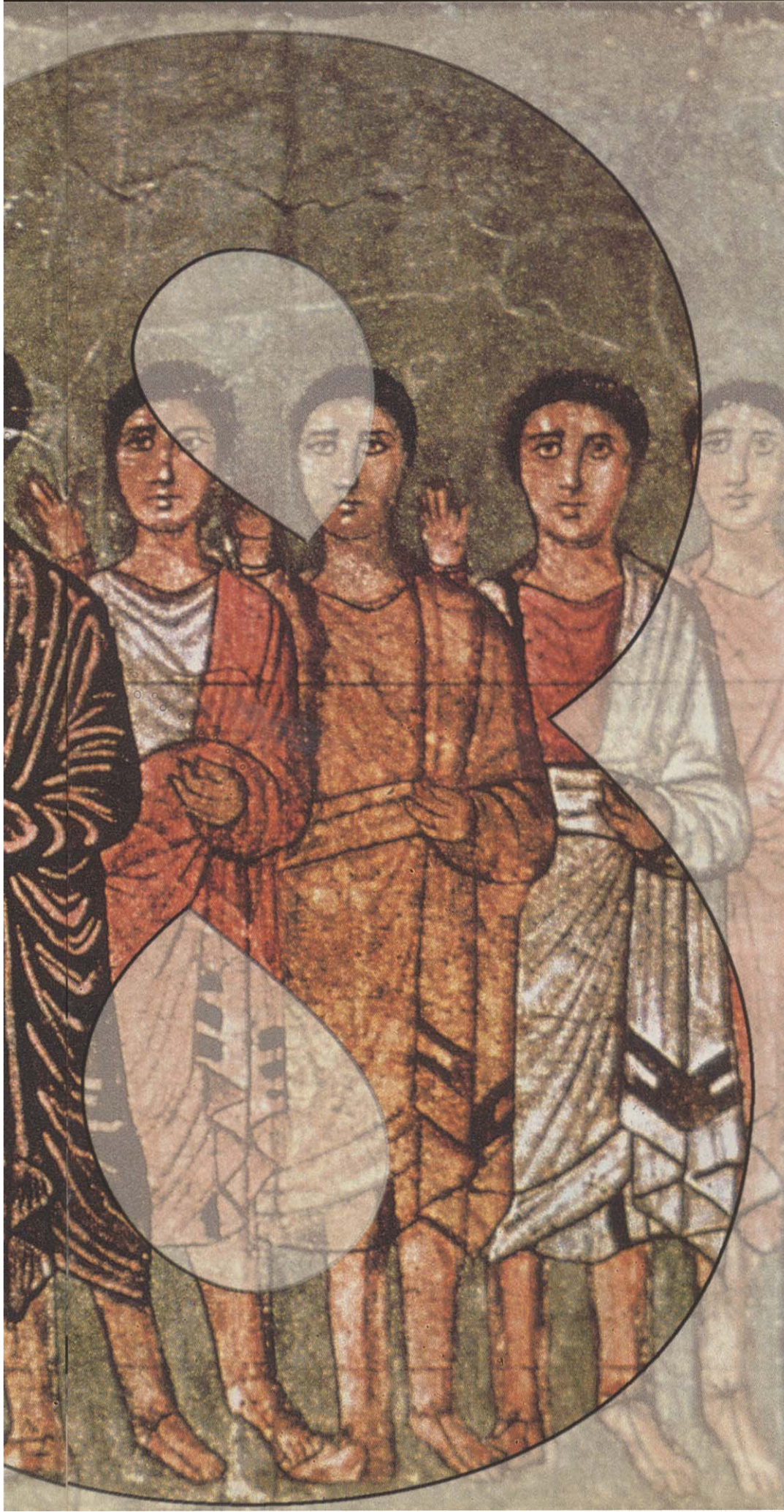


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The Battle Over the Holy Day at Dura-Europos

STEPHEN GORANSON

When the remote Roman fortress of Dura-Europos, overlooking the Euphrates, came under attack in the mid-third century C.E., the residents hastily fortified the city's vulnerable western wall. They piled up a massive dry-fill buttress that covered the numerous buildings directly inside the wall, including a house-church and a synagogue. But their desperate efforts were not enough: The Persian Sassanian army besieged and conquered the city in 256 or 257 C.E., and Dura-Europos was abandoned to the desert sands.

While the dry fill failed to save the city from the Persians, it did help later archaeologists by preserving the buildings it covered. Excavators have discovered beneath the fill a carefully laid-out city, with the best-preserved Christian



NIK WHEELER

Mithras) and temples dedicated to Zeus, Adonis, Artemis, Atargatis, Aphlad, Bel and still others. All this and more came to light during excavations that began in the 1920s, extended for more than a decade and have now resumed.

Greek settlers established the city on the western bank of the Euphrates (in modern Syria) in about 300 B.C.E., a generation after Alexander the Great. They called it Europolis. At some undetermined time, the Aramaic-speaking residents knew the city

house-church and baptistery from antiquity.¹ As I shall show, the intriguing painting that has survived, in part, in the baptistery may best be understood as part of a major dispute between Jews and Christians over which day—Saturday or Sunday as we would call them—is the proper day of worship.

Just down the street from the house-church stood the synagogue, both larger and much more lavishly decorated than the Christian building. These were not the only religious buildings in Dura-Europos, which had at least a dozen other religious centers, including a *mithraeum* (a temple dedicated to

as Dura. Hence scholars created the hyphenated name, Dura-Europos; for simplicity's sake, we will call it Dura.

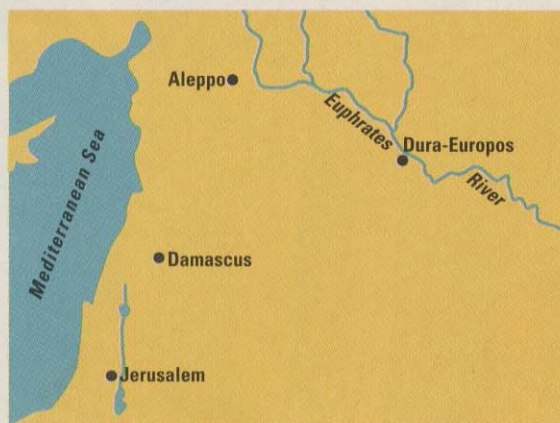
Dura changed hands often. The Romans captured it from the Parthians, who captured it from the Romans, who captured it from the Parthians, who captured it from the Greeks. In the mid-third century C.E., it was serving as a fortress for a Roman army garrison and as a caravan stop on the way to various Persian and Roman empire destinations when the Persian Sassanian army conquered it for the last time.

Dura's population in the years just before its destruction came from diverse ethnic backgrounds and spoke several languages, including Greek, Aramaic, Latin and Persian, as we know from the written remains. The population practiced a wide variety of religions. The many religious establishments in town competed for members. With so many different temples in this multi-ethnic society, a small Christian assembly would not have needed to operate underground. In fact, secrecy would have been difficult to achieve in a garrison town. A Roman bath operated near the baptistery, and it is quite possible that some members of the Christian congregation were soldiers. In any case, no evidence of persecution

PRECEDING PAGES: Samuel (left) anoints David (center) "in the presence of his brothers" (1 Samuel 16:13), as painted on the wall of a third-century C.E. synagogue at Dura-Europos, in modern Syria. Although the Bible clearly states that Samuel rejected David's seven older brothers before anointing the youngest son (1 Samuel 16:10), the Dura artist depicts seven siblings in all—including David. In portraying the brothers, the artist may have turned to a genealogy in 1 Chronicles 2:13-15, which lists only seven brothers, rather than the Book of Samuel's description of the anointing.

Beginning with Genesis 2:3, when God blesses "the seventh day and hallow[s] it," the number seven carries special prominence in the Hebrew Bible, and the Dura paintings, like much ancient Jewish art, reflect this. The Dura painter revised the story of the anointing from Samuel to emphasize the number seven.

In the mid-third century, Dura, a fortress on the eastern edge of the Roman empire, supported a multi-ethnic community that practiced a variety of religions. The local sects used art and number symbolism to teach the faithful and to compete with other religions for new members. The emphasis on seven in the Dura synagogue paintings and on the number eight in the local church's paintings reflects a clash between Jews and Christians over the proper day of worship—the seventh day (what we would call Saturday), which the Jews observed as the Sabbath, or what early Christians referred to as the eighth day (our Sunday).



NOT THICK ENOUGH, the walls of Dura-Europos (opposite), which loom over the eastern Syrian desert today, failed to protect this ancient Roman fortress from the Persian Sassanian army's attack in 256 or 257 C.E. Although the Euphrates River (visible in the distance) protected the city from the east and, on the west, Dura's residents buttressed the city wall by packing dry fill into the buildings and street inside the wall, the Persian invaders eventually conquered and later abandoned the city.

The desert sands concealed Dura until 1920, when British soldiers digging defensive trenches uncovered wall paintings from an ancient temple. By removing the sand and dry fill that preserved much of Dura, archaeologists later revealed a well-planned city established in about 300 C.E. by Greek settlers, who called it Europos. Other settlers called it by its Aramaic name, "Dura," which might mean "wall."

Covering about 180 acres, Dura contains the best-preserved ancient church and baptistery, with some of the earliest extant Christian paintings; a lavish synagogue with an elaborate series of biblical paintings; and temples dedicated to Mithras, Zeus, Bel, Adonis and other deities (see plan, below).

of Christianity was found at Dura.²

In this setting, religious art had the dual function of teaching the religion's members, many of whom would have been illiterate, and of attracting new members.³ These functions need not be contradictory since stories, aspirations and rituals of religious groups can be presented to members and to prospective members in similar ways. As noted by Elias Bickerman, "the Synagogue and the Church ... needed the means of art to acquire new worshippers and to secure the fidelity of the flock. When a rustic temple of Dionysos pictured the majestic and saving deeds of this god ... Jews and Christians had to show that their prototypes of salvation were no less attractive and powerful."⁴

The church and synagogue paintings were also part of a polemic between Christians and Jews at the time.⁵ Specifically, the paintings depict and

reflect a debate over the superiority of worship on the seventh-day Sabbath or on "the Lord's day," Sunday. This was not the paintings' only theme, but, as I will show, it is surely a major one.

The Sabbath/Sunday polemic is expressed in the paintings in number symbology, a common practice in ancient art as well as in ancient texts. In the Dura synagogue paintings, we find frequent references to the numbers twelve and seven, just as we do in the Hebrew Bible. A careful examination of the art in the Dura house-church reflects special attention to the number eight, as the Christian congregation considered Sunday the eighth day.

Let us look more closely at the two buildings. Like the house-church, the synagogue had originally been a private home, but the synagogue had been twice remodeled and redecorated as a house of worship. The synagogue building could hold twice as many people as the house-church, suggesting that Dura's synagogue membership was larger and longer-established than the church group.

Graffiti (inscriptions scratched on a surface) and *dipinti* (painted writing) preserved in the two buildings indicate another

distinction between the two congregations. The most frequently used language in

the synagogue is Aramaic, a Semitic language related to

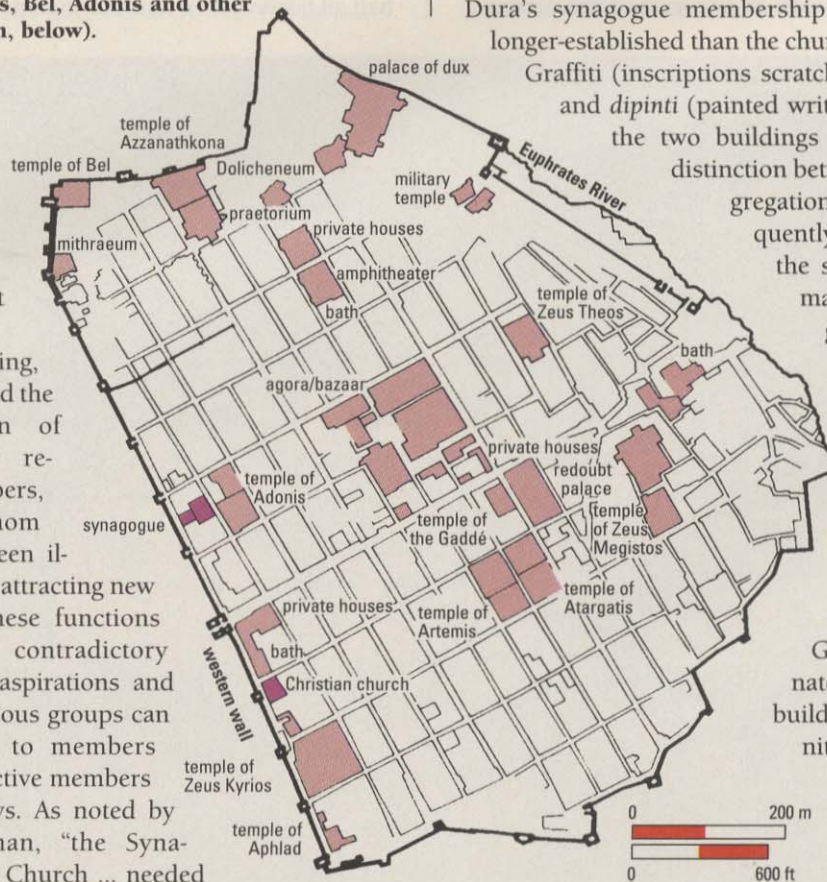
Hebrew. Several names familiar from the Hebrew scriptures, such as Samuel and Abram, appear in the synagogue. But

Greek predominates in the Christian building, and no definitely Jewish names

appear there, providing one indication that the

church congregation was not Jewish-Christian.

The only manuscript found in the dry fill of Dura that can be clearly identified as Christian is a parchment fragment of the *Diatessaron*, a retelling of the four canonical gospels in one continuous narrative. Tatian, who composed the *Diatessaron* (meaning "through the four") in about 170 C.E., produced two versions—one in Greek and one in



Syriac (a Semitic language akin to Aramaic).⁶ The copy found in Dura is the Greek version.

The only definitely Jewish manuscript to survive at Dura is a prayer written in Hebrew. (Many of the other parchment and papyrus texts preserved by the dry fill are records from the Roman army cohort stationed there.)

The Christian building has no depictions of the Temple, the Ark of the Covenant or the seven-branched menorah, another indication that the congregation was not composed of Jewish-Christians.

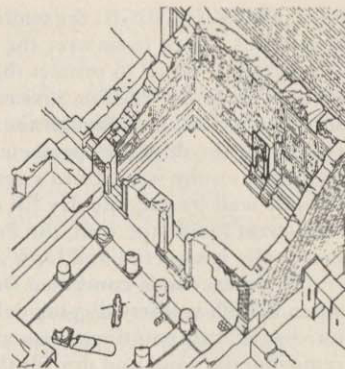
Indeed, as we shall see, the artistic program of the Dura Christian building represents a rejection of the Temple and synagogue, an attitude incompatible with Jewish-Christianity.⁷ While this does not exclude the possibility of Jewish-Christians in the entire city of Dura, we can conclude that at least this house-church was not established by Jewish-Christians. And this is the case even though some Jewish-Christian communities certainly did exist as late as the third century.⁸

(Remember, the Christianization of the Roman empire, begun under the emperor Constantine, had yet to occur.)

Many varieties of Christianity flourished in the mid-third century. If the Dura

church's congregation was not Jewish-Christian, how shall we describe this small, Greek-speaking community?

Was it orthodox? It is debatable whether we can meaningfully speak of orthodox Christianity as early as the mid-third century. (Perhaps they were proto-orthodox.) The books of the New Testament had all been written, but they had not yet been gath-



EDWIN GOODENOUGH, SYMBOLISM IN THE DURA SYNAGOGUE, 1964/PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

ered into a closed canon. Marcionism, an influential Christian movement at the time, totally rejected the Hebrew scriptures (and many of the books that were finally incorporated into the New Testament). Paintings in the Christian baptistery such as that of David slaying Goliath indicate that the congregation was certainly not Marcionite.

Were the Dura Christians influenced by gnostic writings? Gnostics taught that secret knowledge was the key to redemption, to being saved from a corrupt world. (The Greek term *gnosis* means "knowledge.") In the New Testament, the Gospel of John comes closest to being gnostic: "Know the truth and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). But the proto-orthodox church condemned Gnostics as heretics for excessively emphasizing knowledge as the means of salvation. We will return to the question of possible gnostic influence.

First, let's compare the artistic programs of the synagogue and the house-church. The synagogue's

"AN OASIS OF PAINTINGS springing up from the dull earth," excavator Clark Hopkins described the discovery of the Dura synagogue with vibrant biblical scenes covering its walls. One of the city's largest buildings, the synagogue abutted Dura's western wall (see drawing, left).

Painted in tempera on dry plaster smeared over mud-brick walls, the scenes surrounding the Torah niche in the center of the synagogue's western wall (photo below) present the triumph of the Israelites over their enemies through divine intervention. They include the anointing of David and the infancy of Moses (lower right tier); the Jerusalem Temple and the journey of the Ark of the Covenant among the Philistines, with their destroyed Temple (center right); the Exodus, with the drowning of Pharaoh's army (upper right); Elijah restoring the widow's son and the triumph of Mordechai and Esther (lower left); and the 12 tribes of Israel and the Consecration of the Tabernacle (center left). (The paintings are now in the National Museum of Syria, in Damascus.)

Benches, seating about 124 people, lined the walls of the synagogue. Five steps, just right of the Torah niche, created a raised seat for the synagogue leader.





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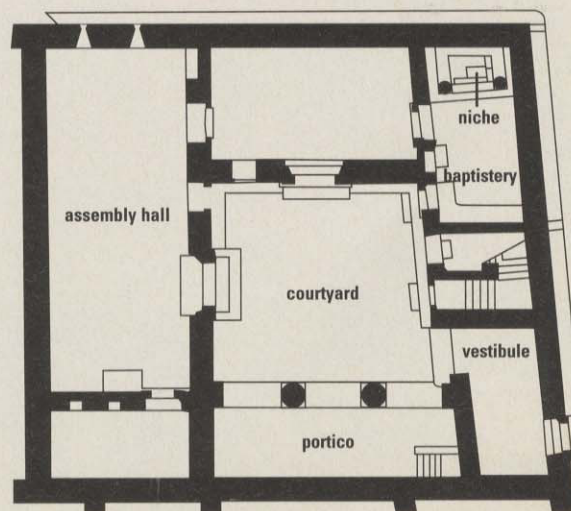
A PAINTED PROCESSION of eight figures once marched across the walls of Dura's third-century C.E. baptistery, shown after its removal from Syria and installation in the Yale University Art Gallery (above) and in a reconstruction drawing (opposite, top). Only the feet of five women remain on the eastern wall; the upper torsos of two figures and the elbow of a third have survived on the north wall.

At the head of the procession appears a large, white, gabled structure, identified by scholars as Jesus' tomb. To its left, in an arched niche in the western wall, stands the baptismal font. The painting above the font, now badly deteriorated (see drawing, opposite, bottom), depicts Jesus as "the good shepherd" who "lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Below Jesus, Adam and Eve grasp for fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.

Early Christians associated baptism with the resurrection of Jesus, as both promised salvation and deliverance from death, and they often celebrated the sacrament on Easter. The earliest Christians observed Easter in relation to the beginning of Passover, which could fall on any day of the week; later Christians moved to dissociate Easter from the Jewish calendar by observing it on a Sunday, the day, according to the Four Gospels, on which the resurrection occurred. Eventually, the weekly day of rest also moved to Sunday. Christians called Easter Sunday and the weekly holy day "the eighth day" because they commemorate Jesus'

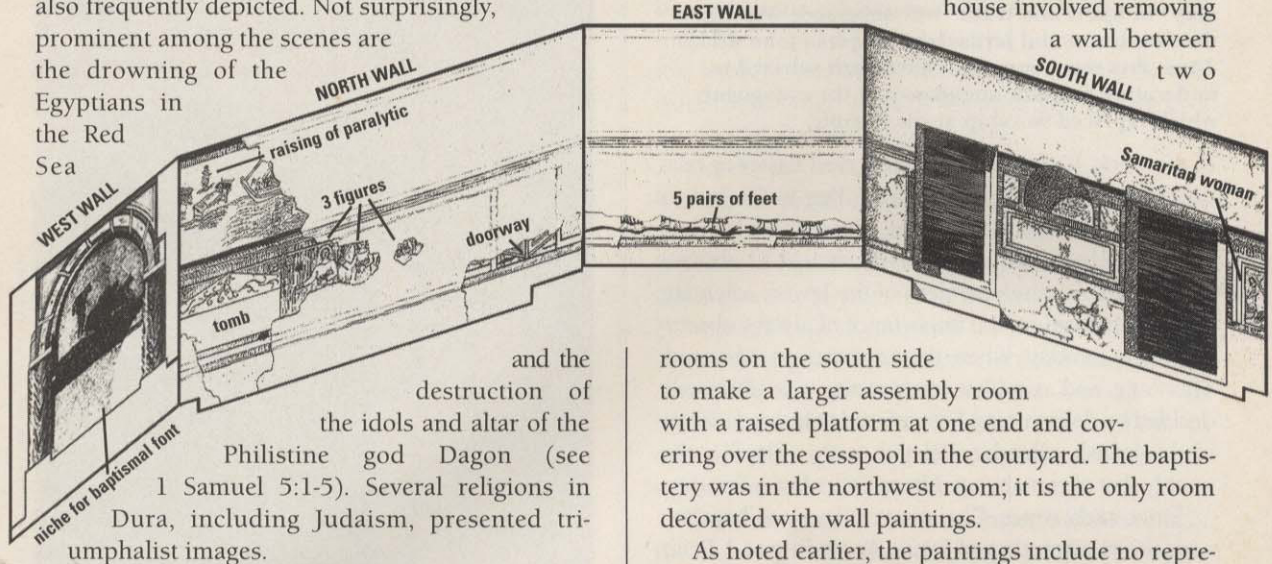
resurrection on the eighth day after Palm Sunday, when he entered Jerusalem.

The procession of eight figures represents these eight days of Holy Week and reinforces the Christian belief in the eighth day as the proper day of worship. Behind the first three figures appear fragmentary traces of another architectural structure, which scholars have interpreted as the entrance to Jesus' tomb. The first three figures, standing inside the tomb, thus represent the three days Jesus spent in the tomb before the resurrection.



extensive series of paintings emphasizes acts of God that distinguish Israel's history from its neighbors'. The holiness and power of the Ark of the Covenant is a prominent theme as is the Temple, which the synagogue itself, in some respects, emulates or temporarily replaces.

The defeat of Israel's enemies and their gods is also frequently depicted. Not surprisingly, prominent among the scenes are the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea



and the destruction of the idols and altar of the Philistine god Dagon (see 1 Samuel 5:1-5). Several religions in Dura, including Judaism, presented triumphalist images.

Turning to number symbology, the number seven appears repeatedly in the Dura synagogue. The continuing importance of the Jerusalem Temple is reflected in one synagogue painting that shows the Temple situated within seven walls, each one clearly indicated with a different color. We frequently find not only the seven-branched menorah (the best-known ancient symbol in synagogues), but also a peculiar depiction of seven sons in the scene of Samuel anointing David as King of Israel. According to the biblical account of this episode (1 Samuel 16), Samuel rejects David's seven older brothers before selecting him to be king. But the Dura picture shows a total of seven brothers—not eight—of equal height, including young David.⁹ A horizontal line of identically sized figures especially invites counting for symbolic purposes.

Other examples of number symbology in the Dura synagogue include several depictions of the 12 tribes, shown as 12 men of the same size.¹⁰

Incidentally, number symbology was not confined to the synagogue and the church at Dura. The repeated

emphasis of seven also appears in the *mithraeum* at Dura; the altar there, for example, has seven steps, which represent stages of initiation correlated to the planets.¹¹ Plaques in the *mithraeum* walls depict the 12 signs of the zodiac. Number symbology was common in Dura art.

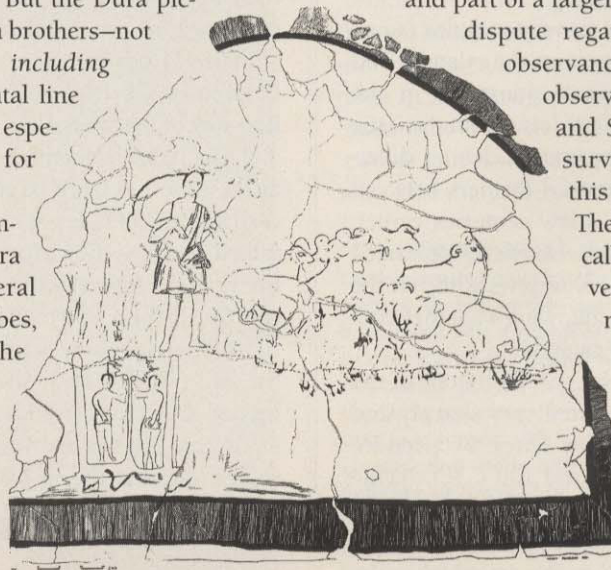
In the Christian building, the conversion from a house involved removing a wall between two

rooms on the south side to make a larger assembly room with a raised platform at one end and covering over the cesspool in the courtyard. The baptistery was in the northwest room; it is the only room decorated with wall paintings.

As noted earlier, the paintings include no representation of the Temple, the Ark of the Covenant or the seven-branched menorah, which are featured in the synagogue wall paintings. Except for the picture of David, the Christian art selections are quite different from those of the synagogue. And the Christian art makes quite different claims than the art in the synagogue.

Instead of emphasizing twelve and seven, the Christian building directs our attention to the number eight. For Christians of that time, the number eight represented Sunday, the eighth day. This was part of the contention between Jews and Christians, and part of a larger intra-Christian calendrical dispute regarding the date of Easter observance. Some early Christians observed both Saturday Sabbath and Sunday, and sermons have survived complaining about this practice.

The disputes included the so-called Quartodeciman controversy.¹² The term "quartodeciman" refers to early Christians who observed Easter in relation to the beginning of Passover, which starts at the end of the 14th day of the Jewish month of Nisan and which can fall on any day



THE SAMARITAN WOMAN draws water from the well in this painting from a wall in the Dura baptistery. In the Gospel of John, Jesus promises the Samaritan woman that everyone “who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but ... the water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14). The baptismal rite recalls this promise of eternal life through water.

Jesus also tells the Samaritan woman that worship “in spirit and truth” will supersede worship at the Samaritan and Jerusalem temples (John 4:21). Thus, this scene may also have been selected to undermine Sabbath attendance at the synagogue, which replaced worship at the Temple.

of the week. Early Christians observed Easter in relation to the start of Passover, according to the Jewish calendar, since that is when the Christian Holy Week occurred. Later, many Christians wanted to observe Easter on a date independent of the Jewish calendar, focusing instead on the importance of always observing it on Sunday, when the resurrection occurred. This long and complex controversy was ultimately decided by determining Easter Sunday independently of the Jewish calendar. Related to this dispute, the weekly day of rest changed from Saturday to Sunday.

Since early times, Christians associated baptism with the resurrection of Jesus. According to 1 Peter 3:20-21 in the New Testament, “[I]n the days of Noah ... eight persons were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you ... through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”¹³

Because of the symbolic association of resurrection and baptism, some early Christian communities considered Easter Sunday as an especially appropriate time for baptism. For example, Tertullian (about 200 C.E.) wrote, “The Passover [that is, Easter, before it was separated from the Passover] provides the day of most solemnity for baptism, for then was accomplished our Lord’s passion, and into it we are baptized.”¹⁴

Calendar calculations can be very complex (some Christian churches still disagree on the calendar and scholars still differ on several questions in the gospels’ chronology of the life of Jesus), but the issue has at least one clear consequence: Calendar differences are one of the most crucial dividers between communities. For example, a few centuries earlier, the Essenes (at Qumran and elsewhere) separated from and condemned their fellow Jews who ran the Jerusalem Temple in part for following what they considered a wrong and unholy calendar.

The Christian claim of the special nature of the eighth day, Sunday, was asserted very sharply and bitterly, for example, in the letter of pseudo-Barnabas 15:8-9 (written around 100 C.E.): “[T]he present Sabbaths are not acceptable to me ... I will make the beginning of the eighth day, that is, the beginning of another world ... We celebrate ... the



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eighth day on which Jesus arose from the dead.”

The claim that Sunday was superior to the seventh-day Sabbath continued well after the first century. In the second century C.E., Justin Martyr claimed that the eighth day “possesses a certain mysterious import, which the seventh day did not possess”;¹⁵ the eighth day, to Justin, was “a type of the true circumcision [newborn Jewish boys are circumcised on the eighth day] by which we are circumcised from error and wickedness through our Lord Jesus Christ who rose from the dead on the first day of the week.”¹⁶

Origen, an influential Christian who was active at the time the Dura baptistery was decorated (he died about 254 C.E.), wrote that “the number eight, which contains the virtue of the Resurrection, is the figure of the future world.”¹⁷ To Ambrose, a fourth-century bishop of Milan who sought the destruction of synagogues, is attributed an inscription at the Saint Thekla baptistery in Milan, Italy: “Eight-niched this church arises destined for holy rites, eight corners has its font, dignifying its gift. The sacred eight is fitting for this fair baptismal hall: here our people are truly reborn.”

From ancient times until today many baptismal buildings and rooms, as well as many baptismal

fonts, have been constructed in an octagonal shape.¹⁸

Polemic references to the eighth day rather than the seventh day as the Sabbath (the day of rest) are also frequent in eastern Christian literature. For example, the Syriac Acts of Judas Thomas relates a legend in which the apostle Thomas converts a king in India. Before he was baptized, "the king gave orders that the bath should be closed for seven days ... and ... on the eighth day they ... entered the bath."¹⁹ The third-century Syriac *Didascalia*—the title means "teachings" and refers to the teachings of the apostles it claims to contain—tells us that "the Sabbath itself is counted even unto the Sabbath and it becomes eight days" (*Didascalia* 26).

Though today Sunday is rarely called the eighth day, Sunday as the eighth day was clearly a prominent issue at the time of the Dura baptistery.²⁰

Do the paintings in the Dura house-church reflect this polemic?

Between the two doors leading into the baptistery room we see a depiction of David slaying Goliath—a scene not often found in a baptismal context. Naturally, the Christians identified with David, presented as an ancestor of Jesus (see Matthew 1:1 and Luke 3:31), rather than with Goliath. The small Christian community presumably hoped to overcome, as did the righteous little David, despite discouraging appearances, the non-believers represented by the brutish Goliath.

To the left of the font is a depiction of the Samaritan woman at the well. As narrated in John 4, Jesus speaks to her of the "living water"—hence the connection with baptism. Jesus also says to her that worship in the future would need to be "in spirit and truth"—and that this will supersede worship at the Samaritan and the Jerusalem tem-

ples: "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father" (John 4:21).

Above the font, Jesus Christ is depicted as the Good Shepherd (see drawing, p. 29). By itself, this image (borrowed from Greek art) would not be polemical. However, with the added drawing, beneath Jesus, of Adam and Eve reaching for the forbidden fruit, the whole indeed takes on a polemical aspect. As a whole the scene contrasts the old Adam, the fallen man, with the risen Christ as a reversal of the Fall from Paradise.

On the north wall's upper register, we see Jesus healing the paralytic. Jesus and the healed man gesture to a third man, not mentioned in the Bible, who is still on a bed.²¹ According to John 5, this healing takes place in Jerusalem on the Sabbath; "the Jews" complain that it is unlawful for the healed man to carry his bed on the Sabbath. The third man (and by extension, the viewer), therefore, is invited to be healed and to defy the Sabbath proscription. In short, in these paintings the seventh-day Sabbath is rejected in favor of the eighth-day Lord's Day.

This brings us to the most monumental scene of the house-church (see drawing, p. 29). It begins immediately adjacent to the baptismal font, takes up the entire lower register of the north wall, and continues around the corner, extending along the entire lower register of the east wall. This carefully laid-out scene includes a sarcophagus (presumably an allusion to Christ's burial), which reinforces the connection between baptism and rebirth. A number of figures walk toward this sarcophagus and toward the baptismal font. As one commentator has observed, "It seems that the painter represents the moment before the Resurrection, perhaps inspired by images of the *paternalia* (visits of relatives to the tombs)."²² Three figures are inside the tomb chamber (as indicated by the open door, for some reason not represented by a rolling stone); five more figures in identical garb approach outside the door—making a total of eight figures. This number of course corresponds to Sunday, seen as the eighth day, and the preferred time for baptism. These fig-

"TAKE UP YOUR MAT AND WALK" (John 5:8), Jesus (above center) commands the paralytic (at left), who carries his bed on his back, in this painting from the baptistery. But a group of Jews, the gospel story continues, warns the healed man, "It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat" (John 5:10). In the Dura painting, Jesus and the healed paralytic gesture to a second sick man, lying on a bed in the foreground, and invite him to be cured, too, in conscious defiance of Jewish law. The Bible does not specifically mention this second ill man, who may have been added in an attempt to portray the Jewish law regarding the Sabbath as invalid.



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ures approaching the sarcophagus, then, represent the eight days, from Palm Sunday to Easter. Three of them are within the tomb because Jesus was in the tomb for three days.²³

In the ancient world it was not uncommon to find time periods, such as days and seasons, personified as figures. For example, a draped statue from the second century C.E. found at Aphrodisias (in modern Turkey) is labeled in Greek *HMHPA*, that is, *hēmēra*, meaning "day."²⁴ Seasons are represented by figures in synagogue mosaics, such as at Beth Alpha in Israel, as well as in early Christian art, for example in the Via Latina catacomb in Rome.

In an extraordinary illustrated manuscript known as the Cotton Genesis, dating to about 500 C.E., the Greek text recounting the days of creation is illustrated with personified figures. Unfortunately, the manuscript was damaged in a fire in 1731, but watercolor copies of some of its illuminations had been made before the fire damaged it.²⁵ In addition to these watercolor copies, the same Cotton Genesis manuscript apparently was used as a pattern book for the 13th-century mosaic decoration on a dome of the San Marco church in Venice.²⁶ So, many of the manuscript's illustrations can be seen in fairly close—and impressive—copies in the church mosaic.

Thus it seems a reasonable inference that the eight figures in the Dura church scene represent the eight days of the Christian Holy Week, from the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem to the resurrection, from Palm Sunday to Easter.

It is uncertain whether the eight days are personified as Christian initiates arriving for baptism, or as "the Marys" (the women who were first to arrive at the tomb on Easter morning), or as angels. Perhaps they represent more than one of the above. In favor of an identification as angels, one could recall an idea recorded by Clement of Alexandria, a second-century Church father, that "days [*hēmerai*] were called angels."²⁷ A modern viewer might expect angels to have wings; but in ancient art angels did not always have wings. In the Dura synagogue painting of Jacob's dream, the angel walking up the heavenly ladder has no wings.²⁸

Another question: Was the Dura synagogue congregation aware of the Dura baptistery's claim that eighth-day worship had superseded seventh-day Sabbath worship? I think so. One of the synagogue paintings depicts eight identical figures. The scene represents Elijah's contest on Mt. Carmel with the priests of Baal (see 1 Kings 18). The biblical text tells us that 450 prophets of Baal contested with Elijah (1 Kings 18:19). The synagogue artist knew how to paint a crowd (as in the Exodus scene), but he nevertheless painted only eight prophets of Baal.

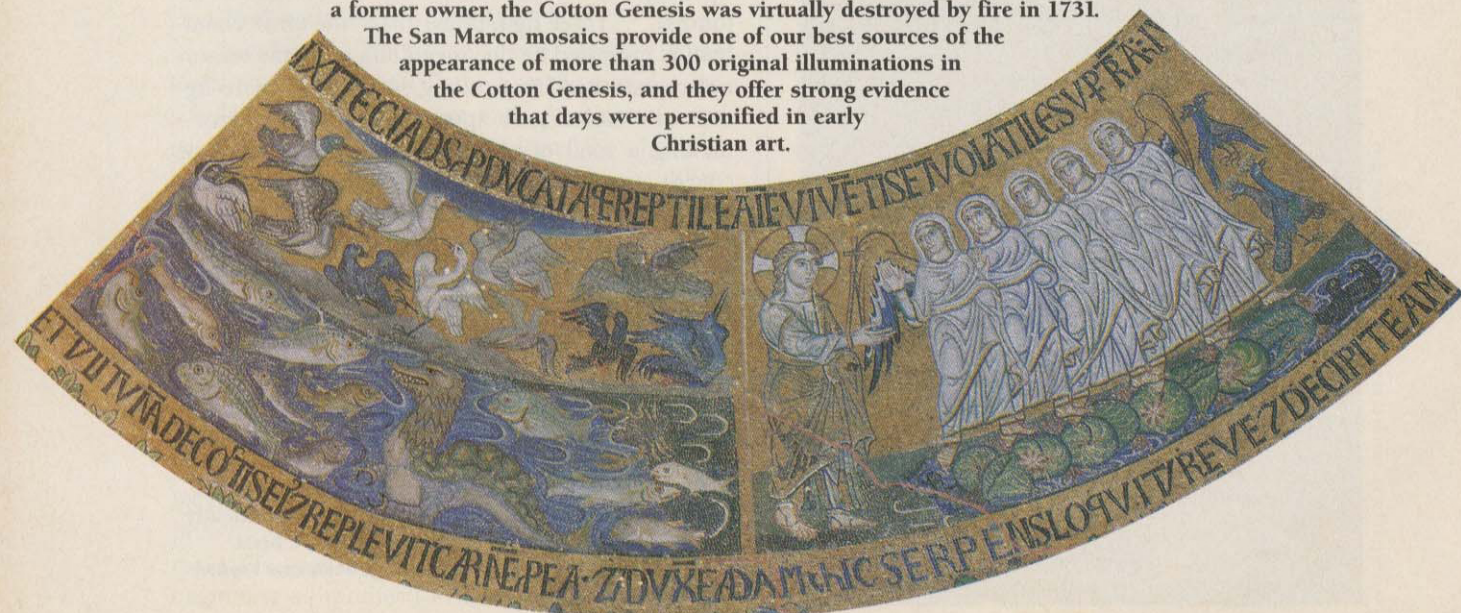
That the synagogue artist chose to depict the despised priests of Baal with eight identical figures reinforces the proposal that Jews as well as Christians in Dura were aware of the polemic claims attached to seventh- and eighth-day worship.

The Dura Christian community worshipped on Sunday and made a polemical issue of this distinc-

"SWARMS OF LIVING CREATURES" fill the waters and birds fly "across the dome of the sky" (Genesis 1:20), in this detail from the Creation Cupola in the Church of San Marco, Venice (see cover). At right, a youthful depiction of God as Christ the Logos blesses the five winged figures (their feet rest on lotus blossoms and a sinister crocodile), who watch over his work on the fifth day of Creation.

Although the mosaic dates to the 13th century C.E., it is based on scenes included in a Christian manuscript of Genesis made in Egypt around 500 C.E. Named after a former owner, the Cotton Genesis was virtually destroyed by fire in 1731.

The San Marco mosaics provide one of our best sources of the appearance of more than 300 original illuminations in the Cotton Genesis, and they offer strong evidence that days were personified in early Christian art.



EDWIN GOODENOUGH, SYMBOLISM IN THE DURA SYNAGOGUE, 1964/PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS



tion in their art. The synagogue congregation in Dura knew of this claim and reacted against it. While the polemic between Jews and Christians, needless to say, continued, the terms changed somewhat. For various reasons, including the church's campaign against the Gnostics, who especially emphasized this symbology of eight, later Christians less and less frequently described Sunday as the eighth day. Also, calling Sunday the eighth day is confusing while still using a calendar with seven-day weeks.²⁹

Many gnostic texts repeat and elaborate on the symbology of the eighth day. For instance, Theodotus, a second-century C.E. Gnostic, wrote that "the rest of the spiritual man takes place on the day of the Lord in the *ogdoad* [that is, the eighth day]."³⁰ And Tatian was said to have become a Gnostic, though both Gnostics and non-Gnostics used his *Diatessaron*. The question of possible gnostic influences on Dura Christians will likely be debated by experts on gnosticism.

The wall-paintings at Dura thus provide us an opportunity to see a representation of a Jewish and Christian polemic as it was expressed in one neighborhood in the mid-third century.³¹ BR

¹ Much scholarly analysis and debate followed these discoveries. See Paul V.C. Baur et al., *The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Preliminary Reports* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ., 1929-1952); Carl Kraeling, *The Excavations at Dura Europos, Final Reports*, vol. 8, pt. 1, *The Synagogue* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ., 1956; reprinted Hoboken: KTAV, 1979); Kraeling, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Reports*, vol. 8, pt. 2, *The Christian Building* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ., 1967), which included an earlier bibliography; a projected final report volume on paintings at Dura has been abandoned. See also, e.g., Marie-Henriette Gates, "Dura-Europos: A Fortress of Syro-Mesopotamian Art," *Biblical Archaeologist* 47 (1984), pp. 166-181; Joseph Gutmann, *The Dura-Europos Synagogue: A Re-evaluation* (1932-1992), rev. ed. (Atlanta:

"O, BAAL, ANSWER US," shout the prophets of Baal in their contest with the Israelite prophet Elijah to determine whose deity is truly God (1 Kings 18:26). Only the true God, they have determined, will answer a prayer to set fire to a sacrificial bullock lying on an altar, at center. The Baal-worshippers cry out in vain—their bullock remains intact, as depicted in this synagogue painting. But when Elijah prays, his bullock is immediately consumed by fire (1 Kings 18:38).

Although the Bible states that "Baal's prophets number 450" (1 Kings 18:22), the Dura artist reduces their ranks to eight: This painting may represent the synagogue's counterattack on the church's painted propaganda presenting the eighth day as the proper day of worship.

The small man standing inside the altar does not appear in the biblical story, but rather in a later midrash, or rabbinic elaboration on the story. According to this midrash, when the prophets of Baal realized they would fail, a man named Hiel agreed to hide within the altar to ignite the heifer from below. The Israelite God foiled their plan by sending a snake to bite Hiel, who died.

Scholars Press, 1992); Susan Matheson, *Dura-Europos: The Ancient City and the Yale Collection* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ., 1982); Ann Perkins, *The Art of Dura-Europos* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973); Michael I. Rostovtzeff, *Dura-Europos and Its Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1943); L. Michael White, *Domus Ecclesiae-Domus Dei: Adaptation and Development in the Setting for Early Christian Assembly* (Yale University dissertation, 1982); Hershel Shanks, "Dura-Europos: Window into a Vanished Jewish World," in *Judaism in Stone: The Archaeology of Ancient Synagogues* (New York: Harper & Row/Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1979), pp. 78-96; Annabel Jane Wharton, "Good and Bad Images from Dura Europos: Texts, Contexts, Pretexts, Subtexts, Intertexts," *Art History* 17 (1994), pp. 1-25.

For reports on the continued work at Dura, led by French and Syrian archaeologists, see *Syria* 63 (1986), 65 (1988) and 69 (1992).

² George D. Kilpatrick, "Dura-Europos: The Parchments and the Papyri," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 5 (1964), pp. 215-225.

endnotes continue on page 44

Dura-Europos

continued from page 33

³ Gutmann, "Early Synagogue and Jewish Catacomb Art and Its Relation to Christian Art," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II* 21:1 (1984), pp. 1313-1342.

⁴ Elias Bickerman, "Symbolism in the Dura Synagogue—A Review Article," *Harvard Theological Review* 58 (1965), pp. 127-151, here p. 145.

⁵ See Marcel Simon, "Remarques sur les synagogues à images de Doura et de Palestine," *Recherches d'histoire judéo-chrétienne* (Paris: Mouton, 1962), pp. 188-198, 204-208; and Herbert Kessler, "A Response to Christianity?" in Kurt Weitzmann and Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990), pp. 178-183.

⁶ William L. Petersen, *Tatian's Diatessaron: Its Creation, Dissemination, Significance, and History in Scholarship* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994).

⁷ A few scholars have argued for the presence of Jewish-Christians at Dura, but none of their arguments is persuasive. See Ignazio Mancini, *Archaeological Discoveries Relative to the Judaeo-Christians: Historical Survey*, *Studium Biblicum Franciscanum*, Col. Min. 10 (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1970), pp. 138-147, who makes claims concerning chi-rho monograms, but see also Richard Frye et al., "Inscriptions from Dura-Europos," *Yale Classical Studies* 14 (1955), pp. 127-201. And see Theodor Klauser, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* (JAC) 10 (1976), pp. 105-106. Jacob L. Teicher, for example, claims that the only Hebrew manuscript found at Dura is a Jewish-Christian document (in "Ancient Eucharistic Prayers in Hebrew [Dura-Europos Parchment D. Pg. 25]," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 54 [1963-64], pp. 99-109.) But when one recalls that Teicher also insisted that Qumran manuscripts (Dead Sea Scrolls) were Jewish-Christian documents as well, it will be no surprise that his theory has persuaded few. Another article attempted to show, with dubious evidence, that one artist worked on the paintings of both church and synagogue. (See Robert du Mesnil de Buisson, "L'inscription de la niche centrale de la synagogue de Doura-Europos," *Syria* 40 [1963], pp. 303-314.) He claims that two inscriptions in the two buildings refer to the same man (supposedly named Sisa or Siseos), but, even if true, this does not demonstrate that the individual was a Jewish-Christian artist. The artists who worked on the paintings need not necessarily have been either Jewish or Christian; they may have been hired contractors who were neither.

⁸ For discussion of varieties of ancient Jewish-Christianity and for evidence that the issue was of concern to rabbis, see Stephen Goranson, *The Joseph of Tiberias Episode in Epiphanius: Studies in Jewish and Christian Relations* (Duke University dissertation, 1990), pp. 73-97. Also note that the Babylonian Talmud disapproves of the *yom nosri*, a reference to the Christian calendar.

⁹ First Chronicles 2:13-15 lists only seven sons in a genealogy, as does the first-century C.E. Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, but if the artist was relying on these sources, he must have had some reason for rejecting the narrative account in Samuel. The great scholar of Jewish legends Louis Ginzberg "was puzzled the Dura artists should have painted six brothers [plus David], as he felt it unlikely that they would have resorted to the Chronicles or to Josephus' account" (as reported by 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] pp. 91-104, here p. 97.). Evidently, the artist chose, or was told by those who commissioned the artwork, to draw a total of seven—not eight—brothers.

¹⁰ Rachel Wischnitzer, "Number Symbolism in Dura Synagogue Paintings," in *Joshua Finkel Festschrift*, eds. Sidney Hoenig and Leon Stitskin (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1974), pp. 159-171.

¹¹ See David Ulansey, "Solving the Mithraic Mysteries,"

Biblical Archaeology Review, September/October 1994, pp. 40-53, 79; and Roger Beck, *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mystery of Mithras* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988).

¹² See Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Graves—A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1994), appendix 2, "Dating the Crucifixion (Day, Month, Date, Year), pp. 1350-1378.

¹³ For an example of an illustration of this verse, see the third- or fourth-century sarcophagus from Trier with eight figures in the ark; Reinhart Staats, "Ogdoas als ein Symbol für die Auferstehung," *Vigiliae Christianae* 26 (1972), pp. 29-52, fig. 2. Another early Christian sarcophagus from Pisa depicts, on the right, eight women mourning the deceased, with a Good Shepherd figure and twelve sheep on the left (Josef Wilpert, *I sarcofagi Cristiani antichi* [Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1929], vol. 1, pl. 83, no. 3. Klauser proposed (in JAC 8 [1965], note 101a) that the eight women plus the deceased on the Pisa sarcophagus represent the nine muses, but this is unlikely since none of the identifying accoutrements of the muses appear.

¹⁴ Tertullian, *De Baptismo* 19.

¹⁵ Justin, *Dialog with Trypho* 24, 1.

¹⁶ Justin, *Dialog with Trypho* 41, 4.

¹⁷ Origen, *Selecta in psalmos* 118, 164.

¹⁸ See Franz J. Dölger, "Zur Symbolik des altchristlichen Taufhauses, I. Das Oktagon und die Symbolik der Achtzahl," *Antike und Christentum* 4 (Münster: Aschendorf, 1934), pp. 153-187; Antonio Quacquarelli, *L'ogdoade patristica e suoi riflessi nella liturgia e nei monumenti*, *Quaderni di Vetera Christianorum* 7 (Bari: Adriatica, 1973).

¹⁹ Then, as part of a litany, Thomas, who anointed the king with oil and baptized him, said, "come, mother of seven houses, whose rest was in the eighth house." Translation from section 2 of the Syriac version by William Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1871), p. 166.

²⁰ See Edward C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1970); Willy Rordorf, *Sunday: The History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968); Jacob Vellian, ed., *Studies on Syrian Baptismal Rites*, *Syrian Church Series* 6 (Kottayam, India: C.M.S. Press, 1973); Josef A. Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy: To the Time of Gregory the Great* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959).

²¹ Because the drawings of the men and the beds are quite different, Kraeling's suggestion of a "before-and-after" scene is not persuasive (*The Christian Building*, pp. 59-60).

²² André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins*, *Bollingen Series* 35:10 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 1968), p. 124.

²³ Carl Kraeling's generally excellent final report on the Christian building and other publications have made major contributions to our understanding of this painting. Nonetheless, his overall interpretation of this scene is not persuasive. He argued that this painting included "before and after" scenes, even though it is difficult to imagine why. He proposed that two additional figures formerly appeared inside the tomb. However, after a complicated and tenuous argument, in which he looks to the Arabic translation of *Diatessaron*, searching for additional women, or "Marys," at the tomb, Kraeling admits that five "Marys" inside the tomb would appear to be "crowded ... into too narrow a space." (Kraeling, *The Christian Building*, p. 85.) In the three surviving ends of the groups of figures in the tomb, the artist left ample space before and after the group of women; it is most reasonable to assume the same generous space was left on the broken portion of the wall. The reconstruction of Henry Pearson, the excavation's architect, shows a total of eight figures. (See Baur et al., *The Excavations at Dura-Europos: Preliminary Reports* 5

[New Haven, CT: Yale Univ., 1934], pl. 41.) According to yet another participant, the excavation director, Clark Hopkins, "First on the north wall is shown the tomb with the three Marys behind, followed by five other women, around the corner of the north wall." (Clark Hopkins, *Discovery of Dura Europos* [New Haven, CT: Yale Univ., 1979], p. 114.)

²⁴ Kenan T. Erim, "Récents découvertes à Aphrodisias en Carie, 1979-1980," *Revue archéologique* (1982), p. 167, fig. 12; and *Aphrodisias: City of Venus Aphrodite* (New York: Facts on File, 1986), p. 122 (with a color photograph). Note that texts of the gnostic baptizing Mandaean refer to a personified Sunday figure.

²⁵ See Weitzmann and Kessler, *The Cotton Genesis: British Library Codex Cotton Otho B. VI*. The illustrations in the Manuscripts of the Septuagint 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986).

²⁶ Otto Demus, *The Mosaics of San Marco in Venice*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984); Johan J. Tikkanen, *Die Genesismosaik von S. Marco in Venedig und ihr Verhältnis zu den Miniaturen der Cottonbibel*, *Acta Societatis Scientiarum Fennicae* 17, (Helsinki, 1889; reprinted Soest: Davaco, 1972).

²⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Eclogae Propheticae* 56.

²⁸ Franz Landsberger, "The Origin of the Winged Angel in Jewish Art," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 20 (1947), pp. 227-254; Marie Thérèse D'Alverny, "Les anges et les jours," *Cahiers archéologiques* 9 (1957), pp. 271-300. See Weitzmann and Kessler, *The Cotton Genesis*, 40, for differing depiction of angels in the Cotton Genesis. In 1 Enoch 61:1, according to Ephraim Isaac, the version with no wings is older than the one with wings; in James Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), vol. 1, p. 7.

²⁹ The potential for confusion appears in a statement from Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* 6.16: "For one may venture to say that the eighth is properly the seventh, and the seventh actually the sixth; that is the eighth is properly a sabbath, and the seventh a day of work." See Everett Ferguson, "Was Barnabas a Chilist? An Example of Hellenistic Number Symbolism in Barnabas and Clement of Alexandria," in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians*, Abraham J. Malherbe Festschrift, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), pp. 157-167, here p. 166.

³⁰ *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 63, as recorded by Clement of Alexandria. Several gnostic texts found at Nag Hammadi also emphasize the *ogdoad* (as the eighth day or eighth heaven); see, for example, Gospel of the Egyptians 41, 58; Paraphrase of Shem 46; Testimony of Truth 55; Zostrianos 6; Origin of the World 102-104; Apocalypse of Paul 23-24. These texts are translated in James Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977, and later editions).

³¹ I thank Sebastian Brock, Susan Downey, Michael Fuller, Susan Keefe, Herbert Kessler, Leonard Rutgers and Annabel Wharton for helpful comments on earlier versions of this study, though they are not responsible for the opinions expressed here.

Collins

continued from page 20

suppression of a rich literature. The theologian may view it more positively, as it helped to focus the religious tradition. But even from that viewpoint, the loss was considerable, since the canonical scriptures were to a great extent deprived of their literary context. Happily, a large body of extracanonical literature has now been recovered. We should at least try to ensure that this literature is not lost again to posterity by a narrow emphasis on the canon.