

Tessa Rajak: “Surviving the Book: The Greek Bible and Jewish Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean Diaspora”

AND

Steven Fine: “Jewish ‘Identity at the Limes: The Jews of Dura Europos between Rome and Persia”

RESPONSE: LEE LEVINE

Tessa Rajak and Steven Fine address two very important issues in understanding Jewish culture of later antiquity – biblical translation and the languages used by the Jews on the one hand, and synagogue art and epigraphy on the other. Since the source materials discussed by each are quite disparate and deal with very different geographical regions, historical contexts, and cultural media, I shall begin by treating each separately and then conclude with some final reflections on the common issue raised by both.

Rajak’s paper on the Septuagint and the nature of its translation of the Hebrew Bible can be divided into two parts. The first two thirds deals with the Septuagint’s technique and rationale of translation while the last third discusses the centrality of the Hebrew language in defining Jewish identity in the Diaspora. Each of these topics merits a response.

Rajak first elucidates the distinctive idiomatic Greek in the translations of the Septuagint’s different books. She notes that the apparent deviations from the accepted and more usual Greek idiom are not due to the translators’ limited command of the language or the inferiority of their style, but rather to their desire to approximate as much as possible the style and idiosyncrasies of the Hebrew original. On one occasion

Rajak refers to this as a “literal” as against a “free” translation, and once again as a “foreignizing” vs. a “domesticizing” one, and adduces evidence that the Jews of Alexandria (where most, if not all, of these translations were produced) might well have an excellent command of the Greek idiom, as attested in the *Letter of Aristeas* and Philo. In addition, many examples are cited to demonstrate this desire to “Hebraize” the translated text, what Rajak refers to on one occasion as “a Septuagint ‘translation language’.” For example, ordinary Greek style makes frequent use of the particle *de*, but such usage is eschewed to render the translation closer to the Hebrew original. Moreover, Rajak suggests, the particular Greek word selected for translation, may have been chosen owing either to the “feel” that the Hebrew evoked or its auditory resonance, i.e., “the audible effects evocative of biblical Hebrew.” Finally, special attempts are often made to duplicate Hebrew style such as the repetition of verbs (an infinitive absolute plus verb) or selecting a Greek word that resembles a sound in the Hebrew original (homophony).

Philo may have exaggerated when he claimed that the Greek word chosen by the translators in the area of Jewish law corresponded exactly to the Hebrew original, but the attempt at approximating many aspects of the original has been convincingly demonstrated by Rajak. Thus, the exercise of translating was not only to render the sacred text in a language that could be understood by a particular audience, but also to preserve in this translation memories of and associations with the original Hebrew text. Rajak refers to this as a form of resistance. While I have serious reservations as to whether such post-colonial terminology widely used in modern scholarship is always appropriate for describing ancient societies wishing to preserve ancestral traditions, the fact remains that the Septuagint does reflect the desire of Diaspora Jews

to accommodate to their environs while recognizing the need to preserve their ancestral traditions, however perceived.

This insight is most illuminating and joins a growing awareness of the complexities of Hellenization as heretofore understood. The fact is that modern scholarship has shifted its focus regarding this topic several times over the last centuries.

- 1) At first, and in fact following the traditional narrative, the notion of Hellenization was viewed as either anathema or irrelevant and marginal to mainstream, normative Judaism.
- 2) It took a series of scholarly works in the mid-twentieth century, commencing with Lieberman's *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (1942) and *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (1950), Goodenough's *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (13 vols.: 1953–68), Smith's "Palestinian Judaism in the First Century" (1956); Schalit's *König Herodes* (1969), and, finally, Hengel's *Judentum und Hellenismus* (1969), to radically redefine the parameters of the discussion. Moreover, the continuous flow of newly excavated archaeological material dating from both Byzantine Palestine and the Diaspora continuously highlight the degree to which the Jews were firmly embedded in the wider material culture of their times, including architectural, artistic, and epigraphical remains.
- 3) The last third of the twentieth century brought to the fore new perspectives and sets of questions that offer a refinement and greater sophistication of the phenomenon of Hellenization. One challenge was to determine exactly how much Hellenism existed at any given time (and not just Hellenism globally), in which sectors of society (rich-poor, urban-rural), in which areas of life (daily life, names, language, material culture, beliefs and practices), and, when appropriate, in which

regions of Judaea/Palestine. Finally, there is the chronological component, the assumption being that as time passed the effects of Hellenism were more widely felt.

A second challenge is the realization that the dynamic involved in this interaction of Hellenistic and indigenous cultures was complex, involving selectivity, adoption, adaptation, and at times outright rejection. In many instances, influences were adopted and internalized without eliminating or compromising inherited traditions. And while there was virtually no adoption without some sort of adaptation, Jews were not required – nor were they prepared for the most part – to abandon the diachronic dimension in order to appreciate and cultivate the synchronic one. Thus, it is not difficult to identify instances in which the Jews rejected Hellenistic patterns (e.g., Hasmonean aniconism) or, more interestingly, nurtured new areas of cultural expression stimulated by outside factors (e.g., the appearance of later forms of Jewish art, the use of symbols). In this last respect, Bowersock has proposed a useful formulation in noting that through its wide range of cultural expression in art, language, and thought, Hellenism offered the East “an extraordinarily flexible medium of both cultural and religious expression. It was a medium not necessarily antithetical to local and indigenous traditions. On the contrary, it provided a new and more eloquent way of giving voice to them.”¹

What has become eminently clear from the above is that one must consider both diachronic and synchronic factors in order to fully understand Jewish society at any given point in history. In certain circles and in certain realms of society, one

¹ G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 7.

component may be more dominant than another, but both dimensions were always at play.

The evolution of Jewish culture and society may be compared to a river that widens and increases its capacity as it flows toward the sea. Among the most significant of the tributaries contributing to the river's flow are those influences that the Jews have absorbed from the cultures with which they came into contact. This dynamic was at play in rabbinic culture as well as in Jewish society generally. Without such influences, Jewish civilization today would have a radically different appearance. Thus, at any specific stage in its history, Jewish culture (religion included) may be viewed as an array of traditions and institutions, many of which had been forged through contact with non-Jewish cultures whose influence had become part and parcel of the Jewish enterprise.

It is in this larger context that Rajak has furnished a valuable example of this complex dynamic of the meeting of Jewish and Greek cultures. She has shown us that the Septuagint translation provides a stellar illustration of how Jews not only adjusted to their Hellenistic environment, but also balanced this adjustment with a not-inconsequential modicum of indigenous, Hebraic associations.

Turning now to the last part of Rajak's article, a claim is made for the ongoing importance of the Hebrew language, from the time of the Restoration under Persian rule, through and including Late Antiquity. In order to demonstrate this prominence, she cites a series of examples, such as Nehemiah's association of intermarriage in his day with the loss of Hebrew, the Qumran documents, the palaeo-Hebraic scripts on Hasmonean and Revolt coinage, Bar Kokhba's letters, the interpretation of problematic terms in 2 Maccabees and Josephus, as well as an assortment of rabbinic

statements praising the Hebrew language. The list is, at first glance, impressive and spans the entire period of classical antiquity.

Assessing the precise importance of any given language at any specific time is always a daunting task, and regarding this particular proposal, there are several methodological issues that ought be addressed: (1) the sources Rajak invokes are highly selective and little attempt is made to contextualize them. Missing are the many attestations regarding the widespread use of Aramaic and Greek in the Second Temple period, as, for example, the use of Aramaisms in most Hebrew books from this era, the use of Aramaic in all public documents ascribed to the Pharisees, the alleged statements in Aramaic by Jesus in the New Testament, and the use of Aramaic translations in synagogue settings (so that the Torah readings would be understood by the community), a view still held by an overwhelming majority of scholars; (2) much of the evidence cited has to do with specific groups whose religious (Qumran; the rabbis) or nationalist (Bar Kokhba) agendas were highly pronounced and did not necessarily reflect the population at large; and (3) the archaeological material, evidence of what people in fact did, and not what some individual authors of literary works may have asserted, is never brought into the conversation. So, for example, 35% of the inscriptions in the Jerusalem necropolis were in Greek and this figure jumps to 78% in Bet She‘arim, 90% in Jaffa, and 78% in Rome. Most of the other inscriptions were in Aramaic (except in Rome, where almost everything else was in Latin), although, admittedly, in a number of cases from a funerary context, it is hard to distinguish between the Semitic languages (Hebrew and Aramaic). Synagogue dedicatory inscriptions from Late Antiquity were likewise overwhelmingly in Aramaic and Greek, although in some of the more remote areas of Palestine (Upper Galilee, southern Judaea) Hebrew is in evidence. Even in the Dura synagogue, as Fine

has noted, Hebrew appears only on one fragmentary parchment found near the synagogue building. In the building itself, the inscriptions are broken down as follows: 22 in Aramaic, 19 in Greek and 15 in Persian.

Moreover, in the two main Jewish cities of Tiberias and Sepphoris, Hebrew dedicatory inscriptions are entirely absent and appear only as single-word identifications for the zodiac signs and seasons. In Tiberias, ten of the eleven inscriptions are in Greek and one is in Aramaic, while in Sepphoris, nineteen are in Greek and eight are in Aramaic. An account in the Talmud Yerushalmi drives home the point that Hebrew was far from dominant in Jewish society. It tells of a synagogue in Caesarea around the year 300, where the congregation prayed in Greek and they were unable to recite even the most basic of Jewish prayers, the *Shema*, in Hebrew.

Thus, Rajak's intriguing presentation of hints of and associations with the Hebrew original of the Bible may well have characterized the Septuagint's translations, and, indeed, Hebrew did achieve a sacred status at some point in antiquity. But all this might have been accomplished even without Hebrew having played a central role in the everyday life of the Jews generally.

Fine's choice of Dura Europos as his topic of discussion requires little explanation or justification. It is universally agreed that Dura is the outstanding example of an ancient synagogue. Its plan and location are well documented, its remains are exceptionally well preserved, including fresco paintings that are altogether extraordinary. Moreover, we are well informed about its local urban context and the dozen-or-so other religious buildings in the town. The town's location on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire and its having changed hands a number of times

throughout its history likewise accord this synagogue a most unique place-among ancient synagogues.

Fine notes many interesting aspects at the intersection of this synagogue's art and its inscriptions. For example, the scene showing Samuel anointing David appears immediately above the chair on which the synagogue leader, Samuel, presumably sat. Similarly, the Purim scene, which took place in Susa, the capital of Persia, features Esther, King Ahasuerus, and Haman, and is accompanied by inscriptions of no less than six Persian officials.

Owing undoubtedly to the constraints of time and space, Fine addresses only in passing a series of important issues and disputes connected with the Dura synagogue. Some involve interpretations of specific panels as, for example, the identification of the four large figures in the center of the western wall above the Torah shrine, the decipherment of which would add enormously to our knowledge of the brand of Judaism in Dura. An even more basic issue is the relationship between the Dura synagogue and rabbinic culture, a question debated by scholars for over half a century. Fine makes his position clear that such a tie existed, and his argument is spelled out more fully in his book, *Art and Judaism*.

In the paper before us, Fine concentrates on the three types of inscriptions rendered in three languages. Both the Aramaic and Greek inscriptions were used for identifying various scenes or figures, for donor inscriptions, and for official synagogue declarations (e.g., the date of the founding of the building and the names of its officials). Moreover, Persian inscriptions, all found in the lowest register of the synagogue's walls, record the visits of Persian officials to the building and their remarks.

Thus, given the frontier location of this town, the many religious and ethnic communities resident therein, and the assortment of languages evidenced in the synagogue building, Fine is certainly correct in emphasizing this local context as a crucial factor in trying to decipher the role and meaning of this building's art and inscriptions. Indeed, the local context is critical not only for Dura, standing as it does in splendid isolation from other Jewish communities, but indeed for virtually all Jewish communities in Late Antiquity.

The primacy of the local context in the Jewish world of Late Antiquity is essential to bear in mind. Communal autonomy characterized the entire Jewish world and stood behind the enormous diversity reflected in its art and inscriptions throughout Late Antiquity. Local needs, tastes, and cultural-religious proclivities were decisive variables in determining a given synagogue's policies. There was no single umbrella authority that determined what and how a synagogue should do, either on the architectural, artistic, linguistic, behavioral, or even liturgical level. Thus, if one wishes to discover why certain motifs were used in a specific time and place, and what they were intended to signify, at least originally, the answer inevitably lies in decisions made by a particular artisan, patron, communal leader, or local community when embarking on such a project.

Why did some communities make use of figural art and others did not? Why do biblical scenes and personalities appear only in certain locales? Why did one synagogue depict Helios in all his pagan glory (Hammat Tiberias), another by substituting the sun for an anthropomorphic figure (Sepphoris), and still another by recording the names of the zodiac signs in inscriptions, without any pictorial representation ('En Gedi)? On another plane, no two synagogue buildings are identical; their plans, architecture, art, and inscriptions exhibit a remarkable diversity.

In the Diaspora, for example, Sardis is a far cry from Dura, as is Ostia from Stobi, while in Byzantine Palestine, despite geographical propinquity, Capernaum is worlds apart from Hammat Tiberias, as is Rehov from Bet Alpha and Jericho from Na'aran. In most cases, any answers to the above queries must be speculative. With the exception of fourth-century Hammat Tiberias and third- to fifth-century Bet She'arim, no literary sources illuminate the immediate social, communal, or cultural contexts, nor can any shed light on the considerations that might have led to these different artistic choices.

Given Dura's monumental artistic remains, its relative isolation from other Jewish communities, and the fact that it is unattested in any contemporary source, the possibility of deciphering the meaning (if, indeed, there was any one meaning!) of this synagogue's magnificent paintings is remote. Nevertheless, as Fine has indicated, many attempts have been made to do so, relating the frescoes to rabbinic literature, Late Antique Jewish poetry, messianism, mysticism, and so on.

Given the fact that this synagogue boasts a lavish and stunning display of art, and taking into consideration that we are dealing with a remote community, small in size, and existing for no more than a generation or two, how are we to explain this phenomenon? At first it was assumed that the Dura building represented the tip of the iceberg and that similar specimens of sophisticated Jewish art certainly existed in the large metropolitan centers of the Diaspora. However, what has become more and more compelling after 76 years of study is that the art of the Dura synagogue seems best explained as being of local vintage, solidly embedded in its Duran and Mesopotamian context. Virtually all aspects of the synagogue building, its architecture, art, and inscriptions appear to have been an outgrowth of the regnant

styles and practices ubiquitous on the Mesopotamian scene in general, and at Dura in particular.

Important for any endeavor to understand this art is its chronology. Two other nearby buildings, the church and the Mithraeum, also underwent considerable renewal and expansion at precisely the same time, ca. 240 CE. Moreover, the decorated rooms in each (the sanctuaries of the synagogue and Mithraeum and the baptistery of the house-church) all face west, as evidenced by their main decorative schemes that are so oriented as well. Each building had some sort of *aedicula* at the western end, the Torah shrine of the synagogue, the cult niche of the Mithraeum, and the baptismal font of the church, and each was approached by steps. The niche of the Mithraeum was flanked by two columns and two large figures, just as the Torah shrine had twin columns by its side and four large figures just above it, also on either side.

It is most interesting that the decorative schemes of these three buildings differ radically from those of other Dura sanctuaries that featured sacrificial processions. Each of these three religious buildings, contrastingly, contained artistic representations that emphasized its own unique historical/mythological heritage. The church baptistery bears scenes from the Hebrew Bible (Adam and Eve, David and Goliath), the New Testament – scenes of the Good Shepherd, the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus walking on the water and healing the paralytic, the women at the empty tomb, etc., and the Mithraeum – numerous scenes from the life of Mithras as well as various cosmogonical symbols, including the zodiac signs and several cult prophets or magi.

The main hall of the Dura synagogue, as we have heard, bore decorations on its ceiling and, more importantly, on all four of its walls, which were divided into a series of horizontal registers from floor to ceiling, with the three main ones displaying

an astoundingly rich variety of scenes drawn from biblical narratives. Virtually every story in the Bible was represented in some sixty different panels, about half of which have been preserved. Above the center of the western wall, breaking the narrative theme, is there a series of depictions replete with symbolic and religious connotations – the façade of the Temple, the *'Aqedah*, Jewish symbols, scenes of blessing future generations, and the four large figures referred to above.

These three religious communities, all relative newcomers to Dura, refurbished their buildings at the same time, each using a decorative scheme that highlighted its particular *Heilsgeschichte* – its sacred icons or symbols (the synagogue and Mithraeum), and its revered leader (Moses) or god.

We are suggesting, therefore, that the unique display of Jewish art at Dura was beholden to the local scene and should be viewed as less connected with the more extensive art of the fourth to seventh centuries, as is usually the case, but, more importantly, in the context of the other third-century sites, such as the Bet She‘arim and Roman *necropoleis*. The latter two eschewed any and all biblical scenes, and their Jewish component is expressed exclusively via religious symbols. This contrast between Dura, on the one hand, and Palestine and Rome further west, on the other, is striking and can only be accounted for by the assumption that the Dura community was located in a different artistic-cultural realm, where Mesopotamian influence prevailed and where the Jews shared the artistic proclivities of the contemporary Dura communities that were also building sanctuaries.

The second and third centuries were a period of religious and cultural ferment across the Roman world, and Jewish communities were not immune from such developments. As formulated by Case almost eighty years ago: “At no period before or since in the history of civilization as known to us have so many separate religious

movements flourished at one time within a single area so thoroughly unified culturally and politically as was the Roman Empire.”²

Rives, for his part, has described this reality as follows: “The period from Augustus to Constantine was in terms of religious developments one of the richest, perhaps the richest, in the history of Europe and the Mediterranean world.”³

Such a phenomenon seems to apply equally to Jewish communities and is reflected not only in the realm of art, but in the emergence and early stages of rabbinic Judaism as well.

Despite the vastly different foci of these two papers, one focusing on the policy and outlook of the Septuagint translators and the other dealing with epigraphical remains in the far Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, a common thread does, in fact, tie them together, one which reflects a crucial dimension of Jewish life in the Greco-Roman orbit. Both engage matters of Jewish identity, one primarily in the pre-70 CE Roman Diaspora (mainly Alexandria), the other in the third-century CE small frontier town of Dura on the Euphrates, only recently having been taken over by the Roman army.

Why was this issue so important? One could, of course, claim that Jewish identity was always paramount, witness the modern obsession with it. However, generally speaking, this concern was not always front and center in the past, but ancient Jewish society may have been more predisposed than others to address it. In the Greco-Roman period, spanning some one thousand years from the conquest of Alexander in 332 BCE until the Arab conquest culminating in 640 CE, Jewish life underwent an ongoing series of fundamental changes. It is doubtful whether someone

² S. J. Case, “Popular Competitors of Early Christianity,” *Journal of Religion* 10 (1930), 55.

³ J. Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustus to Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 2.

living any time in the early Second Temple period would have had much in common with a Jew living around 600 CE. From the introduction of Hellenism, the religious persecutions under Antiochus IV and the subsequent emergence of the Hasmonean state, followed by the conquest of Rome and the rule of Herod and his progeny, the formation of a far-flung Diaspora, the destruction of the Second Temple and the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt, to the emergence of rabbinic Judaism and the triumph of Christianity, virtually every facet of Jewish identity was affected. The mechanisms for coping with these developments were many, but, as noted above, they invariably involved an attempt to synthesize various forces impacting on a specific community at a certain time, yet leaving the ancestral heritage very much intact in each instance.

Given the focus on the local autonomy of the far-flung Jewish communities, identities would have varied greatly, not only because of synchronic factors linked to different historical contexts, but diachronically as well, owing to significant developments within the Jewish community itself. If identity is shaped on changing circumstances and the responses they evoke, then the frequently wrenching transformations occurring in Jewish life throughout antiquity could only give rise to changing identities.

However, it must be remembered that the forces leading to responses and changes in Jewish life went hand in hand with the steady growth of a ever growing common cultural heritage that, while often influenced by outside factors, was intended to preserve a sense of unity among the disparate Jewish communities of Late Antiquity. Thus, as noted above as well, when searching for components of Jewish identity in antiquity – be they language, art, inscriptions, liturgy, and more – both diachronic and synchronic elements must always be addressed.

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The ongoing process of creative tension and interdependence between tradition and reinvention has been one of the basic yet enduringly elusive characteristics of the Jewish historical experience up until our own day.