

# **DIASPORA JUDAISM OF LATE ANTIQUITY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO PALESTINE: EVIDENCE FROM THE ANCIENT SYNAGOGUE\***

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Modern scholarship has contributed much in the last generation to our knowledge and understanding of Diaspora Judaism in the Hellenistic-Roman world. Some studies have focused on communities in a number of locales, others on broader issues touching upon all or part of Diaspora Jewry. Over the years, a number of competing theories have come to the fore regarding the nature of Diaspora Judaism in late antiquity and how it compared to that of Palestinian Judaism.

A once-popular theory posits that there were two antithetical Judaisms, that of the Diaspora which was heavily influenced by Hellenistic religious and cultural currents, and that of Palestine which was basically Pharisaic-rabbinic in orientation.<sup>1</sup> A second theory assumes that Diaspora religious affairs were controlled by Palestinian sages. Such influence, it is suggested, was exercised directly by individual rabbis or through central Palestinian institutions, such as the Sanhedrin and the Patriarchate.<sup>2</sup> More recently, a third theory has been

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1 N. Bentwich, *Hellenism*, Philadelphia 1919, pp. 24–25.

2 G. Alon, *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World*, Jerusalem 1977, p. 22 and n. 11, p. 33; S. Safrai, 'Relations between the Diaspora and the Land of Israel',

advanced, namely, that a variety of Judaisms existed in both the Diaspora and Palestine, where diverse social groupings in different geographical areas developed distinct ideologies and practices reflecting a wide range of religious attitudes, beliefs, and rituals.<sup>3</sup> A fourth theory, also of recent vintage, seeks to identify a common underlying feature or features in Judaism – either of the Diaspora or Palestinian variety.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear, however, that the assumption of a radical break between Diaspora and Palestinian Jewry is no longer tenable. While differences between the two did, in fact, exist, they appear to have been more in measure than in kind. We will deal with this issue more extensively later on.

The question of unity and diversity among the Jewish communities of the Greco-Roman world may be addressed in a number of ways – either by examining a specific source or group of sources or by focusing on a particular region or time frame. We will confine our study to epigraphical, archeological, and scattered literary evidence for the Diaspora synagogue. Such a limited focus has certain advantages: it keeps the evidence at hand to reasonable proportions; it incorporates material spanning diverse parts of the Diaspora as well as a number of centuries; it reveals attitudes prevalent throughout the Diaspora, not of one writer or group but rather of public institutions representing the tastes, proclivities, and "consensus" of particular communities or at least of the leading citizens who founded and sustained the synagogues there; finally, it offers us a basis for comparison of various dimensions

in: *The Jewish People in the First Century*, S. Safrai and M. Stern (eds.), 2 vols.; Assen 1974–76, I, pp. 204, 214.

3 S.J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, Philadelphia 1987, pp. 24–26.

4 See E.P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah*, London 1990, pp. 359–360, n. 6 and bibliography cited there.

of Palestinian and Diaspora Jewry.

However, there are also drawbacks to such a limited focus. Evidence for the Diaspora synagogue, while not negligible, is far from copious. The number of synagogues is defined and the data they offer regarding the Judaism of a community are similarly circumscribed. Given the expanse of the Diaspora and the undoubted diversity from one locale to the next, the evidence at hand appears sparse, at best. These drawbacks, of course, are endemic to any study of antiquity and are of the variety that scholars of any and every field in the Greco-Roman period encounter regularly.

A word is in order regarding the scope of the evidence and the methodological challenges to be addressed. On the one hand, while data regarding the Diaspora synagogue span close to a thousand years – from the Hellenistic period through late antiquity – most of the archeological data derive from the third century onward and, in the main, from some ten synagogue buildings – from Dura Europos (Syria) in the east to Naro (Hamman Lif, North Africa) and Ostia (Italy) in the west. Between these geographical extremities, archeological remains have been found at Apamea in Syria, Sardis, and Priene in Asia Minor, Delos in the Aegean, Aegina in Greece, and Stobi in Macedonia.<sup>5</sup>

5 Convenient summaries of Diaspora remains are to be found in: E.L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece*, London 1934, pp. 37–45; E. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 13 vols.; New York 1953–1968, II, pp. 70–100; A.T. Kraabel, 'The Diaspora Synagogue: Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence since Sukenik', in: *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II, 19.1, W. Haase and H. Temporini (eds.), Berlin 1979, pp. 477–510; G. Foerster, L. Levine, A. Seager, M. Avi-Yonah, in: *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, L.I. Levine (ed.), Jerusalem 1981, pp. 164–190; L.M. White, *Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews and Christians*, Baltimore 1990, pp. 60–101.

Excluded from this list are the Miletus and Mopsuestia remains, whose

Moreover, synagogue inscriptions have been found in several score locations, particularly in western Asia Minor.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, references to the ancient synagogue of the Diaspora in the writings of Josephus, Philo, the New Testament, and pagan authors almost all date from the Hellenistic and early Roman eras, i.e., from a period much earlier than that of most of the archeological remains.<sup>7</sup> Thus, there is a significant chronological gap between the literary and archeological sources, and reconciling these two corpora of information presents a formidable challenge.

### **Diversity within the Diaspora**

The diversity of Diaspora Judaism owes much to the influence of the immediate social and religious environment as well as architectural features of each locale on its Jewish communities. First of all, there were marked distinctions between the architectural styles of the Diaspora synagogues; the monumental public building at Sardis was a far cry from the modest private home that was later transformed into a synagogue at Dura Europos; the architectural plan of the synagogue at Ostia was quite different from that of Naro.<sup>8</sup>

identification as synagogues is problematic. See above references to Goodenough (p. 78), Kraabel (pp. 488–489), Foerster (p. 165), and Avi-Yonah (pp. 186–190).

6 See, for example, B. Lifshitz, *Donateurs et fondateurs dans les synagogues juives*, Paris 1967.

7 E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, revised edition, G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Goodman (eds.), 3 vols.; Edinburgh 1973–87, III/1, pp. lff.; J. Juster, *Les juifs dans l'empire romaine*, 2 vols; Paris 1914, I, pp. 456–472.

8 See above, n. 5, as well as A. Seager, 'The Architecture of the Dura and Sardis Synagogues', in: *The Dura-Europos Synagogue*, J. Gutmann (ed.), Missoula 1973, pp. 79–116.

Secondly, the attitude toward figural art in the synagogues varied markedly from one Diaspora community to the next. One synagogue may have exhibited a full range of figural representation (Dura); another may have been more modest, featuring animals and fish only (Naro); and still others may have been completely devoid of figural art (Apamea, Stobi, and Ostia).<sup>9</sup> The synagogue at Sardis seems to have been a synthesis of sorts. Its mosaic floors display only geometric patterns, yet the appearance of statues of two pairs of lions as well as stone table supports bearing carved eagles indicates that this community apparently had no objection to figural art.<sup>10</sup>

The quantity and nature of epigraphical evidence also vary for the Diaspora synagogues. Although Aramaic and Hebrew were spoken, Greek was clearly predominant in the Jewish communities of the east, Greek and Latin in the west. Moreover, the titles and offices of synagogue leadership and governing bodies differed from synagogue to synagogue.<sup>11</sup>

The location of a synagogue was another factor contributing to the diversity among Diaspora synagogues. For example, the building at Sardis was located in the very heart of the city, on its main thoroughfare, while that of Dura was located on the town's periphery, fronting its western wall.<sup>12</sup>

The larger social, cultural, and religious contexts of each Jewish

9 See above, n. 5.

10 A. Seager and A.T. Kraabel, 'The Synagogue and the Jewish Community', in: *Sardis from Prehistoric to Roman Times*, G.M.A. Hanfmann (ed.), Cambridge, MA 1983, pp. 169–176.

11 J.-B. Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum*, vol. I: Rome 1936, reprint: New York 1975; vol. II: Rome 1952, I, pp. LXVIIIff.; H. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome*, Philadelphia 1960, pp. 167–194; L. Kant, 'Jewish Inscriptions in Greek and Latin', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II, 20.2, W. Haase and H. Temporini (eds.), Berlin 1987, pp. 692–698.

12 Seager (above, n. 8), pp. 80–82.



community appear to have been not insignificant factors in shaping a synagogue's artistic and architectural features as well as its functions and practices. In Hellenistic Egypt, for example, pagan temple models and practices may well have had an influence on the nature of the local synagogue, such as its function as a place of asylum, its location next to a grove of trees, its sometimes elaborate water installations, and the titles of officials heading the congregation. Moreover, the popular custom among the Jews of Hellenistic Egypt of dedicating a synagogue to the ruling family was almost never repeated elsewhere in the Diaspora and is a reflection of widespread pagan practices in the Ptolemaic era.<sup>13</sup> The salient representation of women in synagogue affairs in Asia Minor, especially in its western parts, may also have been influenced by the unusual prominence and high degree of female participation in pagan and Christian ritual in these areas.<sup>14</sup>

Similar contextual influence is evident in the synagogue at Dura as well.<sup>15</sup> The synagogue building, particularly its second phase, adopted and adapted local models of pagan shrines:<sup>16</sup> the synagogue hall and its outer courtyard are reminiscent of a number of Dura temples, as is the

13 P.E. Dion, 'Synagogues et temples dans l'Égypte hellénistique', *Science et Esprit*, XXIX (1977), pp. 45–75.

14 A.T. Kraabel, *Judaism in Western Asia Minor under the Roman Empire with a Preliminary Study of the Jewish Community at Sardis, Lydia*, doctoral thesis, Harvard University; Cambridge, MA 1968; P. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, Cambridge, Eng. 1991, pp. 104–126. Cf. also B. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue*, Chico 1982; R.S. Kraemer, 'A New Inscription from Malta and the Question of Women Elders in the Diaspora Jewish Communities', *Harvard Theological Review*, LXXVIII (1986), pp. 431–438.

15 C. Kraeling, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos: The Synagogue*, New Haven 1956, pp. 366ff.

16 Goodenough (above, n. 5), IX, pp. 29–30; A. Perkins, *The Art of Dura-Europos*, Oxford 1973, pp. 33–69.

series of rooms attached to the complex; the synagogue aedicula was a close approximation of local temple aediculae, however the former is distinguished by containing a Torah scroll and not an idol. Moreover, the famous paintings of the Dura synagogue are organized in panels similar to those appearing in other Dura shrines and in the local church. Their story – the mighty feats of the God of Israel – is well-documented *mutatis mutandis* in other Dura contexts as well.

### Unity within the Diaspora

In contrast to the above-noted diversity, Diaspora synagogues held much in common. The very centrality of the synagogue throughout these far-flung Diaspora communities is a clear indication of their shared recognition of the institution's preeminence. In fact, the synagogue is the only Jewish communal building mentioned in the extant literary, archeological or epigraphical evidence. Thus, there can be little doubt that it was the focal institution of every Jewish community, serving as a place for religious worship as well as for a myriad of other communal functions.

The Diaspora synagogue appears to have been recognized first and foremost, by Jews and non-Jews alike, as a religious institution, just as the Jewish community was recognized as a religious as well as ethnic group. Thus, one may find from almost the very beginning of the Diaspora Jewish experience a recognition of the sanctity of the synagogue building. Philo and Josephus call the synagogue a holy place or a "temple" already in the first century,<sup>17</sup> and at one point the latter attributes such a reference to Onias IV who, in writing to Ptolemy in the second century B.C.E. regarding the building of a temple at Leontopolis, notes that Jews had many such "temples" (ἱερά) This undoubtedly refers to synagogues.<sup>18</sup> Also several inscriptions from

17 Philo, *Every Good Man is Free*, 81 (*Loeb Classical Library*, IX, p. 57); Josephus, *War*, VII, 3, 3, 45.

18 Josephus, *Antiquities*, XIII, 3, 1, 66.

Hellenistic Egypt indicate the "holy" status accorded local synagogues; some apparently served as "asylums," others as sacred precincts or courtyards.<sup>19</sup> Agatharchides and Tacitus likewise refer to synagogues as temples:

The people known as Jews... pray with outstretched hands in the temples (τοῖς ἱεροῖς) until the evening.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore they set up no statues in their cities, still less in their temples.<sup>21</sup>

A number of inscriptions,<sup>22</sup> as well as references made by John Chrysostom<sup>23</sup> and Procopius,<sup>24</sup> bear witness that the "holy" status of the Diaspora synagogue continued down through late antiquity. Inasmuch as this sacred status seems to have originated early on (even without the permanent presence of a Torah shrine – at Delos, for example), it is probable that it was not due to the presence of Torah scrolls per se, which were perceived by many to be the Jewish equivalent of the statue of a pagan deity.<sup>25</sup> Rather, this holiness may

19 A. Kasher, 'Synagogues in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt as Community Centers', in: *Synagogues in Antiquity*, A. Kasher et al. (eds.), Jerusalem 1987, pp. 119–132 (Hebrew).

20 Josephus, *Against Apion*, I, 209; M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, 3 vols.; Jerusalem 1974–84, I, p. 107.

21 Tacitus, *Histories*, V, 4; Stern (above, n. 20), II, pp. 26, 43.

22 Lifshitz (above, n. 6), p. 18, no. 10 (Stobi); p. 31, no. 28 (Philadelphia); p. 34, no. 32 (Hyllarima); p. 70, no. 78 (Gerasa).

23 *Adversus Iudaeos* 1, 3, *Patrologia Graeca*, XLVIII, 847–848; R.L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews*, Berkeley 1983, pp. 79–80.

24 *Buildings* 6#2.

25 See V. Tcherikover, A. Fuks and M. Stern, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, 3 vols.; Cambridge, MA 1957–64, II, pp. 82–85 and p. 86, line 18 (no. 157), John Chrysostom, *Adversus Iudaeos* 1, 5, *Patrologia Graeca*, XLVIII, p. 450; W.A. Meeks and R.L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch*, Missoula 1978, pp. 94–95.



have been related to various religious functions conducted within the synagogue, such as prayer, Torah-reading, and study, and, as noted, to the recognition of the Jewish community as a religious and ethnic entity.

Diaspora synagogues were also concerned with purity rites. Already in the latter half of the second century B.C.E., the letter of Aristeas made it very clear that there was a close connection between washing the hands and prayer.

At the first hour of the day they attended the court daily, and after offering salutations to the king, retired to their own quarters. Following the custom of all the Jews, they washed their hands in the sea in the course of their prayers to God, and then proceeded to the reading and explication of each point. I asked this question: "What is their purpose in washing their hands while saying prayers?" They explained that it is evidence that they have done no evil, for all activity takes place by means of the hands.<sup>26</sup>

Many Diaspora synagogues had basins or lavers in their courtyards (e.g., Priene and Sardis) or the synagogues themselves were located near bodies of water.<sup>27</sup> The reasons for the emphasis on purification are unclear; Aristeas offers one explanation, parallel pagan practices offer another.<sup>28</sup>

26 Letter of Aristeas 304–306, following R.J.H. Shutt, in: *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, J. Charlesworth (ed.), 2 vols.; Garden City 1983–85, II, p. 33.

27 Sanders (above, n. 4), p. 259; L.I. Levine, 'From Community Center to "Lesser Sanctuary": The Furnishings and Interior of the Ancient Synagogue', *Cathedra*, LX (1991), pp. 39–41 (Hebrew). See also Josephus, *Antiquities*, XII, 2, 13, 106.

28 Sanders (above, n. 4), pp. 262–263. On the tradition that in Egypt God spoke with Moses and Aaron outside the cities because the latter contained idolatry and abominations, see Mekilta d'R. Ishmael, Bo, 1, Horowitz-Rabin (eds.), p. 2.

A feature common to later Diaspora synagogues was the prominence of the Torah shrine. Most synagogues known to us to date had a permanent Torah shrine in the main hall, the only possible exception having been at Naro. However, even there, inscriptions found in a room adjacent to the main hall seem to indicate that the room served as a storage place for holy objects (*instrumenta*) – undoubtedly a reference to the Torah scrolls.<sup>29</sup>

The orientation of the building toward Jerusalem is another characteristic common to Diaspora synagogues, and the centrality of Jerusalem – as a memory of the past, hope for the future, or both – undoubtedly played a role in the Jewish liturgy performed therein. It is interesting to note that Diaspora Jewry's geographical focus on Jerusalem has been paralleled by the Diaspora Samaritan community's relationship to Mt. Gerizim. Two Samaritan inscriptions from the Hellenistic period found a decade ago on Delos emphasize this tie explicitly.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, Diaspora synagogues bore similarity to one another in the kinds of symbols they displayed, the most prominent among them having been the menorah. While certainly ubiquitous throughout the Diaspora, Jewish symbols were never a dominant feature in synagogue decoration. Extensive use of Jewish symbols, particularly of the menorah, has also been found at Diaspora burial sites, especially in the catacombs of Rome dating from the third to the fifth centuries.<sup>31</sup>

29 Goodenough (above, n. 5), II, pp. 89–92.

30 P. Bruneau, "Les Israélites de Délos" et la juiverie délienne', *Bulletin de Correspondence Hellénistique*, CVI (1982), pp. 475–479; A.T. Kraabel, 'New Evidence of the Samaritan Diaspora has been Found on Delos', *Biblical Archaeologist*, XLVII/1 (1984), pp. 44–46; L.M. White, 'The Delos Synagogue Revisited – Recent Fieldwork in the Graeco-Roman Diaspora', *Harvard Theological Review*, LXXX/2 (1987), pp. 141–147.

31 Leon (above, n. 11), pp. 196–198; L.V. Rutgers, 'The Jewish Catacombs of Rome Reconsidered', in: *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish*

Diaspora Judaism – as reflected in its synagogues from antiquity – may thus be characterized by its notable diversity and, at the same time, by its shared features. It should be noted that this dichotomy is likewise discernible at Jewish burial sites in the Diaspora. There are major differences between the burial sites in North Africa, Rome, and Palestine, yet certain basic features – the use of certain symbols, the avoidance of specific representations, etc. – are common to all.<sup>32</sup>

### **Diaspora and Palestinian Jewry: Implications**

What, then, are some of the implications of these characteristics for our understanding of Judaism and Jewish society of the Diaspora in late antiquity? First of all, it would seem that Diaspora Judaism was not radically different from that of Palestine.<sup>33</sup> A consensus has emerged of

*Studies*, Division B, Volume II, Jerusalem 1990, pp. 29–36.

32 Ibid.; Goodenough (above, n. 5), II, pp. 3–69.

33 Here I would seek to balance somewhat the engaging thesis offered by A.T. Kraabel, 'Unity and Diversity among Diaspora Synagogues', in: *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity*, L.I. Levine (ed.), Philadelphia 1987, pp. 49–60:

Let me state the thesis at the outset: The Judaism of the synagogue communities of the Roman Diaspora is best understood, on the basis of the present evidence, as the grafting of a transformed biblical "exile" ideology onto a Greco-Roman form of social organization (p. 49).

Without negating possible biblical influences, there seems to be no question that the Diaspora synagogue must be viewed primarily within a horizontal, i.e., Greco-Roman, context, not only with regard to its non-Jewish components but also with regard to its Jewish dimension as well. Second – Temple Judaism and its post-70 development affected Jewish communities both in Palestine and throughout the Diaspora. Any 'biblical' influences were mediated through contemporary Jewish frameworks – institutional as well as ideological.

late that the difference between the Hellenization of the Diaspora and that of Palestine was one of degree only and not necessarily qualitative in nature. As noted, it had been almost universally assumed previously that the Diaspora was much more heavily influenced by the Greco-Roman world than was Palestine. However, two pieces of evidence from the latter – one literary and one archeological – should make us rethink this assumption. In at least one of Caesarea's synagogues, around the year 300, the congregation recited the most basic of prayers – the *Shema'* – in Greek and undoubtedly also read the Torah in Greek, or at least had it translated into that language for the benefit of its congregants.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the appearance of zodiac signs and the image of Helios in a number of synagogues throughout Palestine reflects a significant penetration of Hellenistic artistic motifs into the synagogue in particular and into Jewish cultural life generally.<sup>35</sup>

The Torah shrine was a prominent feature in almost all the synagogues in Palestine and the Diaspora of late antiquity and may have been located in a niche (as at Miletus and Eshtemoa), an apse (as at Ostia and Beth Alpha) or an aedicula (as at Dura and Nabratein).<sup>36</sup> Scriptures were read, expounded, and studied with awe and sanctity throughout the entire Jewish world,<sup>37</sup> and remains of the above

34 J Sotah 7, 1, 21b.

35 R. Hachlili, 'The Zodiac in Ancient Jewish Art: Representation and Significance', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 228 (1977), pp. 61–77; idem, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel*, Leiden 1988, pp. 301–309; Goodenough (above, n. 5), VIII, pp. 167–218.

36 Kraabel (above, n. 5); Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art* (above, n. 35), pp. 166–182; Levine (above, n. 27), pp. 70–74.

37 I. Elbogen, *Jewish Prayer in its Historical Development*, Tel-Aviv 1972, pp. 117–131 (Hebrew); C. Perrot, *La lecture de la Bible*, Hildesheim 1973; J. Heinemann, *Studies in Jewish Liturgy*<sup>2</sup>, Jerusalem 1983, pp. 22–27 (Hebrew).

architectural elements reinforce the centrality of the Torah to Jewish liturgy in antiquity.

Purity was likewise a widespread concern of Jews everywhere.<sup>38</sup> Remains of installations for the washing of hands (and feet?) and possibly also for body immersion were found in Palestine as well as in the Diaspora, and our literary and epigraphic sources confirm their existence.<sup>39</sup> Synagogues located in coastal cities were often situated near the shore, as in Gaza and Caesarea, or in Delos, Priene, and Ostia.<sup>40</sup>

As regards the synagogue building generally, we find that the same features characteristic of the Diaspora buildings also held true for those of Palestine. Monumental synagogues and small ones were built in Palestine and the Diaspora, as well as synagogues remodelled from private homes and separate structures built initially to serve as community centers. Simple buildings stood in Khirbet Shema' and Aegina, more monumental edifices in Capernaum, Marus, and Sardis.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, there was no fixed location for the synagogue in Palestine or the Diaspora: some were situated within the city or village (Chorazin, Hammath Tiberias), some outside of it (Beth Shean, Gush

38 See Sanders (above, n. 4), pp. 255–271, as well as the classic studies of A. Büchler, 'The Levitical Impurity of the Gentile Cities in Palestine before the Year 70', *Jewish Quarterly Review*, XVII (1926–27), pp. 1–81; and Alon (above, n. 2), pp. 146–234.

39 Levine (above, n. 27), pp. 39–41.

40 See above, n. 27.

41 G. Foerster, 'The Ancient Synagogues of the Galilee', in: *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*, L.I. Levine (ed.), Atlanta 1992, pp. 289–319; Goodenough (above, n. 5), II, pp. 75–76; Seager and Kraabel (above, n. 10), pp. 168–175.



Ḥalav), and others, as noted, near the sea (Caesarea, Gaza).<sup>42</sup>

Another feature common to both Diaspora and Palestinian synagogues is the language that was used there. The primary languages of the synagogues in Palestine were those spoken throughout that region, i.e., Greek and Aramaic.<sup>43</sup> Hebrew played a distinctly minor role, as is evident from the inscriptions found in Palestine; it played an even smaller role in the Diaspora. Greek was the lingua franca of the Diaspora; Aramaic was also spoken in the East just as Latin was in the West.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, there appears to have been as wide a discrepancy in attitudes toward art and figural representation among the Jewish communities of Palestine and the Diaspora, ranging from a more conservative approach, as in the synagogues at Ein Gedi and Rehov, to a more liberal, Hellenized one, as in the synagogues at Ḥammath Tiberias and Beth Alpha. For example, the signs of the zodiac and the image of Helios are not mentioned at all, or only by name, in the former, yet they are given full figural expression in the latter.<sup>45</sup> The same range of attitudes towards figural representation may be found in the Diaspora, as, for example, from the strictly aniconic mosaic floors in the synagogue of Apamea to the full-blown biblical cycles depicted at Dura.<sup>46</sup>

The emphasis on local traditions, abundantly evident in the Diaspora synagogue buildings at Dura, Sardis, and Ostia, was a significant factor

42 Cf. above, n. 12 and *The New Encyclopaedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, E. Stern (ed.), 4 vols.; Jerusalem 1993, passim.

43 For collections of these inscriptions, see J. Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic: The Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Ancient Synagogues*, Jerusalem 1978 (Hebrew); L. Roth-Gerson, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Synagogues in Eretz-Israel*, Jerusalem 1987 (Hebrew).

44 Kant (above, n. 11), p. 673.

45 See Hachlili (above, n. 35); Levine (above, n. 27), pp. 63–70.

46 Cf. above, nn. 5 and 10.

in Palestine as well. Each region left an indelible stamp on the nature, decoration, and plan of its local synagogue: the Galilean-type synagogue has long been recognized;<sup>47</sup> more recently, we have become aware of synagogues of the Golan-type as well as of those bearing architectural features unique to southern Judea.<sup>48</sup>

The recognition of local influence on the synagogue does not preclude the fact that there may have been a great deal of diversity among synagogues within any one region, particularly those situated in an urban setting. On the basis of catacomb inscriptions from third- to fifth-century Rome, it appears that, in terms of the social composition, economic status, and ethnic origins of its members, synagogues of very different types existed in the city.<sup>49</sup> The same was probably true for Palestinian settings as well. In the Beth Shean area, we have evidence of five different synagogues dating to the sixth century, each differing dramatically from the next in architectural plan as well as in attitude toward figural representation and in the language and content of the

47 Even within the Galilee, significant differences have been noted between the synagogues of the Upper and Lower Galilees. See E.M. Meyers. 'Galilean Regionalism as a Factor in Historical Reconstruction', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 221 (1976), pp. 93–101.

48 Z. Ma'oz, 'The Art and Architecture of the Synagogues of the Golan', *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, L.I. Levine (ed.), Jerusalem 1981, pp. 98–115; idem, 'Ancient Synagogues of the Golan', *Biblical Archaeologist*, LI (June, 1988), pp. 116–128. Regarding southern Judea, see D. Amit and Z. Ilan, 'The Ancient Synagogue at Ma'on in Judah', *Qadmoniot* XXIII/91–92 (1990), pp. 115–125 (Hebrew); Levine (above, n. 27), p. 41.

49 Leon (above, n. 11), pp. 135–166.

inscriptions found there.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, the picture that emerges regarding diversity within Palestine is not unlike that which we have described for the Diaspora. Morton Smith noted this diversity in passing some thirty-five years ago:

But the different parts of the country [i.e., Israel] were so different, such gulfs of feeling and practice separated Idumea, Judea, Caesarea, and Galilee, that even on this level there was probably no more agreement between them than between any one of them in a similar area in the Diaspora.<sup>51</sup>

Another implication reinforcing the similarity between Diaspora and Palestinian synagogues relates to the explanations that have been offered for the use of Jewish symbols and motifs in the synagogues. It has been claimed that the extensive use of Jewish symbols in Diaspora synagogues reflects a mentality among these Jews of alienation from the surrounding pagan culture, a phenomenon specifically associated with Jewish minority status in the Diaspora.<sup>52</sup> Yet we find that these very same symbols were introduced into Palestine at roughly the same time, even in areas where the Jews were clearly the majority. Moreover, no uniquely Jewish symbols have been preserved in the remains of any Second-Temple synagogues, neither on Delos and throughout Egypt

50 M. Chiat, 'Synagogues and Churches in Byzantine Bet Shean', *Journal of Jewish Art*, VII (1980), pp. 6–24; J. Raynor, *Social and Cultural Relationships in Scythopolis/Beth Shean in the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, doctoral dissertation, Duke University; Durham 1982, pp. 74–129.

51 M. Smith, 'Palestinian Judaism in the First Century', in: *Israel: Its Role in Civilization*, M. Davies (ed.), New York 1956, pp. 67–81 (quote from p. 81).

52 H. Krauss, 'Jewish Art as a Minority Problem', *Journal of Jewish Sociology*, II (1960), pp. 147–171; S. Fine, 'The Menorah as Symbol of Jewish Minority Status', in: *Fusion in the Hellenistic East*, S. Fine (ed.), Los Angeles 1985, pp. 24–31.

nor at Masada and Gamla.<sup>53</sup> Only in the third and fourth centuries C.E. do we find evidence of these symbols, and their appearance then is not confined to any one locale. Thus, while the factor of alienation may indeed have been of some significance, we ought to look elsewhere for an explanation of this phenomenon. It may go well beyond the religious and social proclivities of any specific community or region; it may be an expression of Judaism's reaction to the impact of Christianity's ascendancy in late antiquity and its subsequent influence on various facets of Jewish society.<sup>54</sup>

### Differences between the Diaspora and Palestine

Interestingly, it is precisely with regard to artistic motifs that some fascinating differences emerge between Palestinian and Diaspora practices, and in rather unexpected ways! The intensive use of Jewish symbols in the synagogue – on mosaic floors or stone mouldings – was much greater in Palestine than in the Diaspora. Symbols such as the Torah shrine, menorah, shofar, lulav, ethrog, and incense shovel (on the mosaic floors of the synagogues at Hammath Tiberias, Beth Alpha, Huseifa, Na'aran, and Susiya, for example<sup>55</sup>) never appear in a similar concentration in any of the preserved Diaspora synagogues. The closest parallel to this Palestinian phenomenon may be found in the third-fifth-century Jewish catacombs of Rome, particularly on fragments of gold

53 See Kraabel (above, n. 5), and articles on the Second Temple period synagogue, in: *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, L.I. Levine (ed.), Jerusalem 1981, pp. 19–41. The attempt by Ma'oz to identify a rosette and date palms on the Gamla lintel as Jewish symbols that "may provide a clue to identify synagogues of this period" is unconvincing (*ibid.*, p. 39). See also Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art* (above, n. 35), pp. 84–88, 235.

54 See my forthcoming *Ancient Synagogue*; Y. Tsafir, 'The Byzantine Setting and Its Influence on Ancient Synagogues', in: *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity*, L.I. Levine (ed.), Philadelphia 1987, pp. 147–157.

55 Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art* (above, n. 35), pp. 347–365.

glass.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, these same Palestinian synagogues show a grater proclivity than their Diaspora counterparts to featuring figural representations with distinctly pagan motifs. Dura, of course, is the classic example of extensive figural art, but even there we find biblical scenes only; no Diaspora synagogue can parallel the Hellenistic depictions of zodiac signs and Helios found in a number of Palestinian settings. Amazing as it may appear, Diaspora synagogues, far from being more syncretistic and Hellenized in this regard, were by and large more conservative than their Palestinian counterparts. Perhaps the security of living in their land, in the midst of a largely Jewish population, allowed some Palestinian Jewish communities to indulge in artistic expressions that their Diaspora counterparts might have found objectionable, unsavory or problematic.

The sacred status accorded the synagogue also differed from the Diaspora to Palestine. From its inception, perhaps – and certainly early on – the synagogue in the Diaspora was considered holy.<sup>57</sup> The Palestinian synagogue appears to have acquired a similar status relatively late – from the third century onward.<sup>58</sup> This added dimension of sanctity in no way threatened the community-center aspect of the Palestinian synagogue, as this element was central to the institution from its inception and continued to function as such throughout antiquity.

### **Leadership within the Ancient Synagogue**

An interesting implication of the above comparison between Diaspora and Palestinian synagogues involves the religious leadership of these institutions. We know of no rabbis who functioned in the synagogues of the Roman Diaspora. When mention is made of religious leaders –

56 Goodenough (above, n. 5), II, pp. 108–119.

57 See Kasher (above, n. 19).

58 Levine (above, n. 27), pp. 79–84.



and this has occurred on rare occasion only – it is usually of a priest, *didaskalos* or *sophos*.<sup>59</sup> Nor does rabbinic literature make mention of academies or permanent rabbinic figures in the Roman Diaspora – with the single exception of R. Mattea b. Heresh, who appears to have founded an institution in Rome in the early second century.<sup>60</sup> Any rabbinic figures known to us from Palestinian literature who ventured out to the Roman Diaspora did so for short visits only. The case of R. Meir, who fled to Asia Minor toward the end of his life and subsequently died there, is an exception.<sup>61</sup>

If indeed Diaspora synagogues functioned primarily as communal institutions without "rabbinic" leadership, and given the overall similarity between Diaspora and Palestinian synagogues, the question arises as to the place and function of the sage in the latter. And if the synagogues throughout the Roman world held much in common, in many respects reflecting similar practices, then the influence of the rabbis on the ancient synagogue must have been limited, at best.<sup>62</sup>

59 Sardis – Seager and Kraabel (above, n. 10), p. 170 (priest, *sophodidaskalos*); Rome – Frey (above, n. 11), I, pp. 371–372, no. 508 (student of the sages, μαθητῆς σοφῶν); *ibid.*, pp. 261–262, no. 333 (διδάσκαλος); *ibid.*, II, p. 211, no. 1158 (Beth Shearim – διδάσ[καλος]); *ibid.*, I, p. 140, no. 201 (νομ(ο)δ[ιδασκαλῶ...]); Athens – *ibid.*, B. Lifshitz, 'Prolegomenon', p. 83, no. 715b (πρόσκολος); Argos – *ibid.*, pp. 518–519, no. 719 (σοφῶν). The title 'rabbi' appears in several Latin inscriptions from Italy – although its significance remains elusive – *ibid.*, pp. 418 and 438, nos. 568 and 611, respectively.

60 E. Toaff, 'Matia ben Cheresh e la sua accademia rabbinica di Roma', *Annuario di Studi Ebraici*, II (1964), pp. 69–80. See also B. Bokser, 'Todos and Rabbinic Authority in Rome', in: *New Perspectives in Ancient Judaism*, J. Neusner (ed.), London 1987, pp. 117–129.

61 J Kilaim 9, 4, 32c. See also G. Alon, *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age*, 2 vols.; Jerusalem 1984, II, pp. 670–673.

62 This point is argued more fully by L. Levine, 'The Sages and the Synagogue in

This, of course, is not a view derived from rabbinic literature. Although there is a tendency to assume that if rabbinic literature refers to synagogues or mentions rabbis who functioned in synagogues then this must have been the norm, an increased sophistication in our use of that literature – in addition to the archeological and epigraphical evidence – suggests a somewhat different picture. Rabbinic influence on synagogue affairs was limited; rabbinic control would make significant gains eventually, but this would happen only centuries later, some time toward the end of late antiquity or in the early Middle Ages, and in a different historical setting.

How do we account for the similarity and commonality in Jewish expression in synagogues throughout antiquity? It would seem that there must have been a common thread of Judaism which affected and influenced Jews everywhere, an inheritance of the past that was shaped and preserved by experiences common to Jews throughout the Greco-Roman world despite varying and ever-changing historical and social contexts. Modern critical scholarship by its very nature has spent much time analyzing and dissecting, differentiating and distinguishing. Perhaps the time has come to balance such an analysis by also focusing on the common and the unifying, by defining the nature of this shared continuum – vertically (in time) and horizontally (cross-cultural context) – in order to attain as comprehensive an understanding of ancient Judaism as possible.<sup>63</sup>

Late Antiquity: The Evidence of the Galilee', in: *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*, L.I. Levine (ed.), Atlanta 1992, pp. 201–222.

63 Cf. D. Schwartz, 'Qumran between Priestliness and Christianity', in: *The Scrolls of the Judaean Desert – Forty Years of Research*, M. Broshi et al. (eds.), Jerusalem 1992, p. 181 (Hebrew).

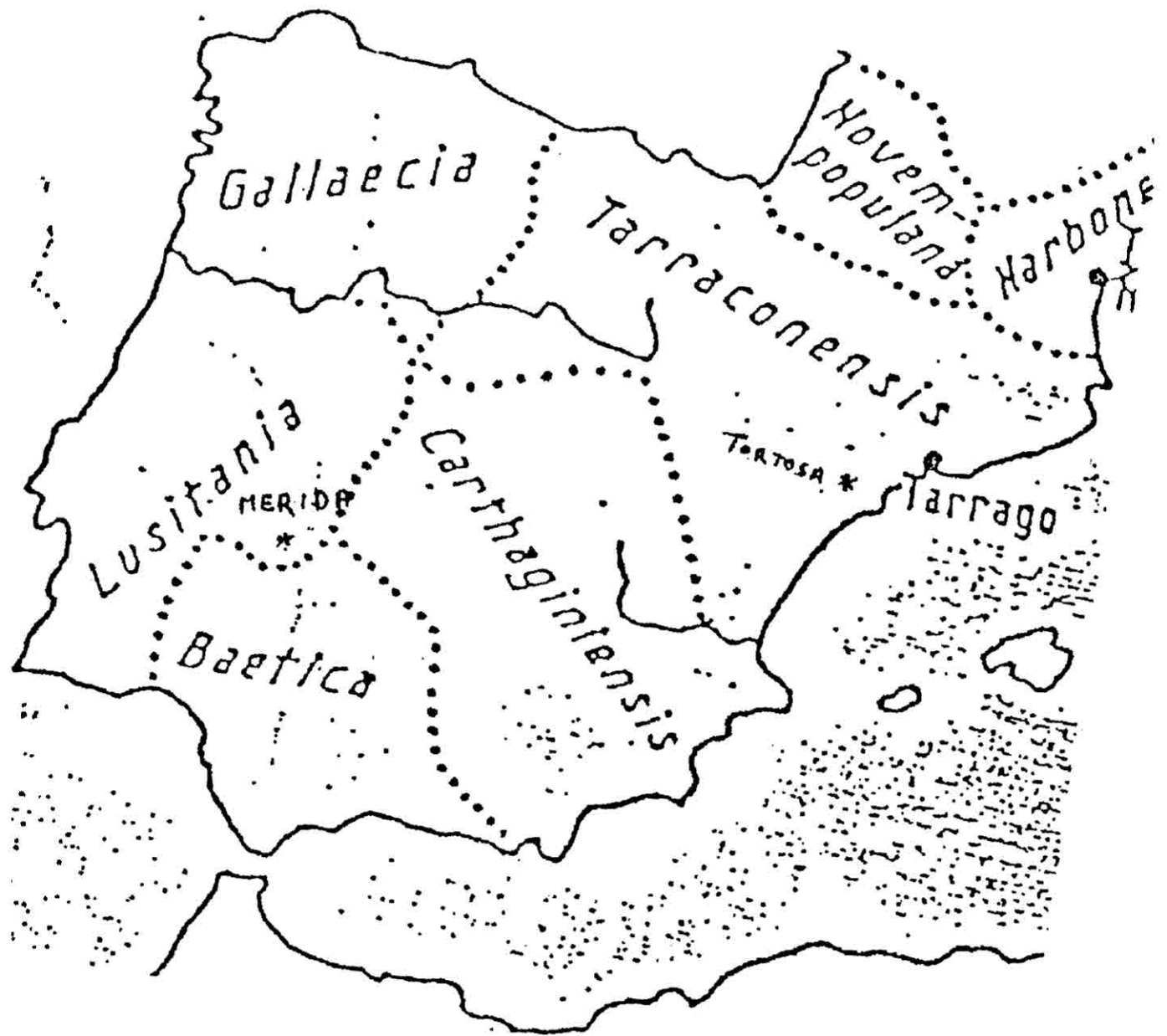


Fig. 1: Spain at the end of the IV<sup>th</sup> century