Journal of HEBREW SCRIPTURES

VOLUME 25 | SPECIAL ISSUE

JILL MIDDLEMAS &
EHUD BEN ZVI

Esther in Dura Europos

Ancient Jewish Memories of Achaemenid Persia 4

Edited by Kristin Joachimsen & Jason S. Mokhtarian

Articles in JHS are being indexed in the ATLA Religion Database, RAMBI, and BiBIL. Their abstracts appear in Religious and Theological Abstracts. The journal is archived by Library and Archives Canada and is accessible for consultation and research at the Electronic Collection site maintained by Library and Archives Canada.
ISSN 1203–1542 http://www.jhsonline.org and http://purl.org/jhs

Journal of Hebrew Scriptures
DOI: 10.5508/jhs29773

ESTHER IN DURA EUROPOS

JILL MIDDLEMAS
UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

EHUD BEN ZVI
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA, EMERITUS

1. INTRODUCTION: THE ROAD AHEAD

Esther appears in the so-called Esther or Purim panel, which is one of a significant number of wall panels in the Dura Europos Synagogue. The panel and the figuration of Esther are found next to the Torah shrine in one of the most important locations in the synagogue. This article addresses a set of questions that emerge from its prominent location and the figure of Esther in the visual (and ideological) world conjured up by the Synagogue murals. We were interested in questions such as, what are Esther and the panel doing in such a significant location? What does its location convey to the Durene Jews[1] who were 'seeing' the murals at the Synagogue time and again? Which sets of meanings did its placement evoke or bring to the attention of the people looking at it? Which likely stories might have been recalled? What does it do in terms of imagining the Persian (Achaemenid) rule of the past?

To explore these questions, we will focus first on the local context of the Synagogue and of the Durene Jews at the time of

[1] The term "Durene Jews" and similar ones serve here as a shorthand to refer to those who participated in the community that met at the Synagogue in Dura Europos and who, as such and by virtue of participating in that ingroup, were socialized into feelings of connection to other Jews and saw commonalities with them based on shared stories, social memory, Torah and the (non-physical) Temple. We explicitly include the proselytes who participated in the community. Issues concerning ideologically based or practical boundaries between Jew and proselyte in Dura Europos or elsewhere at that time are beyond the scope of this paper. That said, we may mention that there is evidence in the Synagogue showing that at least one proselyte (see ceiling Tiles A–B) was among the major donors and was acknowledged as such. Perhaps he also had a place among the general leadership of the ingroup. See Karen B. Stern, "Mapping Devotion in Roman Dura Europos: A Reconsideration of the Synagogue Ceiling," *AJA* 114 (2010): 488–89; Steven Fine, "Jewish Identity at the Cusp of Empires: The Jews of Dura Europos between Rome and Persia," in *Art, History and the Historiography of Judaism in Roman Antiquity*, ed. S. Fine (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 107–9 and bibliography.

the relevant wall paintings, then we will turn to the frescoes themselves within the context of the cultural Jewish ecumene of the time. Then we will look into the Esther/Purim panel itself, and its location. Based on all the above, we will then approach the questions raised and discuss the implications of potential answers to them.

2. THE LOCAL CONTEXT OF THE SYNAGOGUE AND OF DURENE JEWS AT THE TIME

Roman Dura Europos was a border-city within a borderland.[2] Like many of such frontier cities all over history, it served as an important military center,[3] but also as an important site for the transport of goods and the movement of people from one polity to another at the same time. Moreover, Roman Dura was not just at a boundary between two polities, but between the two most powerful empires at the time in this region of the world, Rome and Sassanian Persia. Further, Dura was located about halfway between the capitals of Antioch in the West and Seleucia in the East, on an ancient caravan route, and on the road towards such an important city as Palmyra. As such, it was a borderland city of trade, commute, and the military.

Although the Roman East was 'multicultural' in general and processes of cultural hybridity were widely at work in the entire area, a borderland city such as Dura Europos was bound to experience them even more. The city was indeed an Eastern/Syrian Roman city characterized by the presence of multiple groups

---

[2] The city, originally a Hellenistic colony, was founded most likely by Seleucus I after the battle of Ipsus, ca. 300 BCE. It eventually became a Parthian city (around 113 BCE) and remained mostly as such until 165/6 CE, when it fell under Roman control. It remained under Roman control until its fall and destruction in 256 CE at the hands of a Sassanian army. Although Roman Dura Europos lasted slightly less than one hundred years, most of the many archaeological finds, including inscriptions and documents, are from this period. An early synagogue dating to 165-200 CE was renovated in 244/5 CE, according to the date of ceiling tiles. The synagogue was originally a house, which is also true of the nearby Christian building that included a painted Baptistery, the Mithreum. On the origin of the city, see e.g., Paul J. Kosmin, "The Foundation and Early Life of Dura-Europos," in *Dura Europos: Crossroads of Antiquity*, ed. Lisa R. Brody and Gail L. Hoffman (Chestnut Hill, MA: McMullen Museum of Art, 2011), 95–105. For a brief summary of the history of the city and relevant bibliography, see e.g., Stern, "Mapping Devotion," 474–77. For the city, its public and cultic spaces, and the visual worlds associated with the latter, see Annabel Jane Wharton, *Refiguring the Post Classical City: Dura Europos, Jerash, Jerusalem and Ravenna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 15–63, 171–78.

[3] This is particularly true of the Roman period in which Roman military presence pervaded the city and impacted its development. See Nigel Pollard, *Soldiers, Cities, and Civilians in Roman Syria* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 44–58; idem, "Roman Material Culture across Imperial Frontiers? Three Case Studies from Parthian Dura-Europos," in *The Greco-Roman East: Politics, Culture, Society*, ed. S. Colvin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 119–44.

which constantly engaged with each other. Multilingualism was manifested not only through the use of multiple spoken languages, but also of scripts, inscriptions, and an onomasticon that involved multiple languages and backgrounds.[4] Significantly, all the above could be found not only in the city as a whole, but even in particular spaces that were singularly associated with one of the many groups that co-existed in Dura Europos. For instance, the Jewish synagogue contained and displayed inscriptions in Greek, Aramaic (square script), and Middle Persian. Moreover, Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Persian Zoroastrian names were all attested, including among the people identified as benefactors of the Synagogue. Notably, fragments of a (most likely) liturgic parchment in Hebrew (P Dura 11) were found in its vicinity, which was related not only to the individuals affiliated with the Synagogue, but also probably to some activities that may have taken place within it.[5]

Images in the synagogue reflected a kind of *koine* of pictorial representation as well. For instance, one may notice the use of Tyche-like images to evoke or denote cities, the depiction of the daughter of Pharaoh in ways similar to Anāhitā/ Aphrodite/ Venus, which also bears some resemblance with the Venus in the house of the Roman scribe.[6] Local images of Palmyrene gods

---

[4] See Jean Gascou, "The Diversity of Languages in Dura-Europos," in *Edge of Empires: Pagans, Jews, and Christians at Roman Dura-Europos*, ed. Jennifer Y. Chi and Sebastian Heath (New York: Institute for the Study of the Ancient World; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 75–96; Jennifer A. Baird, "The Texts of Dura-Europos," ch. 4 in *Dura-Europos* (London: Bloomsbury Academic; 2018), 63–86, DOI: 10.5040/9781474204194.ch-004.

[5] For an image, discussion and bibliography see Fine, "Jewish Identity," 101–21 (image on 105); cf. idem, "Jewish Identity at the Limus: The Earliest Reception of the Dura Europos Synagogue Paintings," in *Cultural Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Erich S. Gruen (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011), 289–306.

For a discussion of this text and an argument for its importance in understanding the role of the Synagogue with bibliography, see Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. 173–75; Shulamit Laderman, "A New Look at the Second Register of the West Wall in Dura Europos," *Cahiers archéologiques: Fin de l'antiquité et Moyen Âge* 45 (1997): 5–18.

[6] Needless to say, this does not mean that the image was meant to be 'read' as an image of the said deity. See Géza G. Xeravits, "Goddesses in the Synagogue?" *JSJ* 48 (2017): 266–76. It just means that iconic models were shared.

On potential meanings conveyed by the frontally naked image of the daughter of Pharaoh, and many other insights on the models and influences shaping the paintings of the Synagogue, see Warren G. Moon, "Nudity and Narrative: Observations on the Frescoes from the Dura Synagogue," *JAAR* 60 (1992): 587–658 and bibliography. According to a tradition that became textualized in b. Meg. 13a, Pharaoh's daughter met baby Moses when "she went down to wash and purify herself from the idols of her father's house." According to another tradition that became textualized in e.g., Lev. Rab. 1.3 she was brought into Israel through the direct action of YHWH (רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ דְּסִכְנִין בְּשֵׁם

that appear elsewhere served as models for Dagon,[7] and "the dresses and the veils of the women arriving at the tomb (or bridegroom's tent) in the Christian building bear a striking resemblance to the Egyptian women in the synagogue scene of Pharaoh's daughter rescuing Moses from the river." In addition, as Karen Stern states, "renderings of human figures from Durene temples and domestic spaces exhibit syntheses of Hellenistic, Palmyrene, and Parthian paradigms for dress and dimensional perspective."[8] Significantly for the present purposes, it seems likely that (some of) the same artists were hired to produce paintings in various cultic spaces, and given the substantial influence of Parthian iconography, it is likely that these artists were from the area.

Just as the styles of the artwork and imagery are found consistent in Durene religious spaces, certain social 'tastes' were common across the various groups as well. These 'tastes' may refer to aesthetic preferences, see, e.g. "both Mithraeum and baptistery have blue ceilings painted with rosette-like stars . . . [t]he paintings of all the buildings tend to favor dark reds, greens, and golds."[9] The shared preferences may be related to more concrete aspects of material culture, for instance, as shown by the fact that ceramics and textiles show "a local convergence of Palmyrene and Parthian styles and manufacture."[10] At the same time, however, they may also relate to aspects of acceptable social behavior such as inscribing dipinti and graffiti in all sorts of religious spaces, including the famed wall painted images of the Synagogue, the walls of the Baptistery, and inside the temples of other divinities.[11]

רַבִּי לֵוִי אָמַר לָהּ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא לְבִתְיָה בַּת פַּרְעֹה מִשֶּׁה לֹא הָיָה בְּנֵךְ וּקְרָאתוֹ בְּנֵךְ אַף אַתְּ לֹא אַתְּ בִּתִּי וַאֲנִי קוֹרֵא אוֹתָךְ בִּתִּי שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: אֵלֶּה בְּנֵי בִּתְיָה, בַּת יָהּ).

[7] For issues that might have arisen from the obvious similarities, see, e.g., Tessa Rajak, "The Dura-Europos Synagogue: Images of a Competitive Community," in *Dura Europos: Crossroads of Antiquity,* ed. Lisa R. Brody and Gail L. Hoffman (Chestnut Hill, MA: McMullen Museum of Art, 2011), 141–54.

[8] Stern, "Mapping Devotion," 476–77. On Parthian and Sassanian artistic influences, esp. on the Mordecai-Esther/Purim panel, see Dalia Tawil, "The Purim Panel in Dura in Light of Parthian and Sasanian Art," *JNES* 38 (1979): 93–109.

[9] Robin M. Jensen, "The Dura Europos Synagogue, Early-Christian Art, and Religious Life in Dura Europos," in *Jews, Christians and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue*, ed. Steven Fine (London: Routledge, 1999), 181.

[10] Stern, "Mapping Devotion," 476. On the material culture and art of Dura Europos, see Baird, *Dura-Europos*, ch. 6, 123–52, DOI: 10.5040/9781474204194.ch-006.

[11] See Karen B. Stern, "Opening Doors to Jewish Life in Syro-Mesopotamian Dura-Europos," *JAA* 8 (2018): 178–200; idem, "Celebrating the Mundane: Figural Graffiti and Daily Life Among Jews in the Levant," in *Jewish Art in Its Late Antique Context*, ed. Uzi Leibner and Catherine Hezser (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 237–60; for the various inscriptions in the murals of the Synagogue, see also Fine, "Jewish Identity." It is worth stressing that these dipinti and graffiti were not

In addition, since both the Christian building and the Synagogue had 'scriptural-rooted' images, it is worth noticing that in both cases the selection of the stories pictorially evoked by the murals resulted in a substantially higher proportion of women than in their relevant scriptures in general. Of course, these were key women fulfilling important and memorable roles in the world displayed in the murals, but the fact remains that there are far more women in the visual world of the murals than in the textual world of the relevant scriptures.[12] This tendency is not unique to the synagogue ingroup.[13]

Given all these commonalities, and implicitly, the connectedness among the residents of the city that may bring them about, one might expect that the various groups, and especially those who were subaltern minorities in Dura would tend to advance ways to express and strengthen their sense of inner 'groupness.'

For instance, the very buildings mentioned above shaped spaces for fostering ingroup connectedness, social cohesion and commonalities through social interactions among the ingroup.[14] Repeatedly seeing the murals already socialized those looking at them to a set of common memories socially shared by an ingroup that provided it with a sense of their past, and their rela-

---

meant to deface the images. To the contrary, they were meant to show respect for them.

[12] Two early studies that focus on the prominent role of women in the Dura Europos synagogue from different angles than the present article are Faith Steinberg, "Women and the Dura-Europos Synagogue Paintings," *Religion and the Arts* 10 (2006): 461–96; and Olga Hazan, "Les femmes salvatrices dans le cycle imagé de la synagogue Doura-Europos," *SR* 49 (2020): 193–215. See also n. 50 below.

[13] It is an open question whether this tendency has something to do with the increased roles and status of some key women in Severan Rome. It is worth remembering that Julia Domna herself was from Emesa, a city connected by an important trade route to Palmyra (and from there to Dura Europos and Parthia) and not that far from Dura-Europos. Antoninus, i.e., Caracalla (and Julia Domna) spent much time in the East of the empire and he granted Roman citizenship to free men—with some minor exceptions—all over its territory, including, likely, many Durenes. Moreover, there is clear evidence, even if later than Dura Europos, for a very positive image of Antoninus in Jewish sources. The so-called elephant mosaic panel of the Huqoq Synagogue (early fifth or late fourth century CE) may even show an image of him and Rabbi Judah the Prince, if one follows the interpretation of Adi Ehrlich, "The Patriarch and the Emperor: The Elephant Mosaic Panel in the Huqoq Synagogue Reconsidered," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 31 (2018): 542–58. Ehrlich also reviews alternative proposals and provides bibliography. In any event, it is unlikely that such a positive memory of him emerged simultaneously with and against the background of its first attestation. (One may also keep in mind that the Severan was the last stable dynasty from the perspective of the Durenes.)

[14] There is a debate about whether some non-Jews could have come and even contributed some appreciative graffiti to the Synagogue. Whether this is the case or not, undoubtedly the Synagogue served as an inner space for Jews, just as the Baptistery served as an inner space for Christians.

tionality and commonality to other groups of Jews elsewhere who shared the same scriptures and concepts communicated by the murals. In other words, the Synagogue of Dura Europos reflects a local, particular Jewish expression of a widespread, Eastern Roman/late Hellenistic cultural ecumene that was pervasive in the area at the time, and simultaneously shapes a particular, local instantiation of a general, transregional and across-empires, Jewish cultural ecumene forming and expressing cross-Jewish commonalities necessary for furthering a sense of connectedness to a larger transregional ethno-religious group.[15]

In addition, one must keep in mind that Dura Europos was, above all, a frontier imperial location, with plenty of Roman soldiers and equipment, and thus had an imperial, military raison d'être. The imperial, ideological presence, both explicit and implicit, was pervasive. In such conditions, subaltern groups tend to develop and socialize their members to various forms of cultural 'resistance,' so as to maintain a sense of primacy for their own cultural traditions, and thus facilitate their social reproduction.[16] Significantly, it was precisely the adoption of successful strategies of 'resistance,' securing the high status of the ingroup in its own discourse and sight, that served a crucial role in facili-

---

[15] The (complementary) duality is clearly manifested in visual form through images of how the heroes of the past were dressed, and esp. the foundational hero Moses (see the image of Moses at the burning bush; cf. the image of Moses or Ezra reading from the scroll). See Moon, "Nudity and Narrative."

Of course, dress plays crucial constitutive and communicative roles across cultures all over the world. On matters of 'dress and identity,' see e.g., Megan Cifarelli, ed., *Fashioned Selves: Dress and Identity in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2019).

It is worth stressing that this "general, transregional and across-empires, Jewish cultural ecumene forming and expressing cross-Jewish commonalities necessary for furthering a sense of connectedness to a larger group transregional ethno-religious group" is *not* to be identified with the rabbinic world of the time, nor imply that rabbis led the Synagogue. In fact, given the references to the leaders and benefactors, it seems that the main leadership of the Synagogue consisted of priests. See Jodi Magness, "Priests and Purity in the Dura-Europos Synagogue," in *Follow the Wise: Studies in Jewish History and Culture in Honor of Lee I. Levine*, ed. Zeev Weiss, et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 421–33.

To an extent one might compare this "general, transregional and across-empires, Jewish cultural ecumene forming and expressing cross-Jewish commonalities necessary for furthering a sense of connectedness to a larger group transregional ethno-religious group" with Sander's 'common Judaism' or Fine's 'Jewish *koine*.'

[16] Cf. Jaś Elsner, "Cultural Resistance and the Visual Image: The Case of Dura Europos," *Classical Philology* 96 (2001): 269–304. Some scholars have interpreted the murals at the Synagogue as reflecting not just 'cultural resistance,' but a clear political stance. For the idea that it reflects a strong pro-Roman position see Shalom Sabar, "The Purim Panel at Dura: A Socio-Historical Interpretation," in *From Dura to Sepphoris: Studies in Jewish Art and Society in Antiquity*, ed. Lee I. Levine and Zeev Weiss (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2000), 155–63.

tating its participation in the imperial system.[17] It goes without saying that readings of the Esther-Mordecai scene in terms of cultural resistance are consonant with the strong role of cultural resistance inscribed in the original Book of Esther.[18]

3. THE WALL PAINTINGS OF THE SYNAGOGUE AND KEY ASPECTS OF THE CULTURAL JEWISH ECUMENE OF ITS TIME

Those who commandeered the Synagogue (and the Christian building) and filled them with material as part of a substantial effort to strengthen the western wall of the city to resist the anticipated Sassanian attack eventually failed in their mission. The city was conquered by the Sassanians after a fierce and vicious battle, involving "chemical warfare."[19] While they failed to save the city, unbeknownst to them they preserved astonishing ancient synagogue wall paintings for posterity.[20] Since their discovery in 1932, the Durene murals have been studied continuously, shed much light on the community centered around the Synagogue and brought up multiple debates.[21] The purpose of this

---

[17] See Ehud Ben Zvi, "Asymmetric Hierarchical Systems and Cultural Hegemony among Early Second Temple Literati," in *Cultural Hegemony in Second Temple Judaism: Texts, Ideologies, and Struggles for Power*, ed. Danilo Verde and Benedetta Rossi (Leuven: Brepols, 2024), 15–38.

[18] On cultural resistance and the panel scene, see also section five of this essay.

[19] See Simon James, "Stratagems, Combat, and 'Chemical Warfare' in the Siege Mines of Dura-Europos," *AJA* 115 (2011): 69–101; idem, "Dark Secrets of the Archive: Evidence for 'Chemical Warfare' and Martial Convergences in the Siege-Mines of Dura Europos," in *Dura Europos: Crossroads of Antiquity*, ed. Lisa R. Brody and Gail L. Hoffman (Chestnut Hill, MA: McMullen Museum of Art, 2011), 295–317.

[20] Alongside those of the Christian building and important material findings.

[21] For both a summary of many of these debates, an assessment of the various positions, new proposals and literature, see Rachel Hachlili, "The Dura-Europos Synagogue Wall Paintings: A Question of Origin and Interpretation," in *Follow the Wise: Studies in Jewish History and Culture in Honor of Lee I. Levine*, ed. Weiss et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 403–20. For earlier literature and participation in debates about what may be learned or not from the painted walls of the Synagogue, see e.g., Jacob Neusner, "Judaism at Dura – Europos," *History of Religions* 4 (1964): 81–102; "Symposium on the Dura-Europos Synagogue Paintings, in tribute to Dr. Rachel Wischnitzer, November, 1968: The Contributions of Morton Smith and Meyer Schapiro," ed. Steven Fine, *Images* 3 (2009): 129–41, DOI: 10.1163/187180010X500252 (freely available online).

On the matter of the supposed 'messianism' among the Jews of Dura Europos, see Paul V. M. Flesher, "Rereadings of the Reredos: David, Orpheus, and Messianism in the Dura Europos Synagogue," in *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery*, vol. 1, ed. Risto Ilmari Uro and Paul V. M. Flesher (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 346–66; but also, the important contribution of Kära L. Schenk, "King David Narratives, Messianic Politics and the Dura-Europos Synagogue," in *The Eloquence of Art: Essays in Honour of Henry Maguire*, ed. Andrea

section is not to enter any of these debates, which in any case would require a separate contribution or, better, contributions. It is instead to draw attention to the way and content by which the panels serve to constitute and express basic cross-Jewish commonalities that underlie the connectedness of the Synagogue's ingroup to a larger transregional ethno-religious group.

Clearly the wall-paintings as a whole serve as a visual and very material[22] site of memory 'embodying' and evoking multiple stories about what the ingroup considered to be their own, foundational past. This past was shaped and remembered via visual scenes that, although associated with various periods and places of the ingroup, never crossed the boundaries of the past evoked by what would eventually be called the Hebrew Bible.[23]

Within the scenes shaped by the Synagogue collection, and despite the problems identifying some of the personages appearing in the paintings,[24] it is clear that most of the images relate to the past evoked by the Pentateuch and the books of Samuel and Kings, but are not limited to these books. There is an unequivocal, explicit reference to a memorable scene present in the book of Ezekiel,[25] while another clearly stems from the Book of Esther (which will be discussed below), and there might be references to events and figures in Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezra-Nehemiah.[26]

This, of course, does not mean that the images were simply a kind of 'visual' version of a written text. In fact, the visual images often diverge in some minor and, even not so minor, details from that found in the world portrayed by the relevant texts.[27] Visual art never serves as a calque of a textually constructed

---

Olsen Lam and Rossitza Schroeder (New York: Routledge, 2020), 300–17. See more below.

[22] People could see and touch, while some could even write on the walls, as mentioned above.

[23] Contrast with the situation in the Huqoq synagogue. Whatever proposal for the Elephant panel one prefers (e.g., Alexander and the High Priest, Antoninus and Rabbi Judah the Prince or, less likely, some event in the Maccabean/early Hasmonean period), this would be an 'extra-biblical' event. In fact, to our knowledge, no one has advanced the suggestion that a 'biblical' scene is represented in the panel.

[24] E.g., who, Ezra or Moses, is portrayed as holding and reading from a scroll of/containing Torah? Given the emphasis on Moses in the paintings, we tend to think that it is slightly more likely that it is Moses, but the Ezra option remains open and fully viable.

[25] See Ezekiel 37, the dry bones in the valley that come to life.

[26] One may note that the scene of Samuel's anointing of David reflects Chronicles' viewpoint that David had six brothers and thus he was the seventh (see 1 Chr 2:13–15; and contrast with 1 Sam 16:10–12), but this does not mean that those responsible for the painting learned about this 'fact' through their reading of Chronicles.

[27] A substantial number of examples are mentioned in Joseph Gutmann, "The Illustrated Midrash in the Dura Synagogue Paintings: A New Dimension for the Study of Judaism," *Proceedings of the* American *Academy for Jewish Research* 50 (1983): 91–104 and bibliography. A few of these cases will be briefly discussed below.

scene.[28] It is probably closer to the truth to say that the images conveyed the 'biblical' stories in versions that existed within the (mental) 'archive' or 'library' of the community, whether they had been textualized or not.[29] In other words, they represent vignettes of the memories that were actually held by the group and into which it was socialized by looking at them. The shaping and communication of the meanings of the said images most likely involved the agency of some selected individuals[30] who instilled them to the larger ingroup by pointing to and explaining them, and thus ensured that the community's interpretation was evoked by the image every time they were gazed upon in the Synagogue.[31]

---

[28] One may mention in this context Wharton's critique of "the priority accorded to the literary text in the attribution of meaning to the synagogue frescoes" (citation from Wharton, *Refiguring the Post Classical City*, 39). By "literary text," Wharton refers here to the written "biblical" texts.

[29] To which one may add whether they were textualized in documents completely unavailable to the Jewish Durenes or not. On the general matter of textualization, the situation may compare with the matter of the 'biblical stories' that pervade the imagination of many even today in which Satan convinced Eve, a point never made in the written text, and which neither those responsible for Genesis 2–3 nor their intended readership could have ever imagined. That said, it is precisely the 'lived Bible' not the 'written Bible,' despite all the focus on 'sola scriptura' in some sectors, that influences the beliefs and actions of the relevant social agents.

Surely, one is to be careful about suggesting the existence of 'textually unavailable' stories. It is more likely that the scenes depicted in the paintings reflect stories that existed in the sea of tellings of 'biblical' narratives than the alternative that they were all invented by the people who ordered the paintings, and that the importance of such paintings led to their textualization in multiple sources, in some cases Christian ones.

[30] This is not the place to debate whether these individuals would be 'paytans' as Laderman ("A New Look," 5–6) proposes, 'meturgemans' as Moon ("Nudity and Narrative," 599, 610–12) proposes, some individuals selected by or among the communal leadership, or perhaps even the priest Samuel, its main leader, himself.

On the use of visual placards for didactic purposes in Rome, perhaps in Christian settings and esp. the Roman army, see Moon, "Nudity and Narrative," 610–12. Zsuzsanna Gulásci likens the Dura pictorial representations to a book of pictures used for didactic purposes by the Manicheans in the third century CE. See idem, "Visual Catechism in Third Century Mesopotamia: Reassessing the Pictorial Program of the Dura-Europos Synagogue in Light of Mani's Book of Pictures," *JAJ* 9 (2018): 201–29.

[31] A vast corpus of research supports the saying "a picture is worth a thousand words." Pictures, with a few exceptions, are far more memorable, have more affective impact, represent a more compact way of communicating knowledge and do not require special linguistic capabilities (e.g., the ability to read or aural proficiency in a particular language). On the "picture superiority effect," its cognitive reasons and its (few) limitations, see e.g., Joyce M. Oates and Lynne M. Reder, "Memory for Pictures: Sometimes a Picture Is Not Worth a Single Word," in *Successful Remembering and Successful Forgetting: A Festschrift in*

As dominant as the panels were for the experience of the ingroup meeting at the Synagogue, they did not act alone. The focal architectural feature of the synagogue was the Torah niche (/shrine) which was immediately visible to anyone entering the place (fig. 1).[32] The Torah niche and the imagery around it provided sensorial, evocative and conceptual context that conveyed its significance and communicated two deeply intertwined concepts – that of the centrality of the Temple (and Jerusalem) and of Torah.[33]

The niche was explicitly labeled "the House of the Ark" (בית ארונא) and served as the 'sacred container' for "the ark," which in this context meant in practical terms a wooden 'box' containing the sacred scroll(s). When viewed in the context of the paintings, the entire sequence of container images, that is, the niche containing "the ark" and "the ark" containing a written scroll(s) of Torah,[34] parallel the Temple housing the Ark that contains the two stone tablets of Moses, and thus symbolizes Torah and covenant, as widely agreed for many centuries before Dura.[35] Additional images and symbols standing for the Temple

---

Honor of Robert A. Bjork, ed. Aaron S. Benjamin (New York: Psychology Press, 2011), 447–61 and substantial bibliography. Significantly, the cases in which the "picture superiority effect" may not have materialized have no bearing on the images in Dura Europos.

Moreover, since the paintings in Dura Europos impacted those surrounded by them, they provide us with an approximation of the social memory of the group. As is well known, it is possible to reconstruct an approximation to the socially-shared memory of Israel/themselves that characterizes a small group of literati reading and rereading highly complex texts within the context of a particular corpus, but not that of 'common folks' (see Ehud Ben Zvi, *Social Memory and the Literati of Yehud* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019]). The Dura Europos paintings provide us with tools for reconstructing aspects of their socially-shared memory within the particular context of their time and place.

[32] The importance of the Torah niche/shrine in Dura Europos finds clear parallels in later, but still ancient, synagogues. See e.g., Rachel Hachlili, "Torah Shrine and Ark in Ancient Synagogues: A Reevaluation," *ZDPV* 116 (2000): 146–83; Eric M. Meyers, "The Torah Shrine in the Ancient Synagogue: Another Look at the Evidence," *JSQ* 4 (1997): 303–38; Noa Yuval-Hacham, "Art and Identity in Late Antique Synagogues of the Roman-Byzantine Diaspora," in a special issue of *Arts* devoted to Synagogue Art and Architecture (ed. Ilia Rodov), *Arts* 8 (2019): 164, DOI: 10.3390/arts8040164.

[33] We would like to give special thanks to Professor Laura Salah Nasrallah, Buckingham Professor of New Testament Criticism and Interpretation and Co-Chair of Archaia, and Lisa R. Brody, Associate Curator of Ancient Art, Yale University, for their help in procuring the photos used to illustrate the points of the article.

[34] The paintings include an image of such a scroll being held (and assumedly read) by Moses (or Ezra). As Fine noted, the 'bleeding' of the text on the reverse may suggest that the artists, those who hired them, and perhaps other Durenes were well acquainted with that visual aspect of scrolls. See Kära L. Schenk, "Temple, Community, and Sacred Narrative in the Dura-Europos Synagogue," *AJSRev* 34 (2010): 195–229, esp. 200–206; Fine, *Art and Judaism*, 178.

[35] See 1 Kgs 8:9 (cf. Deut 10:2–5). Although the actual 'history' of

and its ritual worship were visually prominent above the 'shrine'[36] and made the association of the central niche, the spatial-focal-point of the Synagogue, with the Temple, the spatial-focal-place of the world within the common Jewish discourses of the period.[37] That said, the Temple did not exist in the 'real' world. But it could be remembered, made visually present in the Synagogue through paintings, longed for, and, above all, understood as intrinsically associated with YHWH's teachings as they appear in the written scrolls and, as or more importantly for most members of the ingroup, through the visual panels and the stories they evoked.

It is particularly relevant in this context that the paintings, and especially their portrayal of David and Solomon, communicated a rejection of any form of violent messianism (i.e., a kind of Bar Kokhba-like messianism, or even earlier in time, e.g., those involved in the so-called First Revolt against Rome.[38] Fur-

---

the Ark, and its original contents, seems far more complex, from a memory perspective, there was no doubt that it was remembered as containing the two tablets for the vast majority of the Second Temple period and for many centuries before Dura. For the possible history of the Ark, see John Day, "Whatever Happened to the Ark of the Covenant?" in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, ed. John Day (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 250–70; Thomas Römer, "The Mysteries of the Ark of the Covenant," *ST* 77 (2023): 169–85, DOI: 10.1080/0039338X.2023.2167861.

[36] See e.g., the image of the façade of the Temple (at the center), the seven branched menorah, the lulav, etrog, a visual reference to the 'Aqedah, which recalls Mt. Moriah, the place of the Temple according to Jewish tradition since the Achaemenid period (see 2 Chr 3:1). Moreover, the motif of the crowing conch shell appears associated with both the niche and the Temple. See e.g., S. Fine, *Art and Judaism*, 178; Schenk, "Temple, Community, and Sacred Narrative," 200–206.

Of course, the conceptual linking between the (Torah) 'ark' in synagogues and the 'Ark' in the Temple is not unique to Dura Europos; it is present in other ancient synagogues and is eventually attested to in writing. See Fine, loc. cit.

[37] Both before and after the renovation of the Synagogue. The centrality of Jerusalem/Temple is also clearly marked by the direction towards which the Torah niche/shrine faces. Compare with other synagogues of the later Roman or Byzantine period. For bibliography, see n. 32.

[38] The extremely large Moses depicted in the scene of the crossing of the sea does not contradict this point; after all, it was not due to Moses' heroism, but YHWH's might, that the sea parted. Significantly, the armed Israelites in the depiction do not use their weapons at all, and the fallen Egyptians face death at the hands of YHWH. All this is in accordance with the book of Exodus, the numerous references to YHWH's parting the sea and the memories that they shape. The depiction of the armed Israelites follows a widely attested mental image created by a (mis)understanding of the term *ḥămušīm* in Exod 13:18, and which became textualized in, for instance, Targum Onqelos, the Vulgate and as one possibility in the Mekilta of R. Ishamel (בשלח). Similarly, unlike the version in Exodus, the image of the naked Egyptians is rooted in common stories that became textualized in, e.g., Esther R. 3.14.

ther, as argued by Kära Schenk, they advanced a different concept of messianism, a peaceful one, which was conceptually complemented by the allocation of the warrior role of Israel to YHWH and not to any human being.[39]

All these considerations that relate to the Durene Jews' construal of their common memories at the Synagogue reveal some key commonalities with the rest of the Jews in the Mediterranean world at the time. Moreover, they play a role in our proposal for a new interpretation of the Esther-Mordecai panel in section five, but a closer look at the panel itself is now in order.

4. THE PURIM/ESTHER-MORDECAI PANEL[40]

The so-called Purim panel depicts in short relief two major scenes from the story of Esther (fig. 2).[41] The one on the left depicts the celebration of Mordecai on a horse being led by Haman shown with the naked legs of a stable boy or a non-Persian wrestler[42] (cf. Esther 6). The one on the right portrays the rule of Ahasuerus and Esther after the victory of the Jews when Esther is firmly established as his and Persia's queen. The status of the king is marked by his sitting on an elevated, golden throne

[39] See Schenk, "King David Narratives." For comparative purposes, it is worth noting that her emphasis on the images of David as a pious worshipper and of Solomon as a king of peace found their counterpart among Judeans in the Achaemenid period, as does the emphasis on YHWH, rather than a human leader, as Israel's warrior. See esp. Ben Zvi, *Social Memory*, 232–52, which deals with the memory of Joshua in that period, or the well-known characterization of David in Chronicles (and Psalms). See also Kära L. Schenk, "The Exodus Narrative and Divine Warfare in the Dura Europos," in *Exodus: Border Crossings in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Texts and Images*, ed. Annette Hoffmann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 29–48. An emphasis on YHWH acting instead of the people appears already in, e.g., the literature of Trito-Isaiah during the Second Temple period. See Jill Middlemas, "Trito-Isaiah's Intra-and Internationalization: Identity Markers in the Second Temple Period," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context,* ed. Oded Lipschits, Gary N. Knoppers, and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 105–25.

[40] The panel and some of the discussion here are featured in a talk on Esther during Purim for the Oxford Interfaith Forum, see John Goldingay, Jill Middlemas, and Adam Silverstein, "The Esther Story/Purim," Oxford Interfaith Forum, 17 March 2022, available on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rvg9pdy12Yk; see also Jill Middlemas, "Esther in the Eye of the Beholder: Interpretation in Antiquity and Modern Times," *JSOT*, forthcoming.

[41] The imagery of both scenes shows a clear Persian flavor, as expected by the topic and facilitated by the location of Dura Europos and its multi-cultural environment; yet at the same time, Eastern Roman/late Hellenistic motifs are present as well (note, e.g., the four men with seven legs [!] between the two scenes and Esther's maidservant). See Tawil, "The Purim Panel."

[42] Tawil, "Purim Panel," 104–5. According to Tawil's analysis, Haman wears the non-Iranian costume of a wrestler and a charioteer, which indicates in pictorial representation that he is non-Persian (i.e., non-Iranian in her terminology).

(compared in some of the literature to that of King Solomon). Queen Esther is on her throne slightly above and behind him (cf. Esther 9).[43] The scene includes a messenger in Persian clothing extending to or receiving from the king a papyrus, two male attendees of the monarch also in Persian attire representing the eunuchs of the biblical story, and a maidservant dressed in Roman clothing attending to Esther.

The scene seems influenced by a very long ancient Near Eastern tradition of the representation of kingship that continued in various forms through Achaemenid, Parthian and Sassanian depictions, being particularly influenced by the long-standing iconic tradition of the legitimate king sitting on his throne.[44] It is particularly relevant in this painting that Esther is enthroned too, which is in stark contrast to the typical image of the monarch enthroned alone. The authority of Esther in the panel is consistent with the one accorded to her in the Book of Esther when she is firmly established upon her throne following Haman's defeat. The portrayal of the enthroned Esther connotes authority, even though her throne does not evidence the multiple steps and high elevation of that of the king's, which in certain respects maintains the gender hierarchies of the time so that the king remains the king after all.[45] Worthy of note is that among all of the figures, Esther alone wears a crown, which reinforces her significance.

Between the scenes of the elevation of Mordecai and that of the Persian rulers are four men dressed in Hellenistic costumes common to the area (cf. those of Moses), with hands extended in greeting or commendation.[46] We regard them as a way of bringing into the scene the Durene Jews and especially those at the Synagogue looking on vicariously, empathetically partaking in the two scenes as it were, and appreciating it.[47] Arguably, the female maidservant in Hellenistic/Roman attire serving Queen Esther functions similarly. If understood correctly, the Durene Jews put themselves in the picture. Just as the Durene Jews enter the visual world of the painting as eastern Ro-

---

[43] Hazan, "Les femmes salvatrices," 205, 207–8.

[44] Cf. Dalia Tawil, "The Enthroned King Ahasuerus at Dura in Light of the Iconography of Kingship in Iran," *BASOR* 250 (1983): 57–78.

[45] Notice also what seems to be a raised right hand, and expression of greeting that also communicates the position of the power of the greeter. Cf. with the visual representation of Libbali-sharrat, Queen of Assyria, wife of Assurbanipal in the famous banquet scene in which she and her husband are both at the garden. On these and related issues, see Ludovico Portuese, "A Gender-Centered Perspective on Manners and Etiquette for Understanding the Historical Role of the Assyrian Queen," *Kaskal* 19 (2022): 50–52.

[46] Tawil, "The Purim Panel," 104. The analysis here represents a departure from her suggestion that the men represent Palestinian Jews.

[47] This also holds true if the four men represent the leadership of the Synagogue. When seen in this way, they would serve as representatives of the whole community.

man/Hellenistic men and women,[48] they also, simultaneously, gaze and appreciate the Persians of old that appear in the images. Similarly, some actual Persians (Jewish or not) who physically came to the Synagogue and looked at the scene, expressed their appreciation as well, by physically inscribing their sentiments on the painted panel.[49] Since the latter became part and parcel of the panel, the outcome is one in which past and present, Roman/Hellenistic and Persian, and Jews and non-Jews are interwoven at multiple levels.

The relative size of all the main characters (including the four men) is approximately the same.[50] But Mordecai on the left and Esther on the right frame the entire panel. Moreover, the images of both reach higher in the panel than all others, drawing particular attention to the Jewish heroes of the biblical story. It is worth mentioning that Queen Esther reaches higher than the Persian king in the vertical axis, but her crown is just slightly lower than the cap on Mordecai's head, which confirms the gender hierarchies mentioned above. Nevertheless, the figure of Esther is located directly next to the Torah niche, which grants her a certain significance within the panel.

Within the three or four panels in which women appear in the Synagogue,[51] the Purim panel is unique. For instance, not only is Esther portrayed in a position of authority, but she wears a distinctive crown, in which the three towers of a fortified city protrude from a golden wreath. Esther bears the city-wall or mu-

---

[48] This is clearly manifested by their clothes and hairstyle.

[49] See e.g., Fine, "Jewish Identity," 113–16. Persian visitors inscribed their presence and appreciation in the Purim scene and in those related to resurrection, i.e., Elijah reviving the son and Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. The attention of these visitors to scenes involving bodily resurrection may be related to the presence of this concept in Zoroastrianism and thus in Sassanian Persia. For recent treatments of the Zoroastrian concept of bodily resurrection, see Mihaela Timuş, "Resurrection, Zoroastrianism," in *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History: Asia and Africa*, ed. Daniel T. Potts et al. (Wiley Online Library, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119399919.eahaa00043; and Domenico Agostini, "Eschatology, in Zoroastrianism," ibid., https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119399919.eahaa00042.

[50] Contrast with that of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt and parting the sea.

[51] The other two are the depiction of the daughter of Pharaoh as she retrieves Moses from the river and the widow in the panel depicting the story of Elijah reviving her son. A fourth one depicting the Akedah possibly contained an image of Sarah, see Steinberg, "Women and the Dura-Europos Synagogue Paintings." Hazan ("Les femmes salvatrices") counts only three panels with women and excludes the panel of the sacrifice of Isaac that (possibly) pictures Sarah. Given the ratio between men and women in the HB, the Dura Europos paintings show a somewhat better representation of women and women's stories (i.e., women in three or four of twenty-eight). From a qualitative approach, however, the prominent presence of Esther and the important portrayal of the daughter of Pharaoh, who is depicted as personally retrieving Moses (contrary to the MT), demand particular attention as we detail below.

ral crown of the goddess Tyche, the deity of fortune and prosperity of Hellenistic cities.[52] Esther's association with Tyche is reinforced by her posture (including one hand raised and one hand on her belly), her clothing, and her crown.[53] She is the queen of the city, possibly the Persian city of Susa, and she ensures the safety of the inhabitants of her city, near and far.

The panel depicting the Purim story is located on the West wall directly to the right of the Torah shrine, and the enthroned Esther (outlined in an oval) is the figure located closest to the Torah niche/ark from that side.[54] Its counterpart, just on the opposite side of the niche, is the prophet/priest Samuel crowning David (outlined in white), who shared his name with the main leader (ארכון *archon* in Aramaic, and "presbyter of the Jews" in Greek) of the Synagogue at the time, i.e., Samuel (b. yed[a']ya) the priest who probably had his seat/bench adjacent to the mural (fig. 3).[55]

The location of the panel of the story of the triumph of Mordecai and Esther in the most significant location of the synagogue next to the Torah niche raises a number of questions about its purpose, such as what does the Purim/Esther panel do in its prominent position? In particular, what message did it convey in its placement to those Durene Jews who were 'seeing' the murals at the Synagogue time and again? Which sets of meanings would the allocation of that place have evoked or brought to the attention of the people looking at it? Which stories were likely to

---

[52] Xeravits, "Goddesses in the Synagogue?" 272–75. Dating back to Jewish tradition, the crown has also been associated with that of a newlywed bride. Xeravits, correctly in our view, argues against the association with a bride because the scene does not represent the marriage of Esther to the Persian king, but rather her reign at his side, as detailed from chapter six and onwards in the Book of Esther.

[53] Hazan, "Les femmes salvatrices," 205–8.

[54] A reconstruction with the original murals exists in the National Museum of Damascus, Syria and copies are on display in the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv, Israel. See reports of the excavations by R. Mesnil du Buisson, *Les peintures de la synagogue de Doura-Europos, 245-256 après J.-C.* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1939); Carl H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue: Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report VIII, Part 1* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1956).

Xeravits argues that the West Wall contains a message that underlines the special relationship between Yahweh and the people as well as the assurance of the presence of God through the covenant. According to his interpretation of the central axis of the western wall, it emphasizes: (1) the importance of the cult, which is an appropriate reaction to (2) the enduring stability of the relationship between God and his people and (3) the fulfilment of God's promises. See Géza G. Xeravits, "The Message of the West Wall of Dura Europos," *ZDMG* 167 (2017): 105.

[55] See Fine, "Jewish Identity," esp. 108–9, 112. For inscriptions mentioning this archon and the rest of the leadership of the building project (and the community), see Stern, "Mapping Devotion," 481, 487–89 and bibliography.

have been recalled?[56] These are the questions to which we now turn.

5. THE LOCATION OF THE PURIM PANEL IN THE SYNAGOGUE AND THE QUESTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS THAT IT RAISES

At first the location of the panel might seem odd. Surely, the Book of Esther was included among the 'divinely inspired' books (i.e., 'the Written Torah'), and provided the basic ground for the celebration of Purim on which the book was supposed to be read.[57] If the scroll of Esther was read on Purim, which is likely, and if Purim was particularly important in this border area (see below), then it is possible that such an independent scroll was placed inside the *aron*, i.e., the wooden box containing 'Torah' located at the Torah-niche, the house/home of the *aron*.[58]

---

[56] All the panels recall biblical stories due to their respective contents, but their locations are not irrelevant, esp. in this case of such a prominent place to either side of the Torah niche.

[57] Purim is mentioned in Megillat Ta'anit, Adar, "On the 14th and 15th thereof [i.e., of Adar]. Purim, on which it is not allowed to mourn." This text (not its scholion) is dated earlier than the Synagogue. The even earlier multiple versions and additions to the Book of Esther suggest that already in the late Hellenistic period it was an ideologically/theologically important story that some felt the need to 'normalize' to conform to the general expectations of the time for Jewish behavior.

The ritual reading of the Megillat Purim is mentioned and discussed in the Mishna, a text slightly earlier than the mural paintings in Dura Europos. See m. Meg. 1. It is the only text outside the Pentateuch that, according to the Mishna and later rabbinic texts and tradition, Jews are commanded to ritually read in the Synagogue.

Although there was agreement that Esther was a divinely inspired text, according to b. Meg. 7a there was a debate among the rabbis on whether the status of the written text of Esther is the same as other books in the Tanakh. That said, it is important to underline that the question was, however, never on whether the contents of the book are 'Torah' and should be read in public on Purim, but rather about the status of the written scroll of Esther. Significantly, Esther is included among the 'biblical' books whose 'authorship' is reported in b. B. Bat. 14b–15a (15a). Moreover, according to y. Meg chapter 1 halachah 4, Resh Lakish thought that although all the prophetic books (both former and latter prophets) and all the Writings will eventually be nullified in the messianic future (a common position exemplified in the text by the statement of R. Yohanan), the Book of Esther will be the only exception due to the permanent command to read it (which he based on Esth 9:28). In this regard it will, thus, share the fate of the five Pentateuchal books. Rambam was of the same opinion. See *Mishne Torah*, הלכות מגילה וחנוכה (Laws concerning Megillah and Hanukkah), 2.18.

[58] Though the question of in which language the scroll would have been written (and read) remains open (see m. Meg. 2.2, according to which people who speak a 'foreign language' may read it in that language and fulfill their obligation). The question of whether a scroll of Esther written in, e.g., Aramaic (written in square script) would be allowed in the aron in Dura-Europos remains open, but our guess is that it could have been.

But neither the story of Purim nor its main heroes, Esther and Mordecai, were among the most prominent stories and characters of the past evoked by the 'divinely inspired books' as a collection. Moreover, they do not appear in the Torah (in the sense of the Pentateuch).[59]

A common explanation for the presence of the Purim panel in its particular placement on the West Wall of the Durene synagogue focuses on the location of Dura Europos itself—at the boundary with Persia and in a region in which Persian cultural influence was pervasive, and clearly visible in the murals of the town's synagogue. Moreover, the town was formerly in Persian (Parthian) hands. Even in Roman times, of course, caravans would come and go, and so also Persian visitors. A Persian benefactor(s) of the Synagogue is clearly attested by explicit inscriptions,[60] and Persian visitors to the Synagogue left comments in the murals.[61]

In other words, this approach argues that the story of Esther and Mordecai was important for Durene Jews because of cultural geography and social contacts; because the story of Purim happened 'close' to their place, as it were, and is to a point 'their story' as Jews in Diaspora.[62] All these matters probably contributed in some way to the placement of the panel in its prominent position, but they do not shed light on the meanings that those looking repeatedly to the Purim scene in a way informed by its central placement would have called to mind. Moreover, such explanations do not account for the presence of Esther just by images so prominently associated with the Temple, or the framing of the Torah shrine itself, which conjures both the presence and absence of the Temple, between Samuel and Esther.

Another group of proposals addresses the position of the Purim panel from a perspective informed by the subaltern position of the Durene Jews and other groups in the town. One version of this approach addresses the panel and its importance in terms of cultural resistance, of standing consciously or unconsciously against culturally (including religious) hegemonic positions. Accordingly, the panel is an example of cultural resistance, mainly to Roman cultural hegemony, but carrying the ability to resist Persian ideology as well.[63] Another, and less likely ap-

---

[59] Thus, and as anticipated, central figures such as Moses and David are more attested to in the visual world conjured by the murals than Esther or Mordecai. What seems 'odd' and thus draws attention to itself is the placement of the Purim scene in such a key-place next to the ark and the choice of Esther and Samuel as the figures to bracket the ark.

[60] Arshakh (in Aramaic), who may be the same individual named Arsaces (in Greek).

[61] See, e.g., Fine, "Jewish Identity," 113–18.

[62] See the analysis above. Cf. the cross-cultural tendency to establish local sacred places close to the location at which the people of the area 'know' that miracles took place in the past, or to those on which holy men or women lived or were buried.

[63] Elsner, "Cultural Resistance." Cf. Joshua Ezra Burns, "The Spe-

proach in our view, proposes to understand the panel and its location as a declaration of strong political support for Rome again Sassanian Persia by a minority that has benefited from the former and wishes to express their thanks for their benefactors.[64]

Either way, it is difficult not to observe some elements of cultural resistance, and of the usually accompanying re-appropriation and reconfiguration of the hegemonic center. One simple example suffices for our purposes. In both the mural and the Book of Esther, the Persian king remains in power, but the hegemonic center is reconfigured so as to include two prominent leading figures from the subaltern group, Esther and Mordecai, who assume the roles of Queen and vizier in the biblical story.[65]

One may perhaps consider that some regional memories of Julia Domna who attained a significant degree of power in the Roman Empire as its Empress may have colored the imagination of local Jews when imagining a powerful Queen Esther.[66] Obviously, the idea of a Roman (or Sassanian) Jewish Empress (or Queen) represents a far more utopian longing than the actual, historical possibility of a Jewish version of Julia Domna, and thus constitutes a form of ideological, cultural resistance.[67]

Although all these matters contributed to the importance of the Purim panel, they still do not explain or make anything of

---

cial Purim and the Reception of the Book of Esther in the Hellenistic and Early Roman Eras," *JSJ* 37 (2006): 1–34, here 23–24, according to which "The artist offers a subtle protest to the suppression of Parthian culture, preserving memory of the Jews' traditional allegiance to the Persian monarchy" (23).

[64] Sabar, "The Purim Panel." There are plenty of examples from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which a hegemonic power has advanced or was perceived as having advanced the well-being of a minority group and the latter responded with strong loyalty.

[65] Note also that Esther appoints Mordecai to oversee Haman's holdings in Esth 8:2. Increased awareness of the significant role of Esther in establishing and maintaining peace and security for the Jews comes out strongly in the commentary by Jill Middlemas, *Commentary on the Book of Esther and the Additions* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, forthcoming). Cf. the story of Joseph in Egypt, but notice that the latter leads to a Pharaoh who does not know Joseph. The story of Esther either in the Book of Esther or in the mural do not depict anything of that sort. Note also the main gist of Purim and Passover. Both relate to deliverance from an existential peril that originates from a powerful, hegemonic king. Esther and Mordecai are human agents of deliverance, to an extent structurally comparable to Moses. Moses, however, led Israel out of Egypt; Esther and Mordecai made Israel safe in Persia. Whereas Joseph eventually leads to Moses and the Exodus in the book of Exodus, Mordecai and Esther in the Book of Esther do not lead to a need for a Moses-figure. In fact, as mentioned above, within the world of the book, they play a role (partially) comparable to that of Moses. On the Exodus, Moses, and the Book of Esther, see Gilles Gerleman, *Esther* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973).

[66] See n. 15 above.

[67] That said, the process of imagining the enthroned, powerful Esther of memory may have used elements of images and memories about Julia Domna. Notably, there is no textual support for Jews valuing or referring to her, but only to her son, Antoninus.

the connoted link between Esther and the Torah niche/shrine, which is also a link to sacred, written texts and indirectly to the murals. Furthermore, these matters shed no clear light on the link between Esther and the Temple in Jerusalem, nor, for that matter, on the framing of the Torah niche with Esther on the one side and Samuel anointing David on the other.

We would like to propose that another piece of knowledge from Jewish traditions associated with Esther may have played an important role, succeeds at providing a plausible response to the questions mentioned above, is consistent with a generally overlooked detail in the Purim scene, and is compatible with the appearance in visual form of traditions and stories that were later textualized in the midrashim. There is a long and widely attested tradition according to which Esther and Ahasuerus had a son, namely Darius, the king who built the Temple,[68] even if the scroll of Esther contains no reference to the offspring of the royal couple.[69]

As expected, the explicit name Ahasuerus for the king appears in the HB numerous times in the Book of Esther, but unexpectedly it is found in two contexts outside of the story. Ahasuerus appears once, as mentioned above, in Dan 9:1 in a text that explicitly refers to him as the father of Darius,[70] and another time in Ezra 4:6, where the text implicitly conveys the same message. According to the narrative world of Ezra 4–6, Ahasuerus is the king who ordered that the building of the Temple be halted.[71] The order was eventually rescinded by king Darius, who is implicitly presented as his successor. When seen from the perspective of readers whose knowledge about Achaemenid Persia comes only from biblical sources, it stands to reason that Darius, the son of Esther and Ahasuerus, was the king who allowed the building of the Temple.[72]

---

[68] See recently, Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 177–81.

[69] The Book of Esther, in general, tends not to explicitly refer to children of any of the main characters, except, and for obvious narrative reasons, Haman. This does not mean that the readers of the book would have necessarily imagined these main characters as childless. In fact, given social expectations at the time, most likely they were imagined as having children at the time of the story or afterwards.

[70] As it is well known, Dan 9:1 not only identifies Darius as the son of Ahasuerus, but also both as "of the seed of Media." This is likely an early, literary attempt of harmonization with Dan 6:1. The reference, however, caused *some* readers over the centuries to ascertain that there were two different Dariuses, each one of them born to a man named Ahasuerus, and two Ahasueruses who each fathered a son named Darius. According to these readers, the first one was the Darius, son of Ahasuerus, the Mede (to which they relate the references in Dan 6:1 and 9:1), and the second was Darius, son of Ahasuerus (and Esther) who was the king who built the Temple. This tradition is later exemplified in, e.g., Rashi on Dan 9:1; Ibn Ezra on Dan 6:1 and 9:1.

[71] Later midrashim associated this order with the rise of Haman or with Vashti and her downfall. Altogether, they contribute indirectly to the identification of Darius as the son of Esther.

[72] This tradition has a very long history that even reaches to some

Although the tradition about Darius as the son of Esther is attested in written form in our record only as late as Leviticus Rabbah (see Lev. Rab. 13.5),[73] there are plenty of other comparable stories or details thereof that are unequivocally attested to in the paintings of Dura Europos. These stories usually became textualized later than the Synagogue murals themselves, but in some cases at comparable times, and in rare instances earlier than the Synagogue. It is worth stressing that in these rare cases, narratives and characters became textualized more than once, first centuries earlier than the Synagogue and then later than the Synagogue, without any indication that their attestation in the latter or in later textualized versions were directly dependent on the text in which they first appeared.

Two examples may be brought to bear at this point. The first concerns the case of Hiel and the snake, which is unequivocally present in the Synagogue murals, in more or less contem-

---

groups today. For some of its attestations over time, see Tosafot Rosh Hashanah 3b:5; Rashi on Dan 10:2 (see לדריוש הפרסי בן אסתר שבנה הבית) and also Rashi (or attributed to Rashi) on Dan 1:1; 4:24; 8:21; cf. the comments on Hag 1:1 by Joseph Kara, David Kimchi, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, etc.

The lack of (proper historical) knowledge of the Achaemenid period, except from what could be gathered solely on the basis of some readings/understandings of biblical texts, is clearly evident in rabbinic (and later) sources. For instance, Seder Olam Rabba 30 allocates only thirty-four years to the Persian empire from the building of the Temple to its fall. The very same idea is stated in b.ʿAbod. Zar. 9a, a text written in an area that was strongly influenced by later Persian culture. According to the rabbinic tradition the total number of years of what we would call the Achaemenid(/Teispid) empire (i.e., from Cyrus' first year) was fifty-two, about half the time that was allocated to both the Hasmonean and Herodian dynasties. Of course, these chronological pointers required the rabbis to engage in a widespread effort of harmonization of the 'biblical' data – arguing, for example, that since Artaxerxes is a royal name taken by other known kings, no particular years should be allocated to him/them. Similarly, within that chronology, Ahasuerus' eighteen regnal years (see Esth 3:7) must obviously be placed before the building of the Temple in the days of Esther's and Ahasuerus's son (see Hag 1:1; year two of Darius), but as mentioned above there are only eighteen years left. Obviously, these matters require a separate discussion that cannot be carried out here, and which, in any case, has no direct bearing on the argument advanced. On the 'rabbinic chronology' and its implication in terms of world shaping, see Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, 177–81.

Of course, the lack of (proper) historical knowledge of this period did not impede the rabbinic sages in constructing memories about it and its kings on the basis of Jewish and non-Jewish traditions that were known to them. See, e.g., Geoffrey Herman, "Ahasuerus, the Former Stable-Master of Belshazzar, and the Wicked Alexander of Macedon: Two Parallels between the Babylonian Talmud and Persian Sources," *AJSRev* 29 (2005): 283–97, here 292–93.

[73] On the approximate date of the Leviticus Rabbah as a whole, see Burton L. Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates: Studies in Midrash Leviticus Rabbah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 37–38 and bibliography. Visotzky prefers a mid-fifth century date.

porary Syriac Christian traditions, and well-attested in later rabbinic sources.[74]

The second example concerns the legendary story of the daughter of Pharaoh reaching her hand to retrieve baby Moses. The story of Moses's rescue by Pharaoh's daughter is an excellent example of a tradition that emerged out of a particular (mis)understanding of the unvocalized biblical text, namely reading in Exod 2:5 אַמָּתָהּ instead of אֲמָתָהּ, and thus "she sent/stretched out her arm" instead of "she sent her maid."[75] This understanding had an important impact on the image and construction of the character of the daughter of Pharaoh as presented in the Durene scene. While the tradition appears textualized in Targum Onqelos and the Vulgate, most significantly it also appears in written form in Ezekiel the Tragedian from the third or second century BCE.[76] Clearly it is very unlikely that the

---

[74] See Eleonora Serra, "Entre art et exégèse: le sacrifice au mont Carmel dans deux panneaux de la synagogue de Doura Europos," *Judaïsme Ancien–Ancient Judaism* 9 (2021): 197–230; Gutmann, "Illustrated Midrash," 95–96; Hachlili, "The Dura-Europos Synagogue Wall Paintings," 413; Moon, "Nudity and Narrative," 609–10. See Exod. Rab. 15.15; Yalkut Shimoni 214.

Serra (op. cit.) refers to Hiel in Dura Europos as a clear case in which traditions that were later textualized in rabbinic literature were common to both Durene Jews and Syrian Christians. It is in this context that we may turn our attention to the key expression מלך ברוך X העלסם, "blessed is X / א [i.e., Adonai] king of the world/eternity" in the (most likely) liturgical Hebrew text found by the Synagogue, which is indisputably very close to the usual rabbinic blessing formula, "Blessed are you, Adonai, our God, king of the world/eternity." See Fine, *Art & Judaism*, 174–85, text on 177; Reuven Kimelman, "Blessing Formulae and Divine Sovereignty in Rabbinic Liturgy," in *Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue: Studies in the History of Jewish Prayer*, ed. Ruth Langer and Steven Fine (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 17–22; and idem, "Again Blessing Formulae and Divine Sovereignty in Rabbinic Liturgy," in *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins until 200 C.E.: Papers Presented at an International Conference at Lund University, October 14–17, 2001*, ed. Birger Olsson and Magnus Zetterholm (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003), 339–44. But the formula that was likely used by Durene Jews in their liturgy seems reminiscent of one appearing also in Syrian Christianity (*Apostolic Constitutions*) at approximately the same time (Kimelman, "Blessing Formulae," 17–18 n. 70 and bibliography; and idem, "Again Blessing Formulae," 340 n. 87). This is not the place for a study of areas of overlap and general cultural engagement between Syrian Christians and Jews in the third century CE, but the Dura Europos Synagogue may play a role in this regard. See Serra and bibliography cited there. (For the historical background of the formula in the Durene liturgical text itself and its antecedents, see also 1 Chr 29:10; Kimelman, "Blessing Formulae" and "Again Blessing Formulae.")

[75] See Stefan Schorch, "Rewritten Bible and the Vocalization of the Biblical Text," in *Rewritten Bible after Fifty Years: Texts, Terms, or Techniques? A Last Dialogue with Geza Vermes*, ed. József Zsengellér (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 195–214, here 137–38.

[76] "[I]mmediately when she [Pharaoh's daughter] saw me [Moses], she took me, lifted me from the water" (Frag. 1,20); Carl R. Holladay,

Durene Jews learned about the tradition from their readings of Ezekiel the Tragedian, but this example shows how these narratives or elements thereof may appear in written form independently from one another across many centuries and in various historical contexts.[77] Although examples may be multiplied,[78] the present ones suffice to make the point that the lack of written textual attestation is not a good reason to assume that a tradition was invented only later.

The proposal that the Durene Jews 'read' the scene in a way informed by their 'knowledge' that Esther's son would be the Darius who was to build the Temple or allow it to be rebuilt is consistent with the depiction and location of Esther on the panel. Esther is located in a prominent position next to the Torah shrine and her crown mimics the design of the Temple's menorah above the niche. Moreover, the position of Esther's left hand on her belly in the scene may have been read as a hint to her future son and specifically to the one (Darius) who will lead to the re-building of the Temple in Jewish tradition. The proposal resolves the problem of the connection between Esther and the Temple imagery. Given the longing for the Temple in the period and the intertwining of memories of past, present, and future, the portrayal of Esther sheds light upon her role as the person who not only (a) saved the Jews directly in her time, (b) led them through her progeny to a much greater deliverance—the rebuilding of the Temple and the cancellation of the extremely bleak period with no material Temple that began with Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem,[79] but also (c) provided a model and hope for a future, peaceful re-building of the Temple that is consistent with the ideology of non-violence expressed elsewhere in the Dura-Europos synagogue.[80] As such, it fits well with the social and historical circumstances of the Durene Jews (and other Jews in the Roman and Sassanian empires), and their awareness of the extreme calamities that resulted from (other forms of) 'messianism' in their not so distant past.

The two scenes framing the Torah shrine that serve as a memorial for the Temple and the liturgical focal point of the Synagogue also easily relate to each other, once we take into ac-

---

trans., *Poets*, vol. 3 of *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 349.

[77] For a similar example, see the image of the twelve springs of water that emerge from the central rock at the Israelite encampment in the desert, which is undoubtedly present in the Synagogue's murals, and see again what Ezekiel the tragedian wrote: ". . . drawing twelve springs of water from a single rock" (Frag. 16,20); trans. Holladay, op. cit., 399. The same image is textualized in Num. Rab. 19:26; and Sura 7.160, cf. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Num 21:18. It also occurs in Byzantine art.

[78] See, e.g., Gutmann, "Illustrated Midrash," and bibliography.

[79] A point explicitly textualized in later midrashim. On these matters, see Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, 181, with bibliography and references to sources.

[80] See Schenk, "King David Narratives"; and idem, "Exodus Narrative and Divine Warfare."

count that the people there 'knew' of Esther also as the mother of Darius. The figures of Samuel and Esther are located next to the Torah shrine because both serve as human agents whose actions eventually led to the building of the Temple.[81] Of course, Samuel, the priest, anoints a Davidic king who will build it and Esther gives birth to the Persian (though partially Jewish) son who will rebuild it.[82] Samuel relates to the monarchic period, to the one of the Davidic kings; Esther to the post-destruction period, to the one in which non-Israelite kings provide the way to rebuild the Temple. The characterization of these two periods via the clearly gendered images of the male anointing priest and the pregnant woman is obvious. Further, some among the Durene Jews might have been tempted to relate them, even if they did not have the terminology, to conceptions of the 'warrior masculinity' associated with David and the monarchic period.[83] If this is the case, then the characterization of David (and likely Solomon) through the other panels seems to balance such tendencies, as they emphasized not David the warrior, but, rather, the pious, virtuous, cultic-oriented lyre-player.[84]

If Esther is structurally placed as a comparative and contrastive pair with Samuel, then David and Mordecai serve similar purposes. David is the king of Israel, Mordecai is the honored and powerful 'vizier' appointed by Ahasuerus, a foreign king. The difference between a past monarchic period and being a

---

[81] Although the focus of the present article is on the Temple imagery, the location also seemingly places the rule of Esther and David under the authority of the (interpretation of the) Torah, as is consistent with the so-called "Law of the King" in Deut 17. This was an argument made by Middlemas in the Goldingay, Middlemas and Silverstein talk, "The Esther Story/Purim."

[82] In response to our EABS presentation, Laura Carlson Hasler raised an important point about David being the father of Solomon who is associated with building the Temple in the Kings account as a parallel to Esther being the mother of Darius as the monarch behind the building of the Second Temple. Her point is well taken, but we also want to stress that whether such a parallel existed for the Durene Jews depends on the version of the Temple-building story with which they were familiar. The Kings account stresses the agency of Solomon, while the Chronicles account focuses on David.

[83] Cf. David J. A. Clines, "David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible," *Interested Parties: The Ideologies of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 205 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 212–41.

[84] See Schenk, "King David Narratives." Cf. Géza G. Xeravits, "The Reception of the Figure of David in Late Antique Synagogue Art," in *Figures who Shape Scriptures, Scriptures that Shape Figures: Essays in Honour of Benjamin G. Wright III*, ed. Géza G. Xeravits and Greg Schmidt Goering (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 71–90 (esp. 77–87). As mentioned above, comparisons with a clearly attested, strong grammar governing the construction of main personages of old including David in the Persian and early Hellenistic periods are obvious and rooted in the socio-historical conditions of the subaltern groups remembering them (see Ben Zvi, *Social Memory*, passim).

subaltern group, even if located within the center of empire and exercising much power, cannot be more clearly expressed.[85]

Further, Esther is presented as the (diasporic) enthroned Queen *for* Israel, whether in the homeland or diaspora. Not only does she save the Jews from Haman and his followers, but also becomes instrumental in the rebuilding of the Temple.

From a comparative social memory perspective, such a way of remembering Queen Esther is not surprising. The Jewish character of Esther encouraged the Durene Jews to regard her as one of their ingroup. Thus, they would tend to imagine that she and they shared some key commonalities.[86] Further, the Durene Jews most likely 'read' the murals with (not against) the grain and noted, thereby, the central ideological place of the Temple (and Jerusalem) within the world communicated by the wall paintings and its prominence on the Torah shrine itself,[87] which was located directly next to the Purim panel. In fact, the murals drew attention to and strengthened these ideological (already existing) tenets among the Durene Jews. This being so, it is very likely that they imagined a Queen Esther for whom the Temple and by extension, Jerusalem, were very important.[88] Given the emphasis on the regal status of Esther in the mural, it is not difficult to conceive that the community could have imagined and remembered her as a person who not only cares about the Temple and Jerusalem, but also as one who would like to use

---

[85] There is, of course, the contrast between the Benjaminite Saulide line and the Judahite Davidic line too, but this discussion requires a separate essay.

[86] Notice the visual characterization of the Jewish heroes of the past in ways that recall self-images of those looking at the murals. Of course, imagining key personages of old in terms of the present of the reminiscing in-group is a ubiquitous cultural (and social memory) phenomenon and never stops at the level of visual characterization. See, e.g., the multiple Jesuses that various communities of Christians, even in the present, have conjured.

[87] Olga Hazan regards the importance of Durene Esther to be underscored by the pictorial similarities between the queen's crown and the Menorah, which is one of the ritual objects illustrated in the Torah shrine. Hazan makes this suggestion on the basis of the similarity of Esther's posture and clothing to an image of Tyche found in the Temple of Bel. Tyche is the goddess of destiny, protection, and deliverance. Hazan observes that Tyche, like Esther, is also located next to a scene of ritual (ritual being implied by the three items of the Temple located on the Torah niche) and her crown is shaped like one of the images above the Torah shrine–the Menorah. See Hazan, "Les femmes salvatrices," 198.

[88] Cf. with the similar processes that led to the production of the LXX additions to Esther and the ways in which they (re)shape her character. For some introduction to the discussion, see, e.g. Jill Middlemas, "The Greek Esthers and the Search for History: Some Preliminary Observations," in *Between Evidence and Ideology: Essays on the History of Ancient Israel Read at the Joint Meeting of the Society for Old Testament Study and the Oud Testamentisch Werkgezelschap*, ed. Bob Becking and Lester L. Grabbe (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 145–63; idem, *Commentary on the Book of Esther*.

her status (and power) for their benefit, and consequently, for 'transtemporal' Israel. In other words, within the social and ideological world of the Durene Jews (and many other Jewish groups through history), there existed an implied preference for construing and remembering Esther in this way.[89]

All that said, Esther could be remembered only as a Jewish (and Persian) queen, not as a queen of Israel. Neither she nor Mordecai were or could, for that matter, be imagined as kings/queens *of* Israel/the Jews, even if they serve as their protectors (nor is Ahasuerus). David was imagined and remembered as both a king *of* and *for* Israel. He was conceived of as a divinely appointed king of Israel as well as the person who made the necessary preparations for the Temple to be built *for* all Israel (see esp. Chronicles). Similarly, he is construed as one who thought and cared not only for their contemporaries, but also for later, far away generations that will be in Exile (1 Chr 16:35).[90]

In sum, the proposal that the Durene Jews looked at the murals in a way informed by Esther, mother of Darius, is not only reasonable but also resolves the weaknesses of other explanations for the prominent location of the Esther panel. In this way, it complements, rather than nullifies, other theories of its placement. It also confers the murals with additional important meanings (which are widely attested in written form in later sources) and above all serves to provide hope to those looking at the mural, with its location just next to the Torah shrine.

It goes without saying that the proposal advanced here, together with the panel itself effectively reinforced and instilled, via highly memorable images, a memory of (old) Persia, its kings, one of its queens, their interactions with the Jews of old Persian times with which the Durene Jews identified, and the role of the Persian court which at a crucial moment in time, according to the world portrayed in the panel, included Jews in prominent places. But the past was not just the past. That which was remembered provided a template of hope for those who longed for the future rebuilding of the Temple.

---

[89] A similar preference contributed to the popularity in many Jewish circles, across time and space, of the idea that Darius, the king who built the Temple, was the son of Esther and Ahasuerus.

[90] See Ehud Ben Zvi, "Who Knew What? The Construction of the Monarchic Past in Chronicles and Implications for the Intellectual Setting of Chronicles," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.*, ed. Oded Lipschits, Gary N. Knoppers and Rainer Albertz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 349–60.

Fig 1: Close up of the Torah Niche, courtesy of the Dura-Europos Collection, Yale University Art Gallery, ArtStor Public Collections

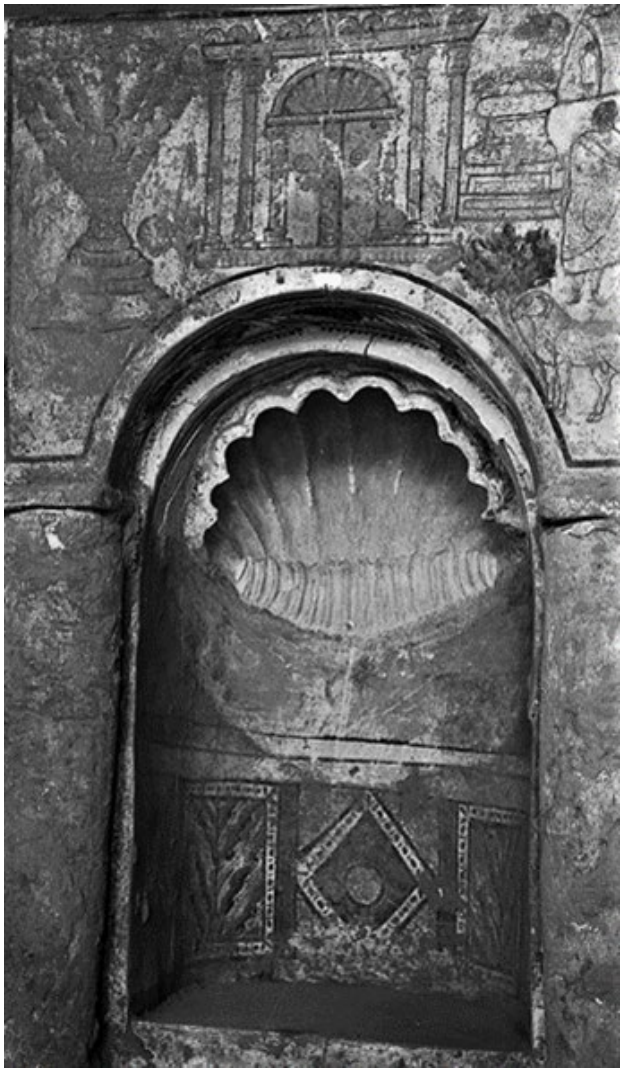

Fig. 2: The Purim or Esther panel

Fig. 3: View of the West Wall