, 15.

111 See fig. 11, and cf. the description of Dinkler, 18–19.

112 See Dinkler, 64–68. Grabar in his review of Dinkler, *CA* 15 (1965), 275–76, disputes these assertions.

113 But see *ibid.*, 68–71.

114 E.g., Num. 27:17, Jer. 23:1–22, 50:6, Ezek. 34, Mic. 5:3, 7:14, Psa. 79:13, 95:7, 100:3, 1 Enoch 89:12–90:36.

115 E.g., at Matt. 25:31–32, 26:31, Mark 14:27, Luke 12:32, John 10:1–16, 26–27, Rev. 7:17.

116 See Dinkler, 73–75, esp. 75, n. 147.

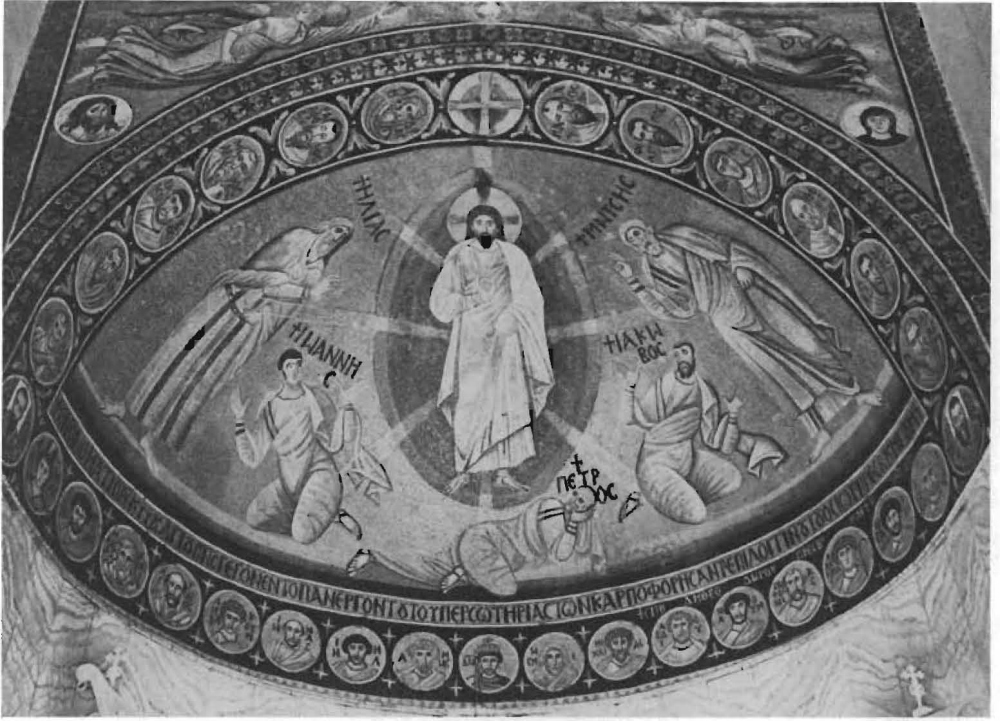


Fig. 10

Apollinare the flanking figures are labeled as Moses and Elijah. Surely then, in the synagogue of Dura, three centuries earlier than the two churches, the king is the Messiah of the Jews, and the flanking figures are Moses and Elijah. The same pattern seems to have influenced the presbyterium and apse of San Vitale. There, too, Moses-scenes frame the apse, but the apse shows a royal Christ enthroned upon a world-sphere, flanked by nameless winged angels (wearing himation and striped chiton!), not by Moses and Elijah.

Here, then, is confirmation (if confirmation were needed) for identifying the king at the top of the Dura reredos with the Messiah of the Jews. We may guess that when the Dura reredos was complete the hand of God appeared above the Messiah as it does at San Apollinare. Here, too, we have the key allowing us to identify the flanking figures in himation and striped chiton at Dura as Moses and Elijah.

There is more to be learned from the apses of Mount Sinai and San Apollinare. In San Apollinare we have noted the tree-studded landscape in which stand the three white lambs who symbolize the disciples who witnessed the Transfiguration; nothing in the scene either at San Apollinare or at Mount Sinai suggests a mountain. In the Gospel accounts, however, the Transfiguration occurs on a mountain, and nothing is said of trees or bushes. At San Apollinare in the lowest level of the green landscape, axially below the jeweled cross, stands a man shown frontally, with a nimbus around his head, clothed as a bishop, in a pose of prayer, with his palms spread upward. A label identifies

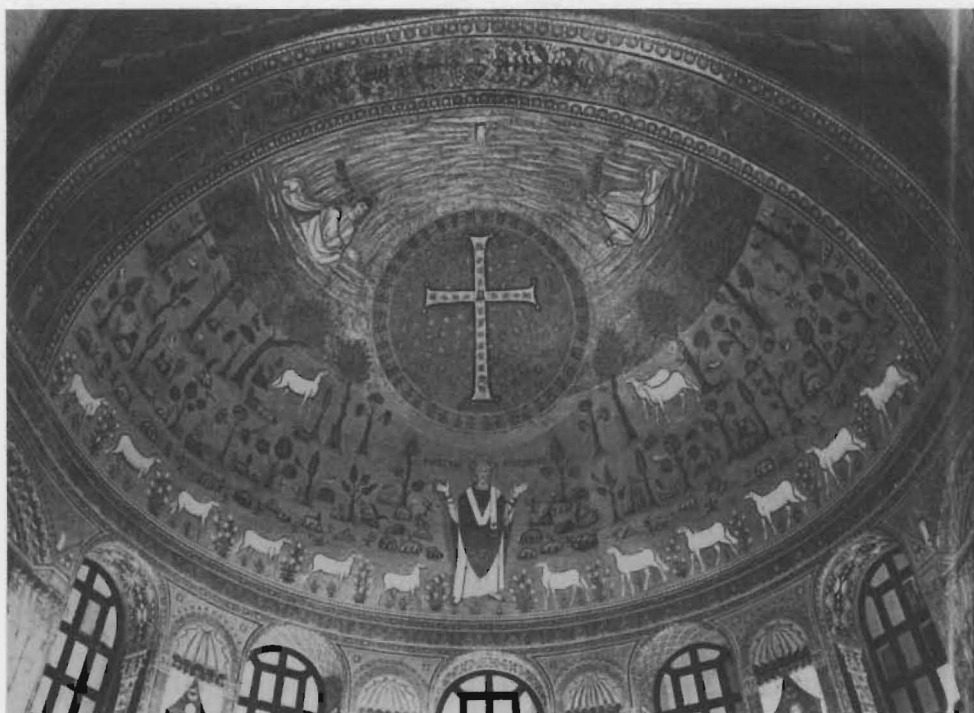


Fig. 11

him as Saint Apollinaris, the saint over whose grave the church was built and for whom the church was named. Converging on the saint from the left and from the right stand symmetrically drawn lines of six lambs each. There would be no room for Saint Apollinaris in a literal representation of the Transfiguration, for he was not present at the event. There also would seem to be no room for a group of twelve at the Transfiguration, for only three disciples witnessed it. If the twelve lambs represented the disciples, Peter, John, and James would be shown twice, for no ascertainable reason.¹¹⁷ We thus conclude that the lambs do not represent the disciples.

Now let us look at the apse on Mount Sinai. Clearly the artist knew how to show a mountainous background for his two Moses-scenes, yet he fails to show a mountain for the Transfiguration. This apse does not show a group of twelve, but it probably represents an extension of a tradition which displayed a twelve to accompany the scene of the royal Messiah: "It is a traditional feature of apse and bema compositions to depict the *twelve apostles* [italics mine] in framing medallion busts. . . . In Sinai, the framing apostle series is very closely integrated thematically with the Metamorphosis [= Transfiguration] in that the three disciples of the Tabor scene are not repeated in the medallions but replaced by the two evangelists, Luke and Mark, and by Matthias.

¹¹⁷ See Dinkler, 73, n. 143.

Moreover, the witnesses of the New Dispensation are supplemented at the bottom by those of the Old, i.e., by the major and minor prophets, to whom the bust of David is added in the center."¹¹⁸

Let us proceed to confront the puzzling aspects of the apses and to consider those puzzles in the light of the suggestive parallels between the apses and the central composition at Dura. Scholars have recognized that a long tradition must lie behind the artistic maturity and complicated symbolism even of the composition at Mount Sinai; all the more must a long tradition lie behind the much more complicated mosaic at San Apollinare.¹¹⁹ Yet study of the remains of earlier and later Christian art reveals no clues to Christian antecedents adequate to produce the two apses.¹²⁰

Here is a first puzzle. Another is the absence of any suggestion of a mountain from the two apses which purport to portray the Transfiguration; there is no trace of a mountain, either, in the Dura reredos. Is it possible that the tree-vine of the Dura reredos is paralleled by the tree- and bush-studded green landscape of San Apollinare, of which there is no suggestion in the Transfiguration narratives? The apses and the Dura reredos all have a group of twelve or thirteen associated with the messianic central scene. Again let us note that the Dura paintings are three centuries older than the apses. Should we not assume that the apses represent Christian adaptations of the Jewish iconographic tradition reflected at Dura and of the theological scheme symbolized by it? We should! But we should also pay due attention to some important insights of Erich Dinkler and correct an error of his.

For Jews the Messiah comes only once. The scene at the top of the Dura reredos is necessarily an eschatological one. Dinkler has demonstrated that the jeweled cross at San Apollinare, the luminous cross over the head of Jesus at Mount Sinai, indeed the Transfiguration scene in both churches with no hint of a mountain, and the Christ enthroned between two angels at San Vitale—all allude to the eschatological scene of the *Parousia*, the Second Coming of the Christ.¹²¹ The partial immersion of Moses and Elijah in the clouds at San Apollinare also probably alludes more to the Messiah's final coming "with the clouds of heaven" (Dan. 7:13 and its New Testament parallels), than to the total disappearance of Moses and Elijah in the cloud of the Transfiguration story. If there are allusions to the Transfiguration in San Apollinare and at Mount Sinai, it is because the Transfiguration prefigures the Second Coming. Thus, the royal Messiah and his attendants serve the same function at Dura and in the Christian apses. If Christians here borrowed an originally Jewish composition portraying the eschatological messianic king, they Christianized the scene by adding to it the three witnesses of the prefiguring Transfiguration.

Let us turn now to the group of twelve or thirteen portrayed at Dura and at San Apollinare and still hinted at in the apse on Mount Sinai. At Dura the assembled twelve or thirteen portray the fulfillment of Isa. 11:11-13. That prophecy did not loom so large for Christians as it did for Jews. Christians lacked the acute consciousness of being an

118 Forsyth-Weitzmann, 13.

119 See Dinkler, 28-29.

120 Ibid., 28-48, 112. For a refutation of the efforts of Grabar and Nordström to reconstruct Christian prototypes from surviving clues, see *ibid.*, 106-12.

121 Ibid., 87-100, 112-17.

exiled, dispersed, and bitterly divided nation consisting of twelve or thirteen tribes. Christians just might have symbolized the fulfillment of Isa. 11:11–13, but that passage mentions only Ephraim (i.e., the Northern Kingdom of Israel) and Judah, so that Christians might have used only two figures. We are about to see why they probably would not have used twelve.

A Christian eschatological source, Rev. 7:4–8, indeed was available to bring a depiction of the twelve tribes into a scene of the Second Coming. But Rev. 7:4–8 is only part of a longer description. In Rev. 7:4–9 a vast host of gentiles joins the surviving members of the twelve tribes. If Christian artists had created for themselves a depiction of Rev. 7:4–9, with or without allusions to Isa. 11:11–13, they would not have used twelve or thirteen figures but more. Indeed, a Christian artist of ca. 830 did precisely that in the Utrecht Psalter, where there is an illustration to accompany the “Psalm” of Isa. 12. The biblical text itself says that chapter is to be recited on the day of the fulfillment of Isa. 11:1–16! The artist showed the Christ standing in a mandorla high on the peak of a mountain, with a nimbus around his head, flanked by Moses and Elijah, with the three disciple-witnesses of the Transfiguration shown below, while large throngs of members of the True Israel converge on the scene from both sides.¹²²

Parenthetically, let us observe that the Utrecht Psalter strongly suggests that the tradition known from the Dura reredos, which connects the scene of the messianic king and his two attendants with Isa. 11:11–13, was still alive in ca. 830.

Thus, the twelve lambs cannot represent the twelve apostles, nor, if the composition is originally Christian, could they represent the scene of Rev. 7:4–9.¹²³ However, if the composition already existed among Jews, Christians could take it and Christianize its interpretation by referring to Rev. 7:4–8. We must consider carefully alternative possibilities by which Christian artists could have produced the twelve in the apse-scene. Must they have borrowed the twelve from the Jewish iconography exemplified at Dura?

At Dura the twelve or thirteen stood by or even amid the branches of the tree-vine.¹²⁴ In our interpretation, the scene of the king and his subjects is a fruit of the tree-vine. The remains of early Christian art contain nothing to suggest that Christians used the tree-vine as a symbol. Rather, for Christians the vine symbolizes the Christ himself and thus can hardly represent the stock from which the Christ will sprout.¹²⁵ Trees are no part of the versions of the Transfiguration story. On the other hand, in Christian belief the Tree of Life will appear at the Great Consummation, near the “throne of God and of the Lamb”; there will be multiple Trees of Life, for they will grow “on this side and on that side” of the river of the Water of Life; they will bear “twelve kinds of fruit” yielding fruit every month, “and the leaves of the Tree are for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2). The trees at San Apollinare show no fruit, and the sheep do not feed on them. Thus, the scene of Rev. 22:2 contributes nothing to an understanding of the trees in the apse of San Apollinare.

122 See *ibid.*, 44–46.

123 Noteworthy is Dinkler’s perplexity, at 102–3.

124 The fact is no longer easy to see in fig. 1, and certainly is not shown in figs. 2, 3, 5, and 6, but it is implied by the proportions of fig. 4 and of Kraeling, *Synagogue*, Pl. XXXIII.

125 John 15:1–16. See Goodenough, VI (1956), 53. On tree symbolism in early Christian art, see *ibid.*, VII (1958), 118–21.

Dinkler, however, found a Christian text which connects the Transfiguration with a garden containing permanently-green trees and never-wilting flowers, in which dwell the departed souls of the righteous. The text is a pseudepigraphon, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, which has been dated to the mid-second century.¹²⁶ Of it a longer version survives in Greek, and a shorter version survives in Ethiopic. The Ethiopic text begins with a mention of how the eschatological cross will appear in heaven as a sign of the Second Coming.¹²⁷ Later,¹²⁸ the Ethiopic text turns to tell of the day of the Transfiguration. According to the Greek text, as the disciples (despite the three of the Synoptic Gospels, the Greek text of the *Apocalypse of Peter* gives their number as twelve!)¹²⁹ were going up the mountain with Jesus, they asked him to show them their departed righteous brethren. Their request is not reported in the Ethiopic version. However, in both the Greek and the Ethiopic text, after the appearance of the two glorious figures (identified in the Ethiopic version as Moses and Elijah), Jesus showed the disciples a garden containing trees, and in it were dwelling throngs of the righteous dead.¹³⁰

According to Dinkler, the *Apocalypse of Peter* has the Transfiguration, the eschatological cross, and a garden with trees: if it presents such striking parallels to the apse at San Apollinare, at the very least, it must be one of the sources for it. But even if we follow the Greek version of the text, we cannot derive from it three plus twelve lambs. Dinkler himself notes that the Ethiopic version is the one which contains the most striking parallels to the apse of San Apollinare. Though we have evidence that the *Apocalypse of Peter* was being read in Italy in the sixth century, nothing tells us which version was known there.¹³¹

Dinkler himself views the twelve lambs as the righteous departed, resident in the garden.¹³² But even if we invoke Rev. 7:4-8, it is hard to see why there should be twelve of them. Furthermore, they are displayed as lambs, in the same manner as the three witnesses of the Transfiguration. The three mortal witnesses were alive at the time of the Transfiguration and will be resurrected to view the Second Coming. It is thus difficult to regard the twelve lambs as the souls of the righteous departed. Moreover, Dinkler himself demonstrated that the figure of St. Apollinaris is an integral part of the composition, though it could have no place in a literal depiction of the Transfiguration: the saint is depicted as the intercessor for the faithful at the Last Judgment which will accompany the Second Coming.¹³³ The two rows of six lambs look to the saint. Surely the artist must have intended them to represent the living (or resurrected) faithful Christians at the time of the Second Coming, not the souls of the blessed departed. The lambs stand at the edge of the garden, either newly admitted inside through the saint's intercession or hoping to be.

126 Dinkler, 90-95.

127 Sec. 1, translated at Dinkler, 91.

128 Secs. 15-16, translated at Dinkler, 92-93.

129 Their number is not specified in the Ethiopic text.

130 In the Greek text the two figures with Jesus at the Transfiguration are not identified as Moses and Elijah but as the righteous departed brethren, and a more detailed description is given of the garden.

131 See Dinkler, 90, 94-95.

132 103.

133 Dinkler, 100-102.

Neither the Ethiopic nor the Greek version of the Apocalypse of Peter says that the three disciple-witnesses entered the garden; they were only shown it, whereas the apse-mosaic has the three witness-lambs standing well within it. Thus, the portrayal of the three lambs is at variance with the Apocalypse of Peter, and the twelve lambs cannot represent the souls of the departed. The parallels between the apse and the Apocalypse can no longer be said to be striking. Indeed, though both versions of the Apocalypse say there were "blessed fruits" upon the trees, no fruits are shown in the mosaic. We are left with no Christian text which could have led a Christian artist to create the twelve lambs and their background.

But Jews long before had begun to portray twelve or thirteen subjects around the messianic king and the tree-vine, and Christian artists could adopt that pattern. Indeed, at Dura the twelve or thirteen are dressed as commoners, in contrast to the superhuman Messiah, Moses, and Elijah. Just so, the artist of San Apollinare portrayed the twelve representative Christian subjects of the returned Christ as lambs looking to the intercession of St. Apollinaris, in contrast to the saint, the Christ, Moses, and Elijah, who are shown as glorified human beings.

As for the garden, Dinkler takes for granted that it is Paradise,¹³⁴ but nothing proves that it is. The garden lacks the four rivers of Gen. 2:10-14 which elsewhere identify Paradise in Christian art,¹³⁵ and we have noted repeatedly that the trees show no fruit. The tree-vine at Dura, too, has no grapes. In Christian symbolism there was no place for a tree-vine, with or without grapes. If Christians borrowed the iconographic tradition exemplified in the Dura reredos, they might transform the tree-vine into a garden with trees, as a place for the assembling of mankind at the feet of the Messiah at the Second Coming.¹³⁶ Whatever the meaning of the garden, the three witness-lambs stand in it only because it is not in heaven. They are shown perhaps for the purpose of Christianizing the scene and certainly for the purpose of alluding to the prefiguring event, the Transfiguration, which occurred when the witnesses were mere mortals; therefore they appear as lambs.

From our study of the Church mosaics and the reredos and wing panels of the Dura synagogue we can draw inferences about both the Christian and the Jewish compositions.

134 19, 95, 103.

135 See Dinkler, 53 (n. 90), 60, 115-16, and Abb. 22.

136 Cf. I Enoch 90:20. Can the garden be Paradise after all, patterned after the Elysian Fields of Vergil and the Apocalypse of Peter (cf. Dinkler, 91, 93, 95), with the three lambs standing within it to represent the three resurrected witness-disciples at the Second Coming? I do not think so. One would have expected the resurrected Sts. Peter, John, and James to be shown, not as lambs, but with status at least equal to that of St. Apollinaris.

In the Ascension scene among the Salerno ivories (of ca. 1080), at the top four angels bear the aureole containing the enthroned and nimbed Christ. At the bottom stand the twelve apostles around the Virgin Mary, who has a nimbus around her head. Touching the top of that nimbus and growing up to touch the bottom of the aureole containing the Christ is a vine bearing grapes. See Robert P. Bergman, *The Salerno Ivories: Ars Sacra from Medieval Amalfi* (Cambridge, MA, and London, England, 1980), fig. 38 (the Ascension scene) and 87-90 (the date). Interpreters have been hard put to explain the symbolism (see Josef Wilpert, *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis. XIII. Jahrhundert* [2d ed.; Freiburg im Breisgau, 1917], II, 911; Goodenough, VII, 146-47; Bergman, 74). Can we see in this piece of mediaeval Christian art Christians still adopting the iconographic tradition exemplified in the Dura reredos and transforming the tree-vine, in this instance by giving it grapes because a grapeless vine seemed pointless?

Very strong are our inferences using the Christian parallels to identify mysterious or ambiguous figures at Dura. In the reredos, the king and his two attendants are the Messiah, Moses, and Elijah. All four figures in the wing panels represent Moses, as Goodenough argued.¹³⁷ In the upper right panel Moses stands at the burning bush; in the upper left, he receives the revelation (the tablets of the Ten Commandments or the scroll of the Torah); in the lower right, he reads the Torah to the Israelites (Exod. 24:7); in the lower left, he stands on the day of or at the very moment of his death.

Why do these scenes of Moses frame the picture of the tree-vine of Israel and its messianic fruit? More than one answer can be suggested. Does the scheme allude to the fact that Moses tended the vine of Israel during the crucial early stages of its growth?¹³⁸ Nothing in the pictures suggests that Moses was a vinedresser. Alternatively, the Moses-scenes may celebrate the divine revelations and promises which warned Israel away from sin and made it possible for the vine to grow: the promise of the departure from Egypt, the revelation of God's law to Moses, Moses' service of teaching it to Israel, and Moses' last admonitory prophecies (Deut. 32:1-47, 33:1-29). Perhaps the Moses-scenes in the wing panels are to be viewed as the protecting fence around Israel, God's vine.

Our comparative study of the central composition of the Dura synagogue and the Christian apses has certainly added to our understanding of the former. Can we not say that it has also added to our understanding of the latter? The great puzzle of the apses is finding how and where their complicated symbolism could have evolved. There are too many parallels between the apses and the tradition exemplified in the synagogue for the resemblance to be coincidental: Moses-scenes which frame, prominent trees, central subject with royal splendor flanked by prophets or angels in himation and chiton, and groups of twelve portrayed as of subordinate status. The synagogue was unquestionably earlier and built at a time when Jews could not have borrowed iconographic symbolism from Christians. In those cases where the apses differ from the Dura pattern, we have explained how the Christian artist could have proceeded to modify the Jewish scheme. We can thus propose with considerable confidence that the artists of the Christian apses drew upon the tradition exemplified in the Dura synagogue.

One piece of evidence is missing from our sources: nothing tells us how the Jewish pattern came to be adopted by Christians. André Grabar and Nordström indeed have argued that Palestinian Christian prototypes lie behind the Christian apses,¹³⁹ and Christians in Palestine are known to have learned from Jews; certainly Origen, Epiphanius, and Jerome did. Dinkler's arguments¹⁴⁰ discounting the evidence presented by Grabar and Nordström have weight, but their view may be true even if their evidence is questionable. Do the facts as we have them allow any inferences? Is it an accident of the chance survival of pieces of Christian art from the ravages of time and iconoclasts that the striking parallels for the central composition of the synagogue are in churches of the sixth century? Or that the earliest known Christian example of the royal Orpheus

137 See n. 98.

138 Cf. the prayer quoted above, n. 51.

139 A. Grabar, *Martyrium*, II, 129-206; Nordström, 125-27.

140 See above, n. 120.

dates from the late fourth or early fifth century? One can imagine circumstances which could give rise to that chronology.

Figured art appears suddenly in the archaeological remains of Jewish Palestine. It hardly existed there among Jews during the first centuries C.E. and B.C.E. The Palestinian Talmud reports that wall-painting began in the times of Rabbi Yohanan (third century C.E.) and the making of floor mosaics in those of Rabbi Abbun (first half of the fourth century) and adds that both practices were tolerated.¹⁴¹ Nothing tells us why Palestinian Jews began to have figured art or when and why Jews of Mesopotamia began to put paintings on the walls of their synagogues or whether Dura was one of the earliest examples there. There were iconoclasts even among the worshipers at the Dura synagogue, as one can tell from the fact that in the lowest rows of paintings eyes have been gouged out.¹⁴² Iconoclasm eventually became the predominant view among Jews, though there were still synagogues with figured mosaics in the sixth century. Attractive symbols, rejected by Jews more and more in the fifth and sixth centuries, by that very fact might have become all the more attractive to Christians. Unemployed Jewish artists might become converts to Christianity and use their old iconography on behalf of their new faith. Strange as it seems, Jewish artists are known to have produced products for religious use by pagans,¹⁴³ so that even without being converted Jewish artists could have brought their own iconography into the decoration of Christian churches!

We have argued that Christians Christianized iconographic patterns that were originally Jewish. We are about to see how Jewish designers may have used the Moses-scenes to Judaize a reredos which, though Jewish in its entirety, still was composed of elements which were all originally pagan.

IV. *What Can the Royal Art of the Ancient Near East Tell us about the Reredos?*

Some problems of the reredos remain unsolved. What were the figures which originally stood in the space of the two blessings of Jacob, and why were they painted out? One can understand how Israel could be symbolized by a vine, but vines do not have the form of a tree. Why does the reredos have at its core the unnatural figure of a tree of which the branches and leaves are those of a vine? I believe we can solve these problems and confirm parts of our theory by studying the reredos in the context of ancient Near Eastern art.

My own research (now reinforced by articles of Dalia Levit-Tawil) has led me to an assumption which I believe to be very fruitful for understanding the paintings of the Dura synagogue: they draw heavily upon the matured patterns of the royal art of the *Sassanian* Persian dynasty.¹⁴⁴ This important path to understanding the paintings of the

141 *Abodah zarah* 3:3, 42d; 4:1, 43d, in the version published by J. N. Epstein ("*Lišrīdēy ha-yeṛūšalmī, Tarbiṣ* 3 [5692=1931-32], 20). I see no reason to doubt this testimony. Probably none of the synagogues in Jewish Palestine with figured carvings should be dated to the second century.

142 See Goodenough, IX, 23-24.

143 See E. E. Urbach, "The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in the Light of Archaeological and Historical Facts," *IEJ* 9 (1959), 158-65.

144 Dalia Tawil, "The Purim Panel at Dura in the Light of Parthian and Sasanian Art," *JNES* 38 (1979), 93-109; Dalia Levit-Tawil, "The Enthroned King Ahasuerus at Dura in Light of the Iconography of Kingship

Dura synagogue has been largely neglected, but for seemingly good reasons. The Sassanian empire began in 226. The synagogue was built in 245/6. From 164 (long before 226!) until the destruction of Dura (probably in 257), with the possible exception of one brief interruption in 253, the city was a Roman army post, foreign to the Sassanian empire if not hostile to it. Rather than Sassanian patterns, would not one expect to see at Dura Greco-Roman ones and those of the Parthian empire, which held Dura before 164 and fell to the Sassanians as late as 226?¹⁴⁵

The excavators were astonished at the extent to which those expectations are proved false. Within the Roman base of Dura there was considerable interest in the Sassanian empire and in its artistic patterns.¹⁴⁶ The synagogue is especially remarkable for the way it displays friendly interest in Persia. Jews long had good reason to look toward Persia and her kings as liberators.¹⁴⁷ Benevolent King Ahasuerus is displayed prominently adjacent to the Torah niche of the synagogue. Rome and Persia were not constantly at war. Subjects of the Sassanian Shapur I visited the synagogue, and in Middle Persian they painted on its walls their approval of its pictures as late as 254.¹⁴⁸ Between 226 and the time in 245/6 when the walls of the synagogue were ready for decoration, there were enough intervals of peace to allow interested parties to learn the new patterns of Sassanian art.¹⁴⁹

Those patterns were quick to mature, as we can tell from the rock reliefs and coins of Ardashir I (226-40) and Shapur I (240-72).¹⁵⁰ Our inadequate information and the

in Iran," *BASOR* 250 (1983), 57-78. For one of the clues I myself discovered, see n. 49. I announced my assumption publicly on March 6, 1975, at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago when I presented my paper, "The Synagogue of Dura-Europos Reinterpreted: a Palace for God and for the Messiah," as a Lester Aronberg Judaica Lecture.

145 On the history of Dura, see Hopkins, *Discovery*, 257-64; MacDonald, "Dating," *Historia* 35 (1986), 45-68. As an example of the prevailing view, see Ann Perkins, *The Art of Dura Europos* (Oxford, 1973), 62, 73 (n. 1), 121-26. For her, the art of Dura reflects mostly Parthian influence, with some admixture of Greek. She barely mentions Sassanian art and then only as a continuator of the Parthian, not as a precedent for Dura. Cf. Daniel Schlumberger, *L'Orient hellénisé* (Paris, 1970), p. 111; he holds that the artists of Dura followed the patterns of Parthian art and were insensible both to the currents of the Mediterranean world and to those of the rising Sassanian realm.

146 See Michael I. Rostovtzeff, "Dura and the Problem of Parthian Art," *YCS* 5 (1935), 263-66, 272, 283-88, and especially B. Goldman and A. M. G. Little, "The Beginning of Sasanian Painting and Dura-Europos," *Iranica Antiqua* 15 (1980), 283-98. MacDonald ("Dating," *Historia* 35 [1986], 54-61) raises valid points against the arguments which Rostovtzeff, Goldman, and Little base upon the "Battle Mural," but those points do not affect other evidence of Sassanian influences, especially that in the paintings of the synagogue.

147 2 Chr. 36:32, Ezra, Neh., Isa. 44:28, 45:1-5; Josephus *BJ* 1.13.1(248)-16.6(317) and *AJ* 14.13.3(330)-15.7(434); *Ekha rabbati* (= *Lam. rabbah*) 1:41 to Lam. 1:3, BT *Sanhedrin* 98a-b. Though the scene of the "Battle of Gog and Magog" in the Dura synagogue (see above, n. 49) shows the Romans and the Persians destroying each other, it seems that the designer was not equally hostile to both sides. One horseman rides a black horse, very likely to symbolize the more disliked power (for Jews, even in Dura, that was Rome!), and one rides a white horse, very likely to symbolize more benevolent Persia (the Babylonian amora Rab, a contemporary of the Dura synagogue, could find sins enough in Persia to justify her fall [BT *Yoma* 10a]). Can we believe that the Jews of Roman Dura could be so audacious as to show even relative favor to Persia? The subversive meaning of the scene would not be obvious to Romans unless explained to them.

148 See n. 7.

149 Cf. Hopkins, pp. 261-62.

150 See Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, 122-66, 245-46.

fragmentary character of what survives can make it difficult to define what, beyond the rock reliefs and the coins, is Sassanian.¹⁵¹ There is much to be learned about the synagogue paintings if we can assume that they reflect Sassanian rather than Parthian art. A distinctive feature of Sassanian royal art, marking it off from the Parthian, is the strong effort visible in the Sassanian to return to earlier patterns of Near Eastern (as opposed to Greek) art. In Daniel Schlumberger's felicitous expression, the Sassanian developments were a "renaissance."¹⁵² The themes we are about to study will give abundant illustration of that fact.

Characteristic of the wall decoration of the synagogue and of the pagan painted temples of Dura is its organization in registers, in multiple parallel bands. This is not the easiest scheme to use and is not found everywhere in the ancient world.¹⁵³ It does have significant parallels in the royal art of the ancient Near East, in which registered compositions were used to decorate palaces and temples and utensils made for the use of kings and utensils made for the use of commoners but depicting kings. The phenomenon goes back to the dynasties of Sumer (of the third millennium B.C.E.) and continues through the kings of Babylonia and Assyria and through the Achaemenian and Sassanian dynasties of Iran, with a very few examples known from the Parthian dynasty.¹⁵⁴

Reliefs and murals are somewhat conspicuous by their absence from descriptions of ancient Near Eastern temples. There may have been many temple murals which could not survive the ravages of time. But in the monumental architecture of Assyria and Babylonia, temple architecture was identical or similar to palace architecture.¹⁵⁵

151 See Oleg Grabar, "An Introduction to the Art of Sasanian Silver," in *Sassanian Silver: Late Antique and Early Mediaeval Arts of Luxury from Iran* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1967), 19–84. Cf. Daniel Schlumberger, "Sur l'origine et sur la nature de l'art des Sassanides," in Huitième Congrès international d'archéologie classique (Paris, 1963), *Le Rayonnement des civilisations grecque et romaine sur les cultures périphériques* (Paris, 1965), 567, 576.

152 Ibid., 570–76.

153 See Kraeling, *Synagogue*, pp. 68–69; Rostovtzeff (*YCS* 5 [1935], 211–12, 242–47) is sure that it is not Greek in origin.

154 For good surveys of the phenomenon of registered art, see Ann Perkins, "Narration in Babylonian Art," *AJA* 61 (1957), 54–62 and Plates 17–20 (includes Sumerian examples); Hans G. Güterbock, "Narration in Anatolian, Syrian, and Assyrian Art," *ibid.*, 62–71 and Plates 21–26. Güterbock rightly treats the bowls with concentric banded reliefs as a phenomenon parallel to the decoration of palace walls. Cf. Robert L. Alexander, "The Royal Hunt," *Archaeology* 16 (1963), 243–50. A good Assyrian example of registered palace reliefs is reconstructed in Pauline Albenda, "Landscape Bas-Reliefs in the *Bit-Hilani* of Ashurbanipal," *BASOR* 224 (Dec., 1976), 49–72, 225 (Feb., 1977), 29–48. Achaemenian examples: Roman Ghirshman, *The Arts of Ancient Iran From Its Origins to the Time of Alexander the Great* (New York, 1964), 160–65 (fig. 211), 198 (fig. 246), 201 (fig. 248), 204 (fig. 254), 231–32 (figs. 279–80). Few Parthian examples have been found; see Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, 48 (fig. 61; but is it Parthian?), 55 (fig. 68). Sassanian rock-reliefs: *ibid.*, pp. 153–54 (fig. 196), 158 (fig. 200), 184 (fig. 225), 192 (fig. 235); Sassanian silver: *ibid.*, 206 (fig. 245), and Ghirshman, "Notes iraniennes, V: Scènes de banquet sur l'argenterie sassanide," *Artibus Asiae* 16 (1953), 66–69 and figs. 16–17; painting in Sassanian style in house at Dura: Rostovtzeff, *YCS* 5 (1935), 285, in the context of 283–88. Even the dado below the three bands of narrative paintings in the Dura synagogue has Assyrian parallels. See F. Thureau-Dangin and Maurice Dunand, *Til-Barsib* (Paris, 1936), Plates XLVI, XLVII; André Parrot, *The Arts of Assyria* (New York, 1961), 4 (fig. 7), 99 (fig. 108).

155 See A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a dead Civilization* (Chicago and London, 1964), 326–28.

Moreover, the palace there was not a secular building. Indeed, an Assyrian palace was the residence of the king who was the high priest of the god Ashur.¹⁵⁶

Central to the Dura reedos is the tree-vine. There are parallels in the royal art of the ancient Near East. A sacred tree could occupy the center of the scene in the royal art of Assyria¹⁵⁷ and Achaemenian Persia,¹⁵⁸ as could a vine in that of the Sassanians.¹⁵⁹ Trees could also be important in framing symbolic royal scenes.¹⁶⁰ Vines, with or without supporting trees could be important parts of compositions in Assyrian, Achaemenian, and Sassanian art.¹⁶¹ There are clear Sassanian examples of the unnatural tree-vine.¹⁶²

From early dynastic Sumer down to the Muslim conquests and beyond, a small number of themes dominated the royal art of the empires of the Tigris-Euphrates valley. First, there was the legitimacy of the king, symbolized by scenes in which he receives the tokens of his office from divine figures. An Old Babylonian painting of an investiture survives from the eighteenth century C.E., as part of a composition in registers. It shows the king of Mari receiving the staff and circle, symbolic of rule, from the hands of the goddess Ishtar, in the presence of another god and goddess. The king stands *between* the two goddesses.¹⁶³

An Assyrian painting of an investiture survives from the reign of Sargon II (721-705 B.C.E.), again as part of a composition in registers. It shows the god at the left handing the ring-sceptre to the king; the king stands *between* the god and a high official.¹⁶⁴ Before we leave the Semitic Assyro-Babylonians, we should look at another pattern of asserting the king's legitimacy, of which I can cite one example: two male figures (priests, I think), bring King Nabû-apla-iddina of Babylon, who stands *between* them, into the presence of the god Shamash.¹⁶⁵

Let us turn now to study scenes of investiture proper in the Iranian dynasties. The Parthians portrayed them, though I do not know of an example in which the king is shown between the god and another important personage.¹⁶⁶

156 Ibid., 99-100.

157 Parrot, *Assyria*, 14 (fig. 16), 162 (fig. 205).

158 See Samuel K. Eddy, *The King is Dead: Studies in the Near Eastern Resistance to Hellenism, 334-31 B.C.* (Lincoln, NE, 1961), 28-29.

159 Edith Porada, *The Art of Ancient Iran: Pre-Islamic Cultures* (New York, 1965), 215 (Pl. 58), with description on p. 213.

160 Trees frame the registered composition at Mari (Parrot, *Syria* 18 [1937], 341-45) and the cylinder seal of Darius I (Ghirshman, *Ancient Iran*, 268 [fig. 329]).

161 On the tree-with-vine in the banqueting relief of Ashurbanipal and its later parallels, see below. See also *Sassanian Silver*, nos. 24 (discussed, p. 66), 45 (discussed, p. 73).

162 Ibid., no. 51 (described, p. 73); Ghirshman, *Artibus Asiae* 16 (1953), 67 (fig. 17).

163 See André Parrot, "Les Peintures du palais de Mari," *Syria* 18 (1937), 335-39.

164 Parrot, *Assyria*, 99 (fig. 108). The painting was found in Room 12 of Residence K at Khorsabad. The building was described as the house of the man second to the vizier in Gordon Loud and Charles B. Altman, *Khorsabad, Part I: The Citadel and the Town* (Chicago, 1938), 65, but Henri Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (Harmondsworth, 1954), 84, called the location the throne room.

165 Parrot, *Assyria*, 168 (fig. 215).

166 See Rostovtzeff, *YCS* 5 (1935), 172, 175; Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, 55.

The theme was a favorite in Sassanian royal art, beginning with the first king of the dynasty.¹⁶⁷ For us, most important are the compositions which show the king between two deities or between a deity and an important personage. Let us call that arrangement the "sandwich pattern." From the reign of Ardashir I, from before the building of the synagogue, there is his poorly preserved investiture relief at Naqsh-i Rajab. Our evidence for the existence of a tradition of using the sandwich pattern to portray investitures allows us to infer that the relief at Naqsh-i Rajab represents an elaboration of that tradition. The relief shows Ardashir receiving the token from Ahuramazda. Behind the king stands, first, the eunuch flychaser so often portrayed with a Near Eastern King. If we are looking for instances of the sandwich pattern, we should disregard the presence of the flychaser. Next behind the king, however, stands a person in the robes of a Persian dignitary, so as to be the left member of the sandwich. Complicating the scene are two small figures inserted between Ahuramazda and the king. Their relative size allows us to infer that they have been added to the sandwich pattern, as an elaboration of it.¹⁶⁸

Perhaps we can regard the investiture relief of King Narsah (293–302) as a somewhat similarly elaborated example of the sandwich pattern. The king receives the token from the goddess Anahita, and a bearded dignitary and another (now mutilated) figure stand behind him, but between the king and the goddess stands the small figure of his son.¹⁶⁹ Perhaps, then, we can also include here the investiture relief of Ardashir I at Firuzabad, where the king stands between Ahuramazda and three persons who are probably his own sons.¹⁷⁰

There are excellent Sassanian examples of the sandwich pattern in which both outer members are deities, in the investiture reliefs at Taq-i Bustan. One shows Shapur II¹⁷¹ (309–379) standing between Mithras and Ahuramazda, and another shows Chosroes II¹⁷² (591–628) standing between Anahita and Ahuramazda. Though these reliefs are later than the synagogue, the Near Eastern antecedents suggest that Shapur II knowingly resumed the old sandwich pattern with two deities; he did not reinvent it.

In a second theme, the ancient Near Eastern monarch's artists would portray his destructive might as he kills beasts in the hunt and crushes his enemies in battle or surveys them in their defeat, thus posing as the champion of man over beast, of truth and order over falsehood and rebellion, and as partner of his own great deity in vanquishing presumptuous opponents. This theme is absent from the reredos and is so

167 *Ibid.*, 131–33, 159, 167–68, 176, 190–93; Ghirshman, "Les Scènes d'investiture royale dans l'art rupestre des Sassanides et leur origine," *Syria* 52 (1975), 119–22.

168 *Ibid.*, 120 (fig. 1) and Arthur Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen, 1944), 90–91. On the small figures of the relief, see Ghirshman, *Syria* 52 (1975), 122–24. Eunuch flychasers: Parrot, *Assyria*, 41 (fig. 49), 51–52 (fig. 60), 69 (fig. 76), 103 (figs. 112–13).

169 Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, 176 (fig. 218).

170 *Ibid.*, 131 (fig. 167).

171 *Ibid.*, 190 (fig. 233), where the king is identified as Ardashir II (379–383); see, however, Guitty Azarpay, "The Role of Mithra in the Investiture and Triumph of Šāpūr II," *Iranica Antiqua* 17 (1982), 181–87.

172 Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, 193 (fig. 235), where the king is identified as Peroz (459–484); see, however, M. C. Mackintosh, "Taq-i Bustan and Byzantine Art: a Case for Early Byzantine Influence on the Reliefs of Taq-i Bustan," *Iranica Antiqua* 13 (1978), 150–51.

common in Near Eastern art, from the Sumerians down through the Sassanians, that it need not detain us here.¹⁷³

The king's destructive power should be used against foreign enemies and domestic rebels. Toward his own loyal subjects, who include docile conquered peoples of ethnic stock different from his own, the king should display his constructive might, as bringer of peaceful order and prosperity to his tamed subjects, who without his taming and protective power might be plagued by internecine strife. This fact brings a third theme into ancient Near Eastern royal art: the portrayal of how the enthroned king's subjects peacefully accept his rule.¹⁷⁴ Sometimes the enthroned king and his deferential subjects are shown in a scene which includes battle or the postures of the defeated or slain enemy. Especially interesting for us are the examples, mostly Sassanian, which show the enthroned king in the center flanked by symmetrically arranged deferential subjects.¹⁷⁵ The king can even turn lions into peaceful subjects, though one might have thought that the realm of wild beasts was permanently foreign to man, and so we have the rare scenes showing the king with a tame pet lion.¹⁷⁶

Related to the third theme is a fourth: the depiction of the pleasures, even the carousals, of peace and of the king, their bringer, as participant in them.¹⁷⁷ Especially important for us are some examples of this fourth theme. I shall henceforth use italics to call attention to features significant for understanding the Dura reteros.

First, there is the famous relief in the British Museum (fig. 12),¹⁷⁸ from the palace at Nineveh of the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal (668-631 B.C.E.). Part of an elaborate composition in registers, it shows the *king reclining* on a high *couch* as he drinks from a bowl. On a high throne to the left, at the foot of the couch, sits the queen, also drinking from a bowl. A tree stands to the right of the king, and another tree, to the left of the queen. Entwined in and supported by the branches of each tree is a vine. The vines

173 This ancient Near Eastern theme is seen on the north wall of the synagogue in the portrayal of the War of Gog and Magog; see n. 49. On the theme, see, e.g., Güterbock, *AJA* 61 (1957), 63. Scenes of hunts: Parrot, *Assyria*, 54-61 (figs. 62-65), 99 (fig. 108), 269-76 (fig. 345); Ghirshman, *Ancient Iran*, 202-3 (figs. 250-53), 268 (fig. 329), and *Persian Art*, 55-56, 173 (fig. 215), 187 (fig. 229), 194-99 (figs. 236-38), 206 (fig. 245), 207 (figs. 247-48), 212-13 (figs. 252-53); *Sassanian Silver*, nos. 1-10. Scenes of battle and victory: *ANEP*, figs. 298-301, 303, 309; Parrot, *Assyria*, 113-15 (figs. 121-29), 122-23 (figs. 138-46), etc.; Ghirshman, *Ancient Iran*, 235 (fig. 283), 268 (fig. 329), and *Persian Art*, 55, 125 (fig. 163), 132-33 (fig. 168), 152-61 (figs. 195-206), 179 (fig. 220), 184-85 (fig. 225), 190 (fig. 233; figs. 168, 202, and 233 show an investiture scene with trampled vanquished enemies).

174 See again Güterbock, *AJA* 61 (1957), 63. See also P. E. Botta and E. Flandin, *Monuments de Ninive* (Paris, 1849-), I, Plates 121 and 144; Parrot, *Assyria*, 103-4 (figs. 112-13); Ghirshman, *Ancient Iran*, 198 (fig. 246), 201 (fig. 248), 204-6 (figs. 254-55), and the docile tribute-bearers of 160-65 (fig. 211); Parthian examples: Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, 52 (figs. 64-65), 54-55 (figs. 67-68).

175 Henri Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (Baltimore, 1955), Pl. 89 (relief of Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria [883-859 B.C.E.]); Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, 169-72 (figs. 212-14; reliefs of Bahram II [276-293 C.E.]), 184 (figs. 225-26; relief of Shapur II), 206 (fig. 245; upper register of plate, depicting Chosroes I [531-579 C.E.]); *Sassanian Silver*, no. 12 (discussed by O. Grabar, *ibid.*, 56-57).

176 See Thureau-Dangin, *Til-Barsib*, pp. 54-55 and Pl. L. There are Roman compositions depicting royal hunts in which the lion is not killed; see Victorine von Gonzenbach, Review of *Sarcofagi romani di caccia al leone*, by Alessandra Vaccaro Melucco, *Archaeology* 23, 1 (Jan. 1970), 65.

177 Sumer: *ANEP*, fig. 304 and p. 284. Assyria: Botta and Flandin, *Ninive*, I, Plates 52, 55, 57-68, 76.

178 Reproduced with the permission of the Trustees of the British Museum from Parrot, *Assyria*, pp. 51-52 (fig. 60).

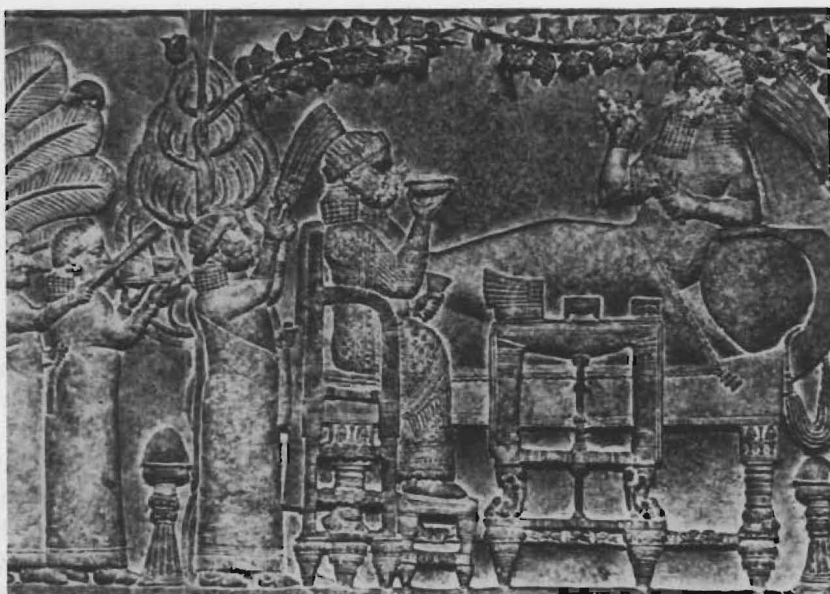


Fig. 12

extend toward one another; the shorter one from the left grows over the queen, and the longer one from the right grows over the king. In front of the middle of the king's couch is an elaborate *table* bearing banqueting equipment. Unfortunately, fig. 12 has been cropped and does not show the tree farther over to the left, from which hangs the *severed head* of the king's vanquished enemy.

The composition is all the more remarkable because it is "the earliest known example of the symposium motif, in which a male personage semi-reclines upon a couch,"¹⁷⁹ and because its finely worked vines entwined in the trees "show the full development of a motif for which there is, at present, no precedent."¹⁸⁰ Either Ashurbanipal's relief itself set the precedent or else the relief is an early reflection of a tradition which thereafter was strong in ancient Near Eastern royal art. The Achaemenian Persian kings held court under a golden representation of plane-tree-with-vine.¹⁸¹ The Sassanians, too, portrayed the plane-tree-with-vine.¹⁸² The Parthians and Sassanians displayed the king or prince in the reclining position upon a couch.¹⁸³

179 Albenda, *BASOR* 224 (Dec., 1976), 49.

180 Albenda, "Grapevines in Ashurbanipal's Garden," *BASOR* 215 (1974), 14.

181 See Eddy, *King*, 26-29.

182 On a silver plate in the British Museum which shows a scene of investiture. The plate is mentioned by Andreas Alföldi, "Die Geschichte des Throntabernakels," *La Nouvelle Clio* 1-2 (1949-50), 553. I have not found a photograph or a clearer citation of it.

183 Parthians: Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, 54 (fig. 67). Sassanians: Goldman and Little, *Iranica Antiqua*, 285 (with fig. 2), 286 (fig. 3), 287, and Plates V-VI; Ghirshman, *Artibus Asiae* 16 (1953), 63 (fig. 14 [= *Sassanian Silver*, no. 13]), 67 (fig. 17); *Sassanian Silver*, no. 14.

We must pay particular attention to the charming Sassanian silver plate in the Walters Art Gallery of Baltimore,¹⁸⁴ which most vividly displays the survival of the tradition exemplified in the relief of Ashurbanipal with his queen. The plate shows a Sassanian king half-reclining on a high couch, holding a mirror in his left hand and offering a wreath of flowers in his right hand to his queen, who sits on the couch with him, at his feet. In front of the couch is a table bearing a bowl piled high with fruit. On the floor, under the couch or by it are three boar's heads. Above the royal couple instead of vines is a canopy decorated with figures which probably represent stars.¹⁸⁵ Tree and vine are absent, but we have couch, king, king's posture, queen, table, and severed heads in common with Ashurbanipal's relief, and the canopy of the plate and the vines of the relief can be viewed as serving the same purpose. The royal hunt is only the king's war against the hostile beast, by which he practices his skills for warfare against human enemies, so that the boar's heads serve the same function as the head of Ashurbanipal's human foe.

The king in life was portrayed as enjoying a victory banquet. He could also be portrayed in death, on his sculptured sarcophagus, as enthroned and being served a similar banquet. A very important example for us is the sarcophagus (fig. 13) of Ahirom, king of Byblos in Phoenicia (tenth century B.C.E.).¹⁸⁶ The king sits upon an elaborate throne. In front of him is a peculiar *table*, the height of which rises well above the seat of the throne.

Two or more of these themes of royal art were often combined on a single monument. We may cite from the third millennium B.C.E. the two sides of the Standard of Ur, one displaying the king at war and the other, in victorious peace.¹⁸⁷ In the eighth century B.C.E. in the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad war and victorious peace were visible simultaneously, war in a lower register and peace in an upper.¹⁸⁸ The *iwān* of Chosroes II of the seventh century C.E. on the back wall shows, in an upper register, a royal investiture and, in a lower, the king as a mounted warrior, and on the side walls are two royal hunts.¹⁸⁹ The Dura reredos combines a tree-vine with all four themes.

The planner of the scheme of paintings exemplified in the Dura synagogue surely worked in a more favored center of Judaism than that provincial border-fortress. He appears to have done his best, however, to make it easy for the available artists, whether they were Jews or non-Jews. The patterns of royal art were well known. Even provincial artists were accustomed to producing pieces of royal propaganda. Wherever possible, the planner used those stock motifs as the basic designs for expressing his Jewish ideas.

184 *Sassanian Silver*, no. 13 (see above, n. 183); also published in Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, 218 (fig. 259).

185 Ghirshman, *Artibus Asiae* 16 (1953), 65; Alföldi, *La Nouvelle Clío* 1-2 (1949-50), 561.

186 Reproduced from the original photograph of James B. Pritchard (published as *ANEP*, fig. 458), with the permission of the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania.

187 *ANEP*, figs. 303-4.

188 Botta and Flandin, *Ninive*, I, Plates 52, 55, 57-68, 76.

189 Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, pp. 192 (fig. 235), 193-99 (with figs. 236-37); Mackintosh, *Iranica Antiqua* 13 (1978), 149-52, 172-74. Mackintosh may be right, that the *iwān* of Chosroes II at Taq-i Bustan shows Byzantine influence, but he paid no attention to the continuity of the Near Eastern themes we have just traced and to their presence together in the organized composition of the Dura reredos.



Fig. 13

Without the ancient Near Eastern traditions, it might have been awkward to combine the *vine* of Israel¹⁹⁰ with the *tree*-imagery of Isa. 11:1, where “shoot,” “stock,” and perhaps “twig” both in the Hebrew and in English are terms appropriate for a tree, not a vine. The images of the Near Eastern tree-with-vine and tree-vine stood available for the Jewish designer. Gute thought he saw the tree-vine as emerging from a vase.¹⁹¹ If the vase really was in the original composition, it too has something of a parallel in the Sassanian silver plate which shows a tree-vine growing out of a body of water.¹⁹²

If the designer wished to portray a majestic dying Jacob blessing his descendants at the foot of the tree-vine and in its shade, all he had to do was draw upon the stock figure of the victorious king banqueting on his couch in the shade. At Dura, the painter of the blessing-scenes at first reproduced the stock figure with stolidly absolute fidelity. He showed,¹⁹³ in the left scene, a table with elaborate vertical legs somewhat like the one in

190 See n. 51.

191 See fig. 3 and n. 15.

192 *Sassanian Silver*, no. 51 (discussed, p. 73).

193 See figs. 3, 4, 6.

the relief of Ashurbanipal. Atop that table is perhaps a banqueting bolster.¹⁹⁴ On the floor beneath the couch or beneath the table is a round object. Can we not guess that it was originally a severed head? In the blessing scene to the right, in front of the couch are the "rampant felines," but their shape is very like the outline of the table on the sarcophagus of Ahiram. Indeed, Pearson, who sketched the reredos when it was fresh, drew in the space of the "rampant felines" what can easily be interpreted as a table,¹⁹⁵ and Kraeling was tempted so to interpret it, but held back because he doubted that two different forms of table could be portrayed in the reredos.¹⁹⁶ He should have noted that the Dura artist practiced variation in the form of the ark¹⁹⁷ and of the royal throne.¹⁹⁸

A banqueting table does not belong in a scene of Jacob's death, much less a severed head. Therefore, those figures were painted out. On the other hand, the original designer or perhaps the Jews of Dura themselves delighted in portraying Jacob's deathbed after the pattern of a royal couch-throne. Painted across each of the spaces in which the tables stood is the same footstool which accompanies the throne at the top of the reredos and the throne of the Pharaoh in the painting at the north end of the bottom register of the west wall of the synagogue.¹⁹⁹

Jews did not glorify hunting, but the designer could draw upon the ancient Near Eastern theme of the king with his tame lion²⁰⁰ and combine it with the Greek figure of Orpheus. We have seen how a tree was traditionally part of that scene.²⁰¹ And so we have the royal Orpheus as a "fruit" of the Dura tree-vine.

Finally, at the top of the reredos, we have a combination of the two ancient Near Eastern motifs of investiture and enthronement. In a pagan investiture scene on the sandwich pattern, the king stands *between* his great deity and another deity or another important person and receives from the great deity the tokens of royal power. Jews and Christians could not so portray their great God the Father on a level with another deity or with a human being. Instead, in the Transfiguration story, the voice of God confers power upon the Christ as he stands *between* the two superhuman prophets, and in the apse of San Apollinare the hand of God is shown above to confer power upon the similarly placed cross symbolizing the Christ. Christians could worship the Christ, but nothing indicates that Jews thought of worshipping their Messiah alongside their God. Yet the Messiah sits in the center of the composition of the reredos, in a position where a pagan or a Christian would expect to find a depiction of the deity to be worshiped. Therefore, I think we must assume that as at San Apollinare, so at Dura the hand of God appeared over the Messiah, who sits enthroned between the two superhuman

194 See Goodenough, IX, 82; Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 63-64.

195 See fig. 4.

196 *Synagogue*, p. 64.

197 Goodenough, XI, figs. 332, 334, 347.

198 *Ibid.*, figs. 323, 329, 336, 338.

199 See *ibid.*, fig. 338, and cf. *Sassanian Silver*, nos. 12, 16, and Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, 203 (fig. 242), 205-6 (figs. 244-45).

200 See n. 176.

201 See n. 56.

prophets.²⁰² The Messiah himself is a glorious accomplishment of God, but God is the one to be worshiped.

At Dura, the investiture scene has been conflated with the enthronement scene, and therefore the Messiah in the upper reredos does not stand but sits. Even for this posture there are ancient Near Eastern precedent and parallels, in the investiture scenes, beginning with Ardashir I, which portray the king on horseback.²⁰³ Finally, we have seen how the symmetrically arranged obedient subjects and the presence of a tree are characteristic of ancient Near Eastern enthronement scenes. Thus the motifs of pagan royal art served to illustrate the Jewish message derived from Genesis 49 and Isaiah 11! Though we have no way of reading the designer's mind, well may he have felt the need to have four pictures of Moses serve as the "fence" around the scene, to ensure that the Jewish onlookers would understand that the origin of the promise of Messianic felicity lay in the Torah revealed through Moses and that fulfillment of that promise depended upon faithful observance of that Torah.

We have now explained how all the stages of the painting of the central composition arose from the designer's use of stock motifs of pagan royal art and from the unimaginative procedure of the local artist (very likely, a non-Jew). The artist first completely reproduced the stock motif with all its inappropriate elements, which thereafter had to be painted out. The designer's scheme was complete in his mind before any paint was applied to the walls of the synagogue. Even the border-pattern crossing the middle of the reredos probably did not come as an intrusion into the designer's plan. The border-pattern and the painted pilasters and the ceiling tiles are meant to give the impression of a palatial trellised royal garden pavilion, with grapevines running through the trelliswork.²⁰⁴ If two of the spaces framed by the trellis-work showed the continuous tree-vine, no harm was done. In fact, the framed spaces both showed the Messiah as fruit of the tree-vine though the lower space also depicted the much earlier scene of Jacob (in a real trellis, all framed spaces viewed by the observer belong to the present). The reredos in the context of the rest of the decoration of the synagogue thus proclaims the building to be a palatial pavilion, as it were, one to house God and the Messiah.

202 Cf. the putto who brings the diadem from on high to Shapur I (Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, 155-56 [fig. 197]).

203 *Ibid.*, 132 (fig. 168), 159 (fig. 202), 167-68 (fig. 211), and cf. Ghirshman, *Ancient Iran*, 235 (fig. 283).

204 See Kraeling, *Synagogue*, 53; Goodenough, IX, 57-58.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AJ	<i>Antiquities of the Jews</i>
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
ANEP	James B. Pritchard, <i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament</i> (Princeton, 1954)
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BJ	<i>Bellum Judaicum</i> (= <i>Jewish War</i>)

CA	<i>Cahiers archéologiques</i>
CRAI	<i>Comptes rendus de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres</i>
EI	<i>Sefer Eretz Israel</i>
Forsyth-Weitzman	George H. Forsyth and Kurt Weitzmann, <i>The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: the Church and Fortress of Justinian</i> (Ann Arbor, 1973)
Goodenough	Erwin R. Goodenough, <i>Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period</i> (13 vols.; "Bollingen Series," XXXVII; New York, 1953-68)
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JJA	<i>Journal of Jewish Art</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
JWCI	<i>Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes</i>
Neusner	Jacob Neusner, <i>A History of the Jews in Babylonia</i> (5 vols.; Leiden, 1965-1970)
PG	J.-P. Migne, <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeco-Latina</i> (Paris, 1857-1934)
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RHR	<i>Revue de l'histoire des religions</i>
YCS	<i>Yale Classical Studies</i>