

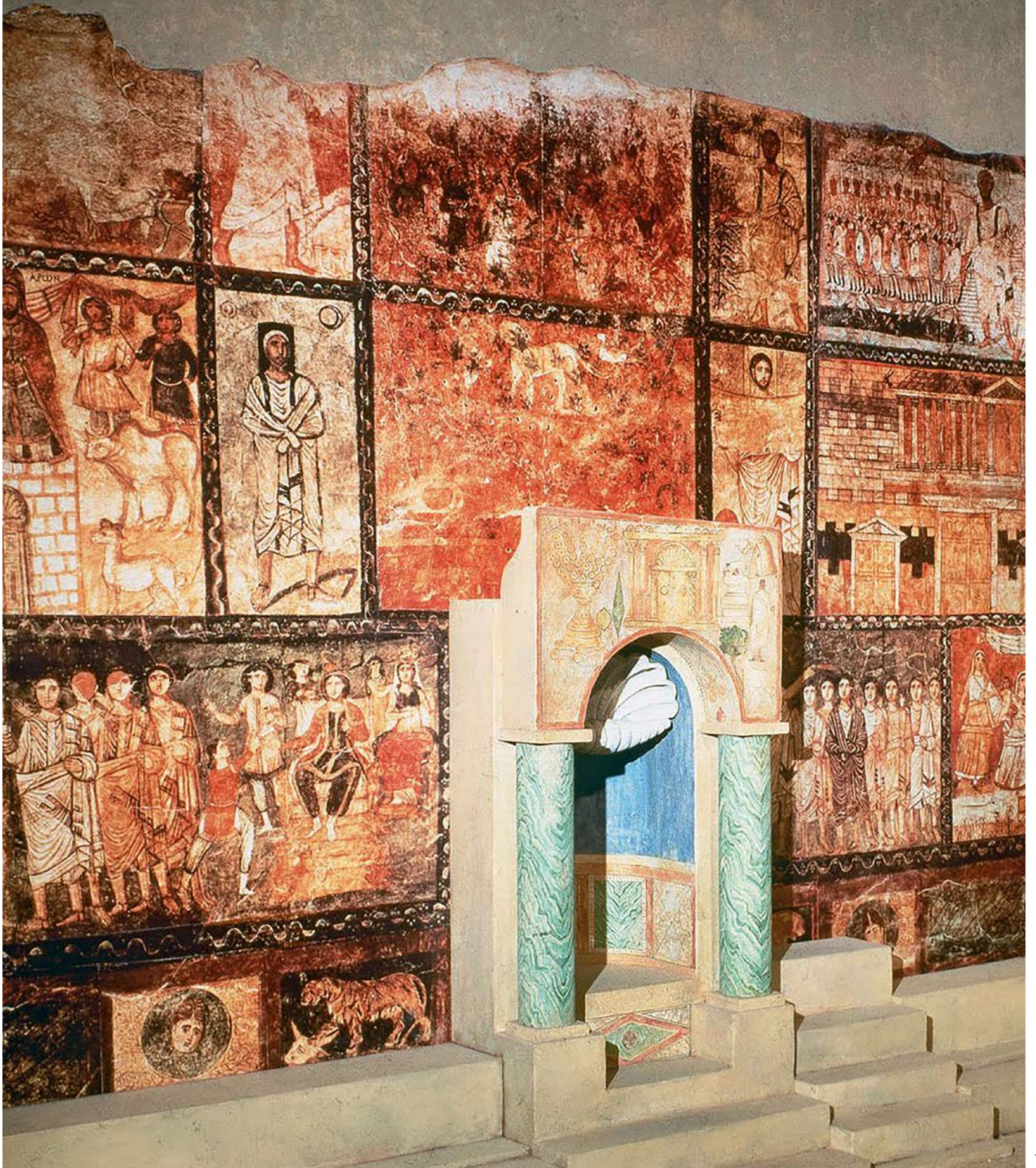


Dura-Europos

In a museum in Damascus, the remnants of a shul from the 3rd century CE linger, telling secrets of our history.

BY LAWRENCE
H. SCHIFFMAN

KUNTRES



S

adly, the last vestiges of the ancient Jewish communities of Syria and Iraq, those remnants that had survived the riots that ensued with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and its victory over the Arabs in 1967, have come to what is probably a permanent end. Yet these countries still have enormous treasures of Jewish archaeology and history that are in danger of destruction and that, in any case, very few of us will ever see. Can you believe this irony of history? The decorated walls, including the artwork surrounding the *aron kodesh* on the western wall, facing Yerushalayim, of a third century CE *shul* building from the ancient city of Dura-Europos, sits in a museum in Damascus.

This *shul* was uncovered at Dura-Europos, Syria, in 1932. The town was officially known as Europos but soon took on the Aramaic name Dura, meaning “the fortress.” The *shul* contains a forecourt and prayer area with painted walls depicting various figures and events from *Tanach*. The last phase of construction was dated by an Aramaic inscription to 244 CE, making it one of the oldest *shuls* in the world. It is unique among the many ancient *shuls* that have emerged from archaeological excavations in that the structure was preserved virtually intact.



An extremely important find discovered close to the *shul* was a Hebrew manuscript containing what appears to have been a prayer text. Although this text does not directly parallel specific *tefillos* in our *siddurim*, many of its expressions have been shown to be similar to expressions used in traditional Jewish liturgical texts. The Cairo Genizah has yielded numerous versions of Jewish prayers and *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) unfamiliar to us, so it should not surprise us that

the Jews of this community recited such *tefillos*, as well.

To understand the significance of this *shul*, the community that surrounded it, and the amazing paintings that decorated it, we need to take an imaginary journey.

Imagine yourself an ancient traveler going from Eretz Yisrael to Bavel. This is a route that was well known to Jews in ancient times. A series of exiles in the time of *Bayis Rishon* brought Jews first

to Ashur (Assyria) in northern Mesopotamia, the Kurdish region of present-day Iraq, and later, with the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash*, to Babylonia, the area in central Mesopotamia surrounding present-day Baghdad.

As these communities of exiles grew and developed, travel and trade between them and Eretz Yisrael continued to flourish. Josephus describes the caravans that delivered the *machatzis hashekel* of each male Jew over the age of 20 from Bavel to Yerushalayim. These funds were used to support the public sacrifices. From the period of the Gemara we know of extensive trade and travel that took place between these communities, and even of burial of Babylonian Jews in Eretz Yisrael.

Imagine yourself making the trip eastward in the late second century or first half of the third century. Joining a reliable caravan with other Jews that would not travel on Shabbos, you traveled north through Damascus and on to the caravan city of Palmyra, known in Hebrew as Tadmor. This large city was a crossroads between Eretz Yisrael and Mesopota-



One of the shul's murals, depicting the scene of Shmuel Hanavi choosing Dovid Hamelech from among his brothers

Entering this shul was a unique experience: Paintings were rich in content, drawn from Tanach and passed-down tradition.

mia, as well as with Arabia to the south. It had a substantial Jewish population as evidenced by a variety of Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions. The king and queen of the city, Odenathus and Zenobia, may have destroyed Nehardea, the home of many of the Talmudic sages in 250 CE. From Tadmor you traveled east until you reached Dura-Europos on the Euphrates River. From this point you would travel south along the Euphrates until you reached the Jewish communities of Bavel.

From 165 CE on, Dura-Europos was under the control of Rome. This meant that Jews from Eretz Yisrael, who for the most part were Roman citizens, could

easily take advantage of this trade route to arrive in Mesopotamia or to travel from there to Eretz Yisrael. When they entered Dura, they knew exactly where to go. Jewish travelers automatically sought out their brethren who were grouped in a community surrounding the *shul*. But entering this *shul* was, as far as we know, a unique experience. All four walls were covered with exquisitely beautiful wall paintings in tempera, a permanent, fast-drying painting medium made of colored pigments mixed with a glutinous material such as egg yolk. These paintings were rich in content, drawn from *Tanach* and from what then was a body of still orally passed-down tradition.

We know quite a bit about the final stage in the construction of this *shul*, although it must have existed for many years before. There is a partly preserved inscription on two ceiling tiles that informs us that:

This building was constructed in the year 556 [of the minyan hashetaros (Seleucid era) = 244/5 CE]... in the eldership of the kohen Shmuel son of Yedaya, the Archon (head of the shul). Those who were in charge of this work were: Avram the treasurer, and Shmuel son of Sapharah, and (...) the proselyte. With a willing spirit they [began to build]... and they sent (...) and they made haste (...) and they labored in (...) a blessing from the elders and from all the children... Peace to them, and to their wives and children all...

The text goes on to describe worshippers "on every Sabbath (...) spreading out [their hands] in [prayer]."

The illustrations of this *shul* were arranged in three horizontal layers to enable inclusion of many scenes. Here are a few examples of some of these: the Exodus and crossing of the Red Sea, Shlomo receiving the Queen of Sheba, Chanah and Shmuel, the Ark in the hands of the *Pelishtim*, Yerushalayim and the first *Beis Hamikdash*, the *Mishkan* and the *kohanim*, several scenes pertaining to Eliyahu, Mordechai and Esther, Yechezkel, and the fall of Babylon. Scholarly books and articles are full of debate about which interpretations of *Tanach* underlie the details of these illustrations.

An analysis of the artwork on the western wall of the *shul*, and particularly that surrounding the niche that had held the *aron kodesh*, is of special interest. The central image on this wall was a picture of the *aron* with the *Beis Hamikdash* in Yerushalayim displayed above it. On both sides of what would have been the location of the actual *aron* we also find important Jewish symbols, an image of the *Akeidah*, the golden menorah, and a *lulav* and *esrog*. An inscription on

Dura was discovered by chance by British troops in 1920. The soldiers uncovered several well-preserved wall paintings and immediately recognized their archeological significance.

this panel actually mentioned the *aron*, termed *arona* in Aramaic. These symbols radiated the notion that the *shul* was indeed a *mikdash me'at*, “a miniature sanctuary,” that served as a partial replacement for the destroyed *Beis Hamikdash*.

The centrality of sacrificial worship is also clear from the panel showing the *Mishkan* that is actually pictured as similar to the *Beis Hamikdash*. Here one also sees the *mizbe'ach* as well as Aharon and a group of *kohanim*. And of course the building is arranged so that this wall and the *aron kodesh* face Yerushalayim. As we would of course expect, the Jews who frequented this *shul*, who offered their *tefillos* and read from the Torah here, retained their close connection to Yerushalayim and their hope to see one day the restoration of the *Beis Hamikdash*.

Scholars have noted that various stylistic elements are shared with wider trends in the art found at Dura. Yes, the artists used techniques and images of the Eastern Roman Empire, but they harnessed them to symbolize age-old Jewish beliefs. No one could enter the *shul* without literally being bombarded by images recalling the sacred history of the Jewish people as described in the *Tanach* and their ongoing hopes for redemption.

How did this ancient *shul* survive and how was it discovered? The survival of the *shul* was due to the fact that it was built against the outside of the city wall. When the Sassanian Persian king Shapur I (240-270, Shevor Malka in the *Talmud Bavli*), who ruled over Jewish Babylonia, was besieging Dura-Europos in 256 CE, the defenders threw enormous amounts of dirt against the outer walls of the city. In this way, 28 of the Dura-Europos *shul*'s murals were preserved, probably half the original number. The western wall, including the niche for the *aron*, survived in its entirety. The southern and northern walls retained about half their murals, and on the eastern wall, only part of the bottom row of decorated panels was intact.

Dura was discovered by chance by British troops in 1920. The soldiers uncovered several well-preserved wall paintings and immediately recognized their archaeological significance. The French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters started to excavate in 1922. Yale University joined the project in 1928, and this decision was fateful for the *shul*. When the excavations ended, some ten years later, as was the custom in those days, the excavators divided the discoveries with the host nation.

Yale decided to take back to New Haven the wall paintings from the church that had been discovered, and the exquisite artwork from the *shul* was moved piece by piece to Damascus, where it was beautifully reconstructed in what is now the Damascus National Museum. The good news, however, is that the Yale faculty published full excavation reports and an entire beautiful volume analyzing the *shul* and its paintings (C.H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 1956).

In 1999, my wife and I joined a cruise that began in Israel and toured a variety of sites in the Middle East. My job was to lecture about the sites that we would be seeing. Unfortunately, the ship docked at Latakia over Shabbos, and the group went to see the Dura-Europos *shul* in Damascus while we remained on the boat. As you can imagine, we were hoping against all odds for some kind of delay in departure for the short trip up the Mediterranean coast from the port of Ashdod where we boarded to the Syrian port. Alas, our hope was not fulfilled.

The closing of the museum in 2012 as a result of the Syrian Civil War and responsible actions by its leadership seem to have preserved the *shul*. Reports indicate, however, that the remains of the building that housed the *shul* at the archaeological site of Dura-Europos, including some of its inscriptions, were destroyed by ISIS. If peace and rational government ever come to Syria, maybe we will have the chance to return to gaze on the illustrations that must have made the Dura *shul* one of the most beautiful in the ancient world. ●

Lawrence H. Schiffman is the Fudge Abraham Lieberman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies and Dir. of the Global Network for Advanced Research in Jewish Studies at New York University.