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Author(s): Rachel Wischnitzer-Bernstein

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## THE SAMUEL CYCLE IN THE WALL DECORATION OF THE SYNAGOGUE AT DURA-EUROPOS<sup>1</sup>

RACHEL WISCHNITZER-BERNSTEIN

M. du Mesnil du Buisson was one of the first to realise that the paintings of the synagogue at Dura-Europos do not offer only an accumulation of disconnected biblical scenes. He maintained that the paintings constitute coherent sets.

In his recent volume M. du Mesnil<sup>2</sup> has offered an ideological scheme which, in his opinion, underlies the paintings arranged in three registers about the walls of the main chamber of the synagogue. According to this scheme the upper register is meant to evoke national aspects of Jewish history, the middle register would deal with liturgical matters and the lower register would tend to convey to the worshipper some moral teachings.

As stimulating as this tripartite scheme evolved by M. du Mesnil may appear at first, one feels surprised to find in a synagogue of the Roman period rationalistic constructions of a general character instead of visionary elaborations reminiscent of the apocalyptic writings and congenial with the rabbinic teachings of the period.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The synagogue at Dura-Europos was unearthed in 1932 to 1935 by an expedition organized by Professor M. I. Rostovtzeff of Yale University and conducted by Yale University in cooperation with the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters. The synagogue has been found in a relatively good state of preservation under the mud brick embankment along the city wall erected by the Romans to resist a Persian attack in 256 C.E. The city had been deserted shortly after its occupation. Cf. M. I. Rostovtzeff, Bellinger, Hopkins, Welles, *The Excavations at Dura Europos, Preliminary Report* (C. H. Kraeling, Pearson, Crosby, Obermann, Pagliaro, Torrey), vol. VI, 1936. C. H. Kraeling has dealt especially with the wall decorations of the synagogue at Dura.

<sup>2</sup> *Les Peintures de la synagogue de Doura-Europos 245-256 après J.-C.*, Rome, 1939, p. 15; bibliography of du Mesnil's writings on the subject on p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the first centuries of the Christian era. The age of the Tannaim*, 3 vol., 1927, 1930.

Let us examine a few scenes in the light of M. du Mesnil's hypothesis.

There is for instance "The Judgment of King Solomon" displayed on the top register. It is not quite apparent why this scene should be assigned to a national cycle rather than to a set of pictures meant to convey moral teachings.

As to the Ezekiel panel on the lower register I believe I have shown in my study "The Conception of the Resurrection in the Synagogue at Dura-Europos"<sup>4</sup> that the Resurrection of the Dry Bones pictured there was conceived by the artist in terms of the raising of the twelve tribes and the Restoration of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, in close agreement with the text of Ezekiel c. 37. In my judgment, emphasis is laid in this scene on the national idea rather than on the expression of the reward and the joys awaiting the individual in a world to come.

This means that the Ezekiel panel would belong to a national cycle rather than to a "cycle moralisateur" and would have been assigned a place in the top register should the proposed scheme be correct. Also there is no conclusive evidence, so it seems, favoring the suggestion that the middle register is connected with liturgical ceremonial. We do not know of any specific observances meant to be illustrated by this set of panels, nor have the repeated representations of the Tabernacle within this register been explained.

The object of this study is to analyse a group of panels and to find out whether they are meant to convey any specific ideas and images beyond their literal sense.

The right half of the middle register presents a good point of departure in so far as the scenes displayed there follow Scripture rather closely. We are met here with something we may consider as a continuous (in the broader sense) illustration of a portion of the first book of Samuel.

Let us review the panels proceeding according to the sequence adopted in my study "The Conception . . . , etc." for the right part of the lower register, i. e. from the front (east) wall toward the back (west) wall moving to the right from the central front door.

<sup>4</sup> *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. LX, 1941.

Starting at the east wall where there are no paintings preserved on the level of the second register, we turn to the north side of the synagogue. The width of the north part of the middle register is taken by two panels.

The first panel is badly damaged and shows only the lower portion of the figures. Moving from right to left there is a youth in pink trousers and white shoes slightly turned to the left and an adult figure in a white and red checkered straight-shaped garment of stiff material (suggested by lack of folds) and black boots standing in almost frontal posture beside a crenellated wall.

M. du Mesnil<sup>5</sup> has identified the scene as "The Infant Samuel brought to the Temple of Shilo by his mother Hannah"<sup>6</sup> (I Sam.1). [Fig. 1]. Judging by the attire of the adult figure I hesitate to adopt the identification of the adult figure with a woman. The checkered pattern occurs in the synagogue frescoes only twice, namely on the garments of Moses and Aaron, both on the panels of the middle register we are dealing with. In the scene "Moses and the twelve streams" Moses is wearing a checkered long sleeved *chiton* and *himation* in orange contrasted with white and violet set against brown. Aaron shown in the adjacent panel, "Aaron and the Tabernacle", has the checkered pattern in green and black on the lining of his mantle. If it can be inferred from these instances that the checkered material was used for sacerdotal vestments only we would identify the adult person accompanying the infant Samuel with Eli, the priest of the Sanctuary at Shilo (I Sam.1) to whom Samuel was brought by his mother. There is however no garment depicted on the frescoes which would be in all points identical with the one on our controversial figure. Moses is wearing the long draped Greco-Roman garment, Aaron is clad in long trousers, a long tunic and a cloak of stiff material, fastened on the chest with a jeweled fibula. The women wear dresses marked by more or less elaborate drapery folds.

<sup>5</sup> It is my pleasant duty to express my thanks to M. du Mesnil du Buisson who put at my disposal during my stay in Paris in 1939 the illustrations from his book on the Paintings of the Synagogue at Dura then being printed in Rome.

<sup>6</sup> Du Mesnil, *op. cit.*, p. 70 ff.

It is not possible to tell with absolute certainty which figure, the priest or the mother of Samuel, was meant to be pictured, as the photograph of the faded painting cannot be consulted on this point and the line drawing made on the assumption that the figure is a woman is not conclusive. However the correct identification of the adult figure is rather of minor importance as it does not involve the interpretation of the Samuel panel in any essential point.

The adjoining panel to the left illustrates two episodes recorded in chapter 4 of the first book of Samuel: The Battle of the Israelites with the Philistines at Ebenezer and the Carrying away of the Tabernacle by the Philistines. [Fig. 2]

The battle scene is arranged in three slightly overlapping zones. The middle zone exhibits figures of larger size which thus assume particular importance. Two horsemen are shown in single combat charging one another with levelled lances. The right rider is mounted on a white, the left on a black horse. As far as can be judged from the drawing of M. du Mesnil (our fig. 2) (the photograph is not very clear) the left rider shows a more restrained attitude, whereas the posture of the warrior to the right is more aggressive. It is not improbable that the divergent characterising of the rivals was meant to indicate the issue of the encounter. We would identify the right horseman with the victorious Philistine, the left one with the defeated Israelite. The white horse rider wears a helmet or cap covering neck and chin, the kind of helmet displayed on Darius in the Alexander mosaic. The comparison with the mosaic from the Casa del Fauno at Pompeii is the more interesting as the two heroes of the battle of Issos, Alexander and Darius, are shown facing, but not attacking each other. The antithetic arrangement is thus only indirectly suggested in the mosaic. The antithesis is not meant to subordinate all the values of psychological and special expression. It is a magnificent display of foreshortened, abridged, closely-knit figures in the hellenistic fashion which prompts the impression of the turmoil of a fierce battle, whereas in the Dura frescoes everything appears schematised and reduced to the essentials of the single combat.

The two affronted horsemen on the panel of the Dura syna-

gogue symbolise, as it were, two spiritual worlds: the pious Israelite and the wicked Philistine. This antinomy anticipates the posture of mounted knights in a medieval tournament frequently used symbolically with a didactic purpose. In late Roman examples affronted horsemen appear mostly in compositions of a representational type,<sup>7</sup> not in battle scenes.<sup>8</sup> The early Sassanian examples exhibit also chiefly representational acts.<sup>9</sup> The combat scene of the Dura painting shows the popular Parthian rider motive in a setting derived from a Hellenistic or Roman frieze or sarcophagus relief duly schematised. The two zones above and below the combat scene are disrupted parts of an originally more elaborate composition.

There are to be seen there footmen equipped with swords and shields tumbling down, falling backward, sinking to the ground in rather violent postures, not well balanced one against the other. These two zones supplying a fore-and background to the single combat scene introduce the factor of masses with which the artist was unable or unwilling to cope in the principal scene. The fighting soldiery is thus confined to special compartments, the chief concern of the artist being to afford a clearly determined situation in the middle zone.

We turn now to the left side of the panel portraying the Capture and Carrying away of the Tabernacle. [Fig. 3]

In two slightly overlapping zones a procession with the Tabernacle is shown. The Tabernacle, a kind of stele with rounded top, shown in the center of the composition, is carried on poles by four bearers marching toward the left.

Direct beneath the Tabernacle between the two couples of the

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the reliefs of the Hippolytus sarcophagus of the Villa Albani in Rome and the sarcophagus of the Museo delle Terme reproduced in H. P. L'Orange, *Der spätantike Bildschmuck des Konstantinobogens*, Berlin, 1939, fig. 61 and 39.

<sup>8</sup> In the reliefs of the Trajan column in Rome for instance mounted Roman warriors are shown moving all in one direction, but never affronted with a mounted Dacian. Cf. Karl Lehmann-Hartleben, *Die Trajanssäule*, Berlin, 1926, pl. XXXVII.

<sup>9</sup> On the rock relief of Naqsh-i-Rustam the act of the investiture of Ardashir I (224-41) is represented according to this scheme. Cf. A. U. Pope and P. Ackerman, *A Survey of Persian Art*, London and New York, 1938, vol. IV, Plate p. 154.

bearers are seen two warriors in full armor marching similarly toward the left. In the upper zone the Tabernacle is flanked by four armed warriors, two to either side, the two men closer to the center showing an inward turn toward the Tabernacle. They are supposed to be moving behind the procession. The bearers of the Ark are captured Levites (I Sam. 6.15), clad in white, draped short tunics. The other men are of the Philistine convoy. I Sam. 4.11 records the event with only a few words: And the Ark of God was taken.

The arrangement of the procession has points of affinity with a funeral procession, a motive which in art can be traced back to the Dipylon vases. But the direct prototypes are not so remote. The setting of the procession in separate zones as primitive as it may seem is to be met for instance in the funeral relief from Amiternum in the Museum of Aquila dated in the Republican or Augustan period.<sup>10</sup> There the porters of the catafalque are shown in one zone and the mourners and musicians on different, higher ground levels, the ground lines, projecting in high relief, interrupted whenever they interfere with the central motive of the bier. The procession in the lower zone moves to the side, whereas the upper figures are arranged as counterparts converging in the axis of the catafalque. In both instances, the artists, the Dura painter and the Roman sculptor, have attempted to reconcile two conflicting schemes: the processional frieze scheme and the centralized symmetrical scheme. The Dura painter has very much simplified the device and reduced the scheme to a few figures forming a compact rectangular unity.

It is also instructive to compare the Dura composition with the triumphal procession depicted on the honorary Arch of Titus<sup>11</sup> in Rome, and this the more so as the subject-matter is practically identical in both cases.

On the relief of the Roman arch the bearers of the spoils of the Temple of Jerusalem are shown moving to the right. The

<sup>10</sup> Mrs. Arthur Strong, *Apotheosis and After-Life*, London, 1915, pl. XXIII.

<sup>11</sup> For the style of the Arch of Titus and its dating cf. Karl Lehmann-Hartleben, *L'Arco di Tito*, *Bull. della Comm. Arch. Com.* LXII, 1934.

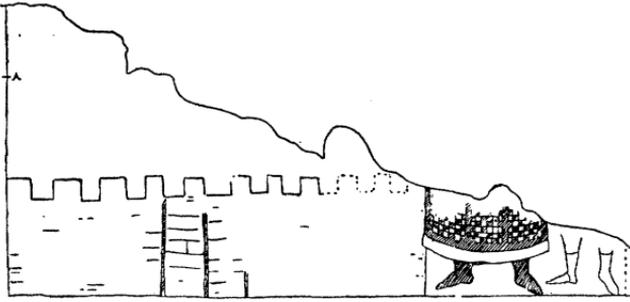


FIG. 1. SAMUEL AT THE SANCTUARY OF SHILOH.



FIG. 2. THE BATTLE OF THE ISRAELITES AND THE PHILISTINES AT EBENEZER.



FIG. 3. THE REMOVAL OF THE TABERNACLE BY THE PHILISTINES.



FIG. 4. (r.) THE TEMPLE OF DAGON. (l.) THE TABERNACLE IS SENT BACK BY THE PHILISTINES.



FIG. 5. (r.) BETH SHEMESH OR THE HOUSE OF THE SUN. (l.) SAMUEL READING FROM THE BOOK OF THE KINGDOM.



FIG. 6. SAMUEL ANOINTING DAVID.

seven-branched candlestick, the two crossed trumpets, and the other objects shown in lower relief, carried by the procession, are projecting high above the men. There is no noticeable attempt to fill the space between the temple implements carried by the men; they are silhouetted against the sky. The procession starts at the left, slightly above the ground level of the foremost zone, in order to suggest a diagonal movement; the depth of the marching crowd is indicated by the undulating line of the heads and the varying height of the relief; the figures of the foreground casting deeper, longer shadows than the more distant ones. And as a last touch to enliven the movement, a slight inward turn is given the head of the procession moving toward a gate obliquely set at the right edge of the relief. Everything tends in the rendering of the procession to work away from the uniformity of a disciplined marching crowd, to impart an illusion of ease, to convey atmosphere, air and light.

What we see in Dura is strongly contrasted against Flavian illusionism. In juxtaposition to the dynamic realism of a contemporary scene (the arch was erected soon after the death of Titus) we are shown here the commemoration of a remote historic occurrence in the hieratic forms particularly suggestive of intense inner life and religious exaltation. The artist is not interested in the display of a pageant, as the Roman artist was; he endeavors to offer the suppliant the National Palladium in full view for devotional meditation.

The next panel is located on the adjacent west wall. It includes similarly two scenes within one frame. The rightward portion of the panel shows on the top a temple, with its front and side rendered in full view, a convention familiar from Roman reliefs where small temples or houses frequently occupy this position. It is the Philistine Temple of Dagon in Ashdod. [Fig. 4] The central columns of its Corinthian portico are removed in order to allow a view into the interior.<sup>12</sup> Through the broad pedimented portal are to be seen two pedestals flanking a table. Below, or

<sup>12</sup> The exaggerated central intercolumnium intended to allow a view into the interior is to be found in temple representations on Roman coins. D. F. Brown, *Temples of Rome as Coin Types*, New York, 1940, p. 19.

according to the optic convention adopted, in front of the temple are scattered implements of the Dagon cult, among them the statue of the god. The statue is curiously enough represented in two states literally following I Sam. 5.3-4 (Dagon fell twice "on his face" before the Ark of the Lord). The two broken statues lying on the ground are standing figures with a banner in their right and a club in their left hand. Among the scattered vessels and other ritual objects two candlesticks are to be noticed which are completely identical with the two candelabra standing beside the seven-branched candlestick in the Tent of the Wilderness pictured on the Aaron panel. Other objects are bowls, vases, a shovel, a string instrument and altars. The scene thus portrayed is narrated in I Sam. 5. It records how the Philistines were punished for carrying away the Tabernacle and depositing it in the temple of Dagon. In fact the subsequent stage of the story is shown when after the Philistine god was smitten the Tabernacle was removed from the temple.

M. du Mesnil has discussed the scene in all its details.<sup>13</sup> He made an attempt to reconstruct the arrangement of the temple interior. He believed that the place of Dagon could only have been in the center axis of the cella, but as the center appears to be taken by something which looks like a table he offered an hypothesis accounting for a piece of furniture on legs. He imagined the god as reclining on a coach like a dying Adonis, on analogy which he thought defensible on account of some similarities of the cult. The two side-pedestals he interpreted as altars.

There are a few objections to be raised against this conjecture, on iconographical and formal grounds. The erect figure of Dagon with its raised hand holding a staff and the other a club or sword is hardly suggestive of the attitude of a fainting god. Further on if we bear in mind that no particular reverence was to be expected for the god of the Philistines in a representation in a Jewish synagogue we may admit that he was given one of the side pedestals,<sup>14</sup> whereas the other was taken by the Jewish

<sup>13</sup> Du Mesnil, *op. cit.*, p. 75 ff.

<sup>14</sup> Above the left pedestal I see something like the shape of a statue. If my impression is correct the god Dagon is shown here in his original position.

Tabernacle. The table in the center was apparently meant to carry the various smaller ceremonial objects among those thrown to the ground during the catastrophe. It is not improbable that the Jews imagined the vessels of the Dagon temple on analogy with those of their own sanctuary as described in the Bible (Exodus 37); the identity of the candelabra would confirm this assumption. Now the description of the Tent of the Wilderness includes some references to a table for "the dishes, spoons, bowls and covers" (Ex. 37.11). Besides, a table for offerings is nothing uncommon in any temple. The table pictured on the painting has the usual shape of a rectangular Roman table. It shows a frame ornamented with vertical lines which covers up the stretchers connecting the legs. Whether there is a tray to be seen corresponding to the border of the table of the Tent of the Wilderness mentioned in Ex. 37.12 cannot be made out. It seems to be rather a plain table. There is nothing suggesting a couch; there is no bolster, as M. du Mesnil has admitted himself, and there is no footstool to be seen. Bolsters, and very high stuffed ones, and footstools are a feature of all the couches pictured in the synagogue (in the scene of the Blessings of Jacob and the Elijah panel).

As a matter of fact the Dagon statue is identical in all respects with the figure of a standing Adonis in a fresco at the Adonis Temple in Dura.<sup>15</sup> The scene portraying the temple of Dagon is particularly characteristic for some incongruities of the so called "continuous" method of narration. In his endeavor to point out particular details of the biblical record the painter has not recoiled from picturing one figure (the statue of Dagon) twice, lying on the ground, at practically no intervals, thus trying to convey two consecutive stages of the story at variance with experience. Another characteristic feature is the building up of a composition out of bare elements of scenery, of accessories, with no human figures in action stressing the meaning of the scene.

The left portion of the panel exhibits the Tabernacle about

<sup>15</sup> F. E. Brown, *The Temple of Adonis, Excavations of Dura Europos*, Prel. Rep., 1939, fig. 44.

to be carried away. The Sending away of the Tabernacle on a cart carried by "two milch kine, on which there hath come no yoke" (I Sam. 6 7) has not taken place in Ashdod, the abode of the god Dagon, but somewhere "in the country of the Philistines", the Tabernacle having sojourned in the meantime in Gath and Ekron (I Sam. 5). But the artist has somewhat compressed the narrative and selected the more impressive episode. I mention this in order to point out that the continuous method of narration used by the artist is at the same time selective. The procession of the Tabernacle, when compared to the one dealt with above, is built up on a different spatial scheme. The Holy Ark elaborately draped with a cloth and put on a cart occupies almost the whole height of the panel on the right side of the scene. The kine carrying the vehicle are shown in the foreground moving to the left. The two Levites in attendance are standing behind the kine in almost frontal posture, one of them shown as a halffigure above. The background is closed on the top with three frontal figures in long Greco-Roman garments, the "Lords of the Philistines" (I Sam. 6.8 mentions five) who according to the biblical record accompany the Tabernacle.

The composition has analogies in the Roman triumphal reliefs representing the emperor on the quadriga with Roma leading the horses by the bridle.<sup>16</sup> The conflict of the processional and frontal tendencies is more apparent in the Dura fresco with its dual emphasis on the action in the foreground and the figures of the Philistines in the back, witnesses of the miracle (The kine took the straight way to Beth-Shemesh, I Sam. 6.12).

In the adjacent left panel a charade is introduced, the meaning of which is to be inferred from the literal interpretation of the name of a city.

We have noticed that the procession of the Tabernacle carried on a cart is painted within one frame with the picture of the

<sup>16</sup> An example is the relief of Marcus Aurelius in the Conservatori Museum in Rome, reproduced in Elisabeth Hill, *Roman elements in the settings of the synagogue frescoes at Dura*, in *Marsyas*, vol. I, 1941, fig. 13. The system of space representation employed in the scene of the "Carrying away of the Tabernacle" although derived from the "third group" in the formulation of E. Hill belongs in my opinion to a separate group.

temple of Dagon. To the left the Tabernacle scene is separated by frame lines from another temple image. [Fig. 5] The temple portrayed in this panel occupies the whole area and arrests attention by its elaborate design.<sup>17</sup> The structure was identified with the Temple of King Solomon. No other sanctuary, it was thought, would be of sufficient importance to deserve reproduction in a separate panel without any marks of identification.

M. du Mesnil tentatively interpreted the building with a Temple of Sol<sup>18</sup> taking into consideration that the edifice lacks the features associated with the Solomon Temple and seems to be conceived rather in the forms familiar from Syrian temples, especially sanctuaries of solar character. The interpretation of M. du Mesnil is on the other hand based on the meaning of the name of the city of Beth Shemesh. Beth Shemesh means "House of the Sun". The image of the temple merely stands for the image of the city. We may add that as a charade the picture was not supposed to bear a title. As a matter of fact the Tabernacle was carried to Beth Shemesh according to I Sam. 6.12 upon the express command of God. It was stationed there until it went to Kirjath-Jearim (I Sam. 21). We shall not dwell on the description of the temple with its seven crenellated walls disposed in terraces according to the convention of the stepped background scheme, nor on the solar symbols displayed on the entrance portal of the outer enclosure, which led M. du Mesnil to his striking and bold interpretation. But however correct this interpretation would seem, M. du Mesnil still felt that the picture remained ambiguous, troublesome. There was nothing to justify the selection of an image of rather ill augury. Beth Shemesh was an ill reputed city punished for the irreverence of its inhabitants (I Sam. 6.19).

M. du Mesnil assumed for this reason that the picture was an afterthought, that another panel, namely Samuel anointing

<sup>17</sup> In our reproduction which is intended to show clearly the relation to the "portrait" panel on the left the right part of the temple is cut off. Good reproductions of the image of the temple are to be found in Du Mesnil du Buisson, *op. cit.*, Plate XXXV, and XXXVI, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Du Mesnil, *op. cit.*, p. 84 ff.

David, was first contemplated, but then transferred to the lower register for secondary considerations.<sup>19</sup>

But no matter whether an afterthought or not, the problem still remains unsolved, the Beth Shemesh picture appears puzzling enough.

Taken at their face value none of the pictures of the right side of the middle register can be comprehended.

Why should the suppliant, one wonders, have to dwell on the image of Shiloh, the doomed city, or on the battle with the Philistines with its fatal issue causing the capture of the Tabernacle, the death of the priest Eli (I Sam. 4.17), the doom of his family, why was the "abomination" of the temple of Dagon and the "tabooed" temple of the Sun evoked at all? The Tabernacle was released, it is true, but its farther peregrinations were known to be far from triumphal. Beth Shemesh was not a glorious memory, the outlook was decidedly saddening.

The introduction of the cycle displaying the misfortunes of the Tabernacle cannot be justified unless interpreted by its symbolical value.

Let us examine the scenes depicting the trials of the Tabernacle in the first book of Samuel in the light of some significant passages in Psalm 78 which provides an explanation why the Sanctuary was doomed to perish. "He forsook the Tabernacle of Shiloh" (verse 60). "He refused the Tabernacle of Joseph" (verse 67).<sup>20</sup> Verse 68 goes on: He chose the tribe of Judah, the Mount of Zion which he loved". Verse 70 concludes: "He chose David".

In terms of tribal symbolism the discarding of Shiloh means the shifting of the ascendancy from the Joseph, i. e. Israelite, to the Judaeon element of the nation. In terms of religious organization this meant the centralisation of the cult in the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem.

<sup>19</sup> In order to honor the archisynagogus whose seat was just below the panel. According to inscriptional evidence the rabbi's name happened to be Samuel. This coincidence led M. du Mesnil, *op. cit.*, p. 127, to his conjecture. In our opinion the scene of "Samuel anointing David" is closely connected with the cycle into which it is actually set.

<sup>20</sup> Shilo was situated in the territory allotted to Joseph.

That Shiloh actually disappeared in the Philistine wars is confirmed by archaeological evidence. Albright<sup>21</sup> pointed to the fact that no remains have been discovered belonging to the period between the 10th and the 6th century, when according to the Biblical statement Shiloh lay in ruin.

The disaster of Shiloh was a lasting historic memory to which many speculations were attached.

A typical talmudic saying enumerates the following disasters: "Esau will destroy seven holy places: the Tabernacle, the Sanctuary at Gilgal, Shiloh, Nob, Gibeah, the first and the second Temple."<sup>22</sup>

In order to understand the enigmatic prophecy connecting Esau with events of later date, it is necessary to know that in Jewish tradition the name of Esau, the elder son of Isaac who sold his birthright and as father of the Edomites became estranged from the Israelites, used to designate Rome. The Romans who under Vespasian and Titus had destroyed the Second Temple became identified with the Babylonians who had destroyed the First Temple of Jerusalem, and the Philistines who destroyed the Sanctuary at Shiloh: they embodied in Jewish conception the destructive forces in history.

There is an essential difference in the conception of the historical process of the religious teachers about the time of the synagogue at Dura (245–256) and the old biblical prophets. In the view of the Jewish leaders of the 2nd–3rd century political catastrophes were no longer exclusively conceived as a punishment for faithlessness, but taken as necessary phases of the historical process.<sup>23</sup> Trials and sufferings were viewed as paving the road to the ultimate triumph of God. It was in the period after the failure of the uprising of Bar Kokhba under Hadrian that the conception originated of a suffering Messiah living as a beggar in Rome until his time should come. Many an old messianic prophecy was reinterpreted in the days of the Roman rule. The verse Genesis 49.10 "The scepter shall not depart

<sup>21</sup> W. F. Albright, *Archaeology of Palestine*, 1929, p. 57.

<sup>22</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, 329.

<sup>23</sup> N. N. Glatzer, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichtslehre der talmudischen Zeit*, Berlin, 1937.

from Judah until Shiloh comes", usually associated with the person of the Messiah whose name was to be Shiloh, was connected in some quarters with the name of the city of Shiloh. Thus Rabbi Judah, the Patriarch of Sepphoris (136–217) interpreted it in this sense.<sup>24</sup> The doom of Shiloh prerequisite for the raising of the Davidic Temple became in typological reversion prerequisite for the Restoration of the Davidic Temple. According to a medieval prophecy: "The scepter will not depart from Judah, until Shiloh comes, the prophet Samuel appears at Shiloh and Saul is made king".<sup>25</sup> The medieval text elaborates on and paraphrases the old theme. It is significant that in the wall decoration of the synagogue at Dura the scene of "Samuel anointing Saul" is missing (at least on the well preserved principal west wall and on what is to be seen of the other walls). This scene had no direct messianic bearing. Emphasis is laid instead on "Samuel anointing David". The Resurrection cycle on the lower register culminates in this image, mystically connected with the scenes of the middle register, displaying "Samuel at Shiloh" and the stations and trials of the Tabernacle.<sup>26</sup>

The tannaitic teachers<sup>27</sup> in their effort to understand God's purpose in the disappointing course of history searched the Bible for analogies to the contemporary situation. The Bible gave a comforting answer in the account of the misfortunes of the Tabernacle and the doom of Shiloh which led to the rise of Jerusalem. The fatal omnia forecast ultimate triumph. In terms of the contemporary scene this meant to convey that the hardships of foreign rule foreshadowed deliverance.

The panel next to the allegorical picture of Beth Shemesh is the so-called Ezra panel. [Fig. 5] This panel belongs to a partic-

<sup>24</sup> A. Posnanski, *Schiloh, Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Messiaslehre*, 1904, p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> Posnanski, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>26</sup> An interpretation of the Shiloh-panel was given by me in a paper read at the Meeting of the American Oriental Society, Chicago, April, 1941: "The Sanctuary of Shiloh and its Meaning in the Iconography of the Synagogue at Dura."

<sup>27</sup> Tanna, literally teacher, term used for the religious authorities of the 1st–3rd century.

ular set of pictures arranged like a two-storied triptych. The upper part consists of an unidentified scene flanked by two standing figures of Moses in narrow panels. The lower part includes the "Blessings of Jacob" and other subjects in a central panel flanked by two narrow panels, one (the left one) picturing Abraham and the other (the right one) supposed to represent Ezra. The Ezra panel is next to the Beth Shemesh image. The discussion on the Ezra panel is still going on. The figure has been identified with Moses, Jeremiah and other biblical heroes. Moses being portrayed twice in the upper register, there was no plausible reason for representing him again below. Besides Moses is characterised in the frescoes rather as a sturdy, square built man, whereas the figure pictured as a counterpart to Abraham, also of short proportions, is tall and slim. He is clad in the usual Greco-Roman long garment reserved to patriarchs and prophets and is shown standing in frontal attitude and reading from an open scroll. A scrinium is seen to the left. The figure exhibits the type known from statues of Sophocles and Demosthenes standing beside their scroll box in the posture of an orator. The *contraposto* is not carried through very satisfactorily and the folds of drapery are rigid, but the whole figure is of extraordinary nobility. The elongated face with the large deeply set eyes encircled with black anticipates the beautiful ascetic faces of Byzantine art.

The biblical book of Nehemiah, c. 8, depicts how Ezra, the prophet and scribe who came back to Jerusalem with the exiles, read the Mosaic Law before the people. He is portrayed (verse 4) as standing upon a pulpit "made for the purpose" and (v. 2) reading before the congregation of men and women. None of these details is shown on the panel. Ezra would appear in connection with Abraham and Moses as an exponent of the Covenant with God which Moses concluded and Ezra renewed. His figure would thus emphasise the nomistic aspects of Judaism. However in the period of Dura one would assume that the emphasis was rather on the political aspects. It was the moment in Jewish history when after the repeated failure of the national movement of liberation political aspirations began to take a messianic and even eschatological turn. The paintings of Dura reflect the preoccupations of this transitory period.

I would suggest that whereas the upper wings of the triptych portray as generally admitted Moses on Mount Sinai and at the Burning Bush, the lower wings exhibit Abraham and *Samuel* of whom it is said (Midrash *Tehillim*, ed. Buber, 25.212, note 24) that he is equal to Moses and in some respects his superior.

Whereas Abraham embodies the patriarchal age and Moses represents the period of the Exodus, Samuel points to the age of the founding of the kingdom, the three ages corresponding to the principal periods of Jewish history, a scheme typical of the religious writings of the time. To these three outstanding ages a fourth age, the time of the Messiah, was added. This periodisation has been preserved in liturgy.

The figure of Samuel reading from a book refers to I Sam 10.25: "He (Samuel) tells the people the manner of the kingdom and writes it in a book and leads it up before the Lord".

The oratorical attitude, the reading scroll and the scrinium are in agreement with the biblical account. Samuel is portrayed in his function of instituting the kingdom. In the scene below he is shown again, and we recognise there the tall figure of the prophet, anointing David. [Fig. 6]. Thus the cycle of the middle register opens with the infant Samuel consecrated to the service of God, unless there was in the missing part on the east wall another introductory scene, and terminates with the prophet Samuel proclaiming the kingdom of Israel. The chain closes. Ezra would hardly fit into the picture as well as Samuel.

The commenting upon events told in the historical book of Samuel on the basis of passages from the Psalms,<sup>28</sup> i. e. writings of a non-historical character, is illustrative of the hermeneutic method of exegesis used in rabbinical literature of this period. However as the scenes portrayed in the right half of the middle register are all disposed in chronological order, in accordance with the first book of Samuel and thus, even taken at their face value, constitute a coherent whole, it is only by inference that we are able to establish their underlying sense.

Direct evidence of the symbolical purpose is provided by the register below, where the scenes borrowed from different biblical

<sup>28</sup> Psalm 78.

books and strikingly out of chronological order make no sense taken literally. These scenes are: 1. David surprises Saul in the Wilderness of Ziph. 2. Joab's crime and punishment. 3. Resurrection of the Dry Bones. 4. Exposure of Moses. 5. Anointing of David by Samuel.<sup>29</sup> The corresponding biblical passages illustrated by the scenes are: I Sam. 26; I Ki. 2; Ez. 37; Ex. 2; I Sam. 16. The ideological scheme underlying the scenes is in my interpretation the following: David sparing his foe deserves to be raised. He is the type of the righteous man. Joab murdering his rival is the type of the evildoer. He deserves punishment. But punished in this world his resurrection is not entirely excluded. It is questionable. The kingdoms of Judah and Israel will be raised with their righteous King David. The infant Moses was saved. His miraculous rescue anticipates, prefigures Salvation. David is the "Anointed". He is the prototype or the father of the Messiah, the Messiah ben David. (*Messiah* means literally Anointed).

In summarising the essential points of our interpretation we would say that the right part of the middle register sets forth the idea of the *Institution of the Kingdom*, or in terms of the actual situation, carries the expectations of the triumph over the tribulations of the times, and the corresponding part of the lower register means to convey the idea of the *Investiture and the Restoration of David*.

Thus both sets of pictures are logically connected, complete each other and convey through biblical images the messianic expectations of the Jewish community.

It is typical of the methods of discussion introduced by the tannaitic teachers that they freely operate with figures and events, remove them from their historical background, take them out of context and use them even as types and symbols like the Tanna R. Elieser ben Jacob (*Gen R.* 56) who set forth the following idea: There is no generation in which there are no men like Abraham, David and Jacob; there is no generation which does not have a man like Moses, and none which does not

<sup>29</sup> Scenes 1, 2, 3 and 5 have been interpreted by me in *op. cit.*, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1941.

possess men like Samuel.<sup>30</sup> N. Glatzer<sup>31</sup> has called this method of interpretation "Aktivierung der Geschichte". It consists in recasting historical events in the mould of contemporary, living experience.

When Josē ben Ḳisma says to his pupils: "Bury my coffin deep in the ground, for there will be no palmtree in Babylonia to which a Persian horse will not be tied, and no coffin in Palestine from which a Median horse will not eat straw,"<sup>32</sup> he is evoking the Persians and Medians of the Bible as a parallel to the Parthians of his time, enemies of Rome whose victory it was hoped would make an end to the rule of the oppressor.

Many similar utterances made in cryptic language are built up on this kind of parallels.

Josē ben Ḳisma also uses abstract allegories. When asked by his pupils when the Messiah will come, he gives the following answer: "When the gate will be pulled down and rebuilt, pulled down and rebuilt and pulled down, the son of David will come, just before there will be time for rebuilding it for the third time."<sup>33</sup> The picture of the destroyed gate is too vague to allude to any particular episode of the Parthian wars. However the author is eager to give a more direct hint to the reader, so the pupils ask for a sign and he says: "If what I say is true, the water of the cave of Paneas will be transformed into blood."<sup>34</sup> The source of the cave of Paneas was known to be near Caesarea. The gate is an allegory of that Roman fortress.

The allegory of the gate of Caesarea used by Josē ben Ḳisma has many points of similarity with the image of the city of Beth Shemesh in the wall decoration of the synagogue at Dura. There is to be noticed in both instances the unobtrusive character of the images vaguely suggestive of the topographical setting of the events. The method of conveying ideas and emotions through historical parallels and allegories which is characteristic of the

<sup>30</sup> Glatzer, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>31</sup> Glatzer, *op. cit.*, p. 32 ff.

<sup>32</sup> Sanh. 98ab quoted from Joseph Klausner, *Die messianischen Vorstellungen des juedischen Volkes im Zeitalter der Tannaiten*, 1903, p. 40.

<sup>33</sup> Sanh. 98a, quoted from Klausner, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

rabbinic literature of the 2nd and 3rd century, appears to be identical with the methods used in the building up of the iconography of the decoration of our synagogue. This striking community of thinking gives evidence of a close collaboration of the artists with the rabbinical leaders of the Jewish colony in Dura. The use of biblical subjects for a symbolical pictorial program like the one carried out in the synagogue at Dura in 245–256 A.D. will not appear unusual or too bold a venture when compared with the mural decoration of a Neapolitan villa, the description of which has been preserved in a source of the 3rd century A.D. Karl Lehmann-Hartleben<sup>35</sup> has shown in his analysis of the description of the paintings how programmatic painting originated out of traditional mythological material organised with the object of conveying certain doctrines. Didactic painting was started in the 2nd century A.D. in funeral paintings and in the religious art of the mystery cults.<sup>36</sup> Along with this art, using mythological material, Jewish art was developing and reinterpreting biblical material for similar didactic purposes. Parallel developments in the mental attitude contributed to the formation of a common style some features of which I have pointed out in my iconographical study. Set against its historical background, the art of the synagogue at Dura, in contents and form, obtains its particular significance.

<sup>35</sup> "The Images of the Elder Philostratus," *The Art Bulletin*, XXIII, March, 1941.

<sup>36</sup> K. Lehmann-Hartleben, *op. cit.*, p. 44.