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The Dura Europos Synagogue Paintings and their Influence on Later Christian and Jewish Art*

The third-century Dura Europos synagogue paintings represent the earliest continuous narrative cycle of biblical images known in art. Not until the fifth century do we find similar complex and elaborate narrative cycles of biblical images in church art.

Since the Dura synagogue paintings are the earliest continuous surviving narrative biblical cycle, they have naturally raised the question of whether there exists a relationship between them and later biblical scenes found in medieval Jewish and Christian art. No systematic study has been devoted to this problem, but scholars have occasionally attempted to compare certain narrative scenes appearing in the Dura synagogue paintings with those found in later Christian and Jewish art.

One such comparison involves the Dura synagogue depiction of a nude figure standing in the water and holding a child [Fig. 1]. The figure has been identified as the Egyptian princess standing in the Nile, rescuing the child Moses. Since the nude princess in the waters is also found in several medieval Jewish and Christian miniatures dating from twelfth- to fourteenth-century Spain, some scholars have posited a direct connection between the Dura synagogue painting and the medieval Spanish illustrations. However, this need not be the case. The Dura synagogue painting appears to be closely related to such sources as the contemporary *Targumim* (Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible), which clearly explain that the princess, suffering from leprosy, went down to bathe in the Nile and was miraculously cured of her affliction when she touched the basket containing the child Moses. The

medieval Spanish depictions usually reveal three or four nude figures in the water, but in only one miniature [Fig. 2] is a nude figure labelled "Tarmuth" (a name for the princess found in early sources like Josephus and repeated in later texts). The inscription on this miniature further explains that

"the daughter of Pharaoh [accompanied by] her maidens
cleanses herself [in the Nile]."

Iconographically, the medieval illustrations do not show three clothed maidens awaiting the princess on shore, and the child is not held aloft by the princess, as is the case in the Dura synagogue painting. Furthermore, the Dura painting and the medieval Spanish miniatures appear to be influenced by different literary traditions.¹

Scholarly attempts to link the rendition of the Sacrifice of Isaac in the Dura synagogue with depictions in Spanish art are equally unconvincing. The Leon Bible of 960, fol. 21v, for instance, shares with the Dura painting only the element of Isaac lying atop the faggots on the altar. In the Leon Bible scene Isaac and Abraham are shown facing the viewer rather than with their backs to the spectator as in the Dura synagogue version [Figs. 3-4]. Moreover, the ram at Dura is standing next to a tree, while in the Leon Bible it is entangled in the thicket, in keeping with the biblical narrative. Although the hand of God (rather than the angel) is revealed in both depictions, the Leon Bible has the hand bestowing the Christian benediction (the *benedictio latina*). In addition, Abraham uses a knife in Dura, while in the Leon Bible Abraham uses a sword (the more



1) «The Finding of Moses», Dura Europos Synagogue, west wall, Syria, ca. 245 A.D., Damascus National Museum.

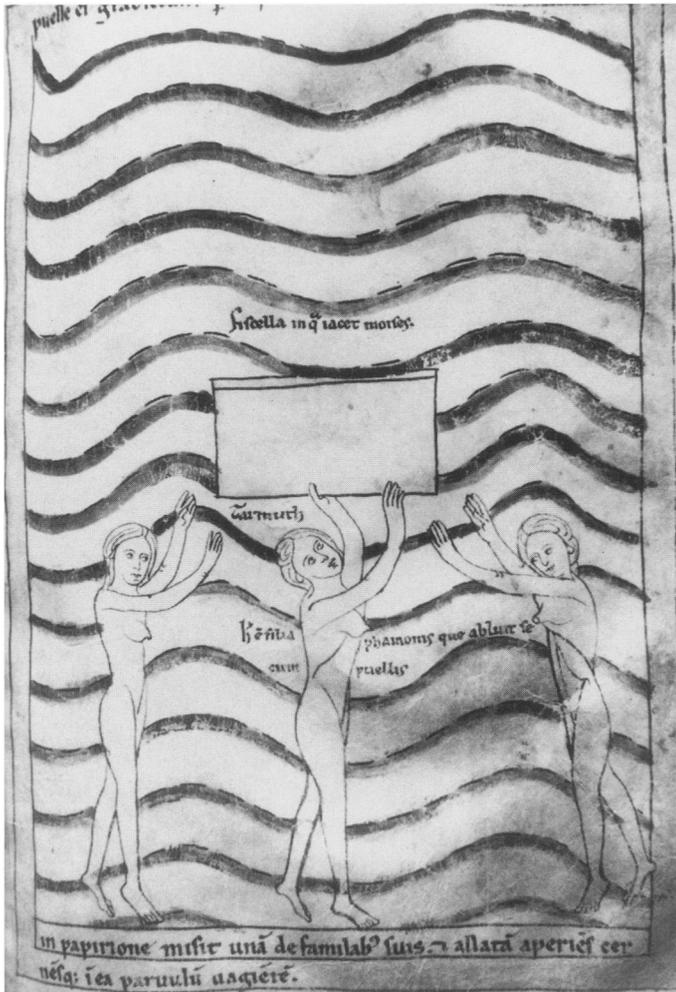
common implement featured in Christian art). Furthermore, Abraham's grasping of Isaac's hair in the Leon miniature is a detail not found in the Dura painting.

Thus the tenth-century Leon Bible miniature appears to differ too greatly from the Dura synagogue painting to be considered dependent upon it.²

The analogies that have been drawn between some scenes in the eleventh-century Spanish Ripoll Bible and the Dura synagogue depictions do not prove a direct connection between them. The only similarity in the illustrations of Haman and Mordecai in the Dura painting and in the Ripoll Bible (Biblioteca Vaticana, MS lat. 5729, fol. 310v) is that Haman

is leading Mordecai's horse. There are, however, significant differences. In the Dura synagogue scene there are three figures with arms raised in a gesture of acclamation; in the Ripoll Bible we find four. Moreover, the four figures are behind the horse in the Ripoll Bible, rather than in front of the horse as at Dura. Furthermore, the Ripoll Bible figures are not presented frontally, as at Dura, and, in addition, their garments differ radically.³ Close stylistic and iconographic parallels to the Haman and Mordecai scene of the Dura synagogue can be found in the roughly contemporary sculptural reliefs from Palmyra.⁴

On folio 82 of the Ripoll Bible the illustration of the Crossing



3) «The Sacrifice of Isaac», Dura Europos Synagogue, west wall, Syria, ca. 245 A.D., Damascus National Museum.



4) «The Sacrifice of Isaac», Leon Bible, Spain, 960, Léon, Colegiata de San Isidoro, Cod. 2, fol. 21v.

2) «The Finding of Moses», Pamplona Bible, Spain, ca. 1200, Harburg, Collection Prince Oettingen-Wallerstein, MS I, 2, lat. 4, fol. 49.

of the Red Sea [Fig. 5] bears an interesting iconographic similarity to the same theme in the Dura synagogue. In both instances we see the hand of God, armed Israelites and naked Egyptian bodies drowning in the water. However, there need not be a direct connection between these two renderings, since references to armed Israelites and naked Egyptians drowning can be found in both Jewish and Christian literary traditions.⁵

Narrative scenes in the Dura synagogue paintings have been linked not only with Spanish illustrations, but with Byzantine ones as well. Such depictions as that of Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph in the Dura synagogue have been compared



5) «The Exodus from Egypt», Ripoll Bible, Spain, first half of 11th century, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica, MS lat. 5759, fol. 310v.

with Byzantine Octateuchs (for instance, Istanbul, Topkapi Saray Library, Cod. gr. 8, fol. 141), yet the similarities are rather superficial. In both renderings the four major persons described in the Bible are present, and the patriarch is seen reclining. However, the costumes in the two scenes differ. In the Dura synagogue painting Joseph is clad in a Persian trousered costume, whereas in the Octateuch he is shown wearing the draped robe. Furthermore, in the Dura painting Jacob is neither bearded nor has white hair, as in the Octateuch miniature. In addition, in the Dura scene neither Jacob nor Joseph are haloed, as they are in the Octateuch rendition. In the Octateuch all of the figures are shown in profile, while at Dura they are presented frontally. Moreover, in the Octateuch Jacob's hands are shown crossed, an antitype of Jacob's preference for his younger son Ephraim (interpreted by the Church Fathers as *Ecclesia*). The Dura depiction seems to have avoided the crossing of Jacob's hands — the prefiguration of the cross.⁶ It seems, then, that the differences in the two scenes far outweigh the resemblances, and appear to rule out any direct connection between them.

Such is also the case in the comparison between the Destruction of the Temple of Dagon miniatures in the eleventh-century Book of Kings (Biblioteca Vaticana, MS gr. 333, fols. 9v-10) and the scene in the Dura synagogue. The Book of Kings miniatures follow the biblical narrative of the Septuagint and render the ark-box with cherubim, but in the

Dura synagogue painting we see the Torah ark-chest — a purposeful substitution to indicate that the illustration is related to contemporary Palestinian liturgical synagogal practices and texts. Thus, while there may be some similarities in the depiction of the idols in the double arcade and in the exterior and interior views of the Dagon Temple, the reliance on different textual traditions, the rendering of different arks and the diverse costumes worn augur against claiming a direct relationship between the Dura painting and the Book of Kings miniatures.⁷

It should be stressed that the Dura synagogue and its cycle of paintings was buried as part of the Roman defense system against Sasanian attacks, which occurred around 256 A. D. During the short period of time preceding their burial it is unlikely that they exerted an influence on later Christian art. It has been suggested recently that models for the Dura synagogue paintings may have existed in a synagogue in a larger nearby center, such as Palmyra. It should be noted, however, that even if that were true, they could not have exerted an influence on Christian art, either, as Palmyra was sacked by Rome around 272 A. D.⁸

It seems evident from all the scenes discussed herein that no concrete and indisputable connection can be established between the illustrations in Christian and Jewish art and the paintings at the Dura synagogue.⁹ The parallels cited by scholars are too problematic to be convincing.

* I am deeply indebted to Dr. Marilyn Gutmann for reading this paper and making many suggestions for its improvement.

¹ J. Gutmann, "Josephus' Jewish Antiquities in Twelfth-Century Art: Renovatio or Creatio?," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 48, 1985, pp. 435-438; *idem*, "The Illustrated Midrash in the Dura Synagogue Paintings: A New Dimension for the Study of Judaism," *American Academy for Jewish Research Proceedings*, 50 (1983), p. 94. Cf. T. Gaster, "A Samaritan Poem about Moses," *The Joshua Bloch Memorial Volume* (ed. A. Berger, *et. al.*), New York, 1960, pp. 120, 125. Cf. also K. Schubert, *Bilder-Pentateuch von Moses dal Castellazzo, Venice, 1521*, Vienna, 1985, pp. 114-115, for another version of the nude princess and three of her handmaidens (on fol. 73). This scene appears to follow the similar depiction in the fourteenth-century *Kaufmann Haggadah*, fol. 10; Gutmann, "Josephus' Antiquities....," *op. cit.*, p. 437, n. 13.

² J. Gutmann, "The Sacrifice of Isaac: Variations on a Theme in Early Jewish and Christian Art," *Thiasos ton Mouson: Studien zu Antike und Christentum. Festschrift für Josef Fink zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. D. Ahrens), Cologne, 1984, pp. 118-119; *idem*, "The Dura Europos Synagogue Paintings: The State of Research," *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity* (ed. L. I. Levine), Philadelphia, 1987, p. 69, no. 1.

³ C. Walter, "Papal Imagery in the Medieval Lateran Palace," *Cahiers archéologiques*, 21, 1971, pp. 130-131.

⁴ H. J. W. Drijvers, *The Religion of Palmyra*, Leiden, 1976, pls. LXVI and LXIX/1, pp. 25, 28.

⁵ Gutmann, "Illustrated Midrash....," *op. cit.*, pp. 102-103; C. H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue* (The Excavations at Dura Europos, Final Report, 8/1), New Haven, 1956, pl. LIII, p. 83; L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Philadelphia, 1947, VI, p. 55, no. 11 (*Eliyahu*

Rabbah 1:2 mentions that God punishes the wicked while naked and *Esther Rabbah* 3:14 relates that "The Egyptians when they sank in the sea were also punished naked"). Cf. H. Kunz, *Materialien und Beobachtungen zur Darstellung der Lotgeschichte (Genesis 19, 12-26) von den Anfängen bis gegen 1500*, Munich, 1981, p. 109, who cites Christian sources which indicate that in the Middle Ages nakedness was an outer sign of sin and guilt. Since the Egyptians were a sinful people they are depicted naked and thus deprived of spiritual merit.

⁶ K. Weitzmann, "The Question of the Influence of Jewish Pictorial Sources on Old Testament Illustration," *No Graven Images: Studies in Art and the Hebrew Bible* (ed. J. Gutmann), New York, 1971, pp. 77-78; cf. W. Stechow, "Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph from Early Christian Times to Rembrandt," *No Graven Images*, *op. cit.*, p. 262, LXI, and R. Hausscherr, *Rembrandts Jacobssegen. Überlegungen zur Deutung des Gemäldes in der Kasseler Galerie*, Opladen, 1976, pp. 30-32. D. Korol, *Die frühchristlichen Wandmalereien aus den Grabbauten in Cimitile/Nola*, Münster, 1987, pp. 109-129, re-examines this Dura synagogue painting and questions interpretations based on the assumption that Jacob is not crossing his hands.

⁷ Weitzmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 312-315; J. Gutmann, "The Illustrated Jewish Manuscript in Antiquity: The Present State of the Question," *No Graven Images....*, *op. cit.*, p. 239, n. 19.

⁸ Gutmann, "Dura Europos Synagogue....," *op. cit.*, pp. 66-69.

⁹ The connections I cited between the Dura synagogue paintings and the Ashburnham Pentateuch miniatures (J. Gutmann, "The Jewish Origin of the Ashburnham Pentateuch Miniatures," *No Graven Images....*, *op. cit.*, pp. 329 ff.) should be corrected in the light of a new study by F. Rickert, *Studien zum Ashburnham Pentateuch*, Bonn, 1986. Rickert convincingly shows that the Ashburnham Pentateuch is a Christian liturgical manuscript and that "Die Beziehungen zu jüdischen Darstellungen besteht lediglich darin, dass auch diese aus dem antiken Formenvorrat schöpften," p. 85).