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**THE CROSSING OF THE RED SEA AS AKEDAH IN THE SYNAGOGUE
AT DURA EUROPOS (MID. 3RD C. AD).
AN ANALYSIS OF MESSAGE STRUCTURE IN A WORK OF PLASTIC ART**

“There will be a highway for the remnant of his people
that is left from Assyria,
as there was for Israel
when they came up from Egypt.”
(Is. 11,16)

The oldest Jewish wall-paintings known to us cover the walls of a synagogue at Dura Europos on Euphrates. The synagogue in its present shape is a result of the rebuilding of an earlier synagogue which was situated on the same site.¹ Four figurative strips ran along its interior walls. Three higher strips illustrated old-testament texts.² The most prominent is that which depicts *The Crossing of the Red Sea* (see the fig. 1).

The complex composition of *The Crossing* has given rise to the controversy among scholars as to how many scenes make up the picture (the numbers suggested are: 3,4,5,6)³. Thus the only way to

¹ R. Mesnil du Buisson, *Les peintures de la synagogue de Doura-Europos 245-256 après J.-C.*, Roma 1939, 7-13.

² A. Grabar, 'Le thème religieux des fresques de la synagogue de Dura', *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 44 (1941), 26-27; M. Rostovtzeff, 'Die Synagoge von Doura', *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und für Kirchengeschichte*, 42 (1932), 203-218; *Reallexicon für Antike und Christentum*, vol.4, 363; Mesnil du Buisson, op.cit., chart VIII. See C. Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos*, New Haven, London 1979; K. Weitzmann, H.O. Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art.*, Washington DC 1990; A.J. Wharton, *Good and Bad Images from the synagogue of Dura Europos: Contexts, Intertexts*, *Art. History* 17 (march 1994) 1-25.

³ M. Rostovtzeff, op.cit., 209 names four scenes, the exodus, the wandering of the Israelites toward the sea, the drowning of the Egyptians, the miracle in Mara; with the division into decades, centuries, and chiliads. Mesnil du Buisson, op.cit., 30 gives five scenes, the seven plagues, the flight from Egypt, the Moses while dividing the sea, the drowning Egyptians, the landing of the Israelites on the shore along with the incorporated sixth scene of the miracle in Mara. R. de Vaux, 'Un détail de la synagogue de Dura', *Revue biblique* 47(1938), 383 divides the painting into three scenes, the exodus from Egypt, Moses closing the waters of the sea, the miracle in Mara. C. Kraeling, *The synagogue*, New Haven 1956, distinguishes four scenes, the exodus from Egypt, the

avoid errors and inconsistencies when interpreting the painting is an analysis of the composition structure and a precise description of the picture, which draws on this analysis (see the fig. 2). It is important to approach every element of the painting with the awareness of its being a sign, a word aimed at the spectator. Any chance should be ruled out here. All the attempts at reducing, multiplying or diverging from the events recorded by the **written story** are clues which enable us to read the **painted story**.

Helpless as regards the lack of unambiguous sources and anxious about the multiplicity of interpretations we are forced to go back to the very painting. It is invested with the sufficient information and 'signals' to speak for itself. In order to read the picture exhaustively its every detail has to be taken into account because each detail plays an important role as material from which the structure of the painting's message is built of. We must be persuaded that there are no accidental or unjustified moves in plastic art. Thus such elements of the picture as the arrangement of space, the direction of movement, the way the foreground and the middle distance are related, as well as the placement of color, the nature of the occurring lines, and most of all the context in which a given element appears are all semantically relevant. For not only do all these elements result from the style-predominant at the time or belong to a tradition in plastic art but they are the language of painting as well. Another important factor, elsewhere regarded perhaps as extra-scientific but here considered as an important contribution to the study of plastic picture, is that of an elusive impression the picture gives to the beholder. In the slow unraveling of consecutive layers of the representation's content, or in other words, in the process we can designate as the hermeneutics of the picture, the intellect, senses, as well as our emotions and even our sensitivity should cooperate. After all they, too, contribute to the creation of the picture we are to read. The reading of the picture proceeds in three stages: morphological analysis, description of the message structure, and hermeneutic interpretation. I introduce here the notion of morphological analysis to emphasize the fact that the picture is an organic whole in which all the elements are connected and condition one another. There is no room for the morphological analysis of the painting in this article. Instead, it is devoted to the conclusions drawn from this analysis i.e. to the description of the message structure and the hermeneutics of the picture.

On the basis of the morphological analysis I suggest a reconstruction of the composition of the painting that is made up of only three scenes which should be read from the right to the left in accordance with the Hebrew direction of narration (see the fig. 3).⁴ A greater number of scenes given by other scholars results, I believe, from the wrong understanding of the composition's character. I am of the opinion that each scene has features of a certain drama put on stage. The situation, being a drama brought to a standstill, is conceived in such a way that it includes the development of events in

march of Israelites and the dividing of the waters, the march across the desert, the miracle in Mara. Kraeling describes the second scene as strangely displaced and incomprehensible. He claims that because of its end being in the sea the first group of the Israelites is redundant. E.R. Goudenough and M. Avi-Yonah in: *Encyclopaedia Judaica* vol. 6, col. 281 names four scenes. The Israelites while leaving Egypt, Moses when dividing the sea, the drowning Egyptians, the twelve families of Israel marching along the dry sea bed. See: A.J. Warton, op.cit., 12-13.

⁴ J. Dekers, *Der alttestamentliche Zyklus von S. Maria Maggiore in Rome*, Bonn 1976, 169 - 171 defies the thesis that the direction of a narration of this kind is characteristic of Jewish art. He shows that at Dura it is composition-based, and that the artist intended to orientate the direction of the scene onto *the* axis of the wall that is to say, toward *the* painting of the Torah (the sacrifice of Isaac, a chandelier). I copied the drawing after: Mesnil du Buisson, op.cit., chart XV-XVII.

time, their result as well as their cause presented in the background or conjectured. The first scene depicts the Israelites¹ approaching the shore of the Red Sea (result) against the background of the walls of the place of their enslavement which they had left i.e. Egypt (cause). In scene number two they sing thanksgiving songs (result) after the miracle of *the Crossing the sea* (cause). And scene number three depicts the miracle in Mara (result) after the organizing of the People into the twelve tribes of Jacob's (cause). Scenes two and three are superimposed onto each other.

Mesnil du Buisson called the composition style of *The Crossing* continuative and bound.⁵ It is continuative for the scenes appear side by side in close causal relation to each other. On the other hand, it is bound because the figure of Moses links the scenes appearing in bath of them simultaneously. Such an approach entails more scenes: I. the seven plagues; II. the exodus; III. the dividing of the waters of the sea; IV. the drowning of the Egyptians; V. the landing on the shore and the miracle in Mara. Here scenes two and four exist only as conjectures. The composition gets very complex and inconsistent. As a matter of fact the kind of dynamism du Buisson suggests does not really occur in the scenes at Dura.⁶ The only dynamic accent is the figure of Moses, who energetically strides in the first scene. All the elements of the scene are 'frozen', giving the impression of blocks and there is no communication between them. This is very well formulated by Perkins who wrote: "The overall effect of the composition of The Exodus is a series of heavy vertical blocks ...".⁷

My thesis that the scene from Dura consists of three as-if-staged images, has been inspired by the study of Perkins concerning the composition style of Durene painting in general. According to her one of the characteristics of that style, which has its roots in the art of Mesopotamia, is a tendency **to create such as-if-staged pictures in order to present a narration.**⁸

The way of reading the composition of the scene which depicts *The Crossing of the Red Sea* concerns the painting in the shape that has lasted up to the present day, as it is known that the synagogue was partly repainted. In the first place it is the figure of Moses of the second scene that draws attention since it differs from the rest with its height, volume, meticulousness of execution and the likeness of face. There is a caption reading 'Moses' next to him as if the painter had thought that the spectator could have some difficulty in recognizing the figure. A hypothesis can be put forward that the figure was added later in connection with the changed conception of the painting. Moreover, the stripes, which are to symbolize the twelve roads the Israelites wandered are executed rather awkwardly; they are painted behind the two figures of Moses due to the lack of space, as if they were added at the last moment. This fact has bearing on the complexity of the construction of the second

⁵ Mesnil du Buisson, op.cit.

⁶ A. Perkins, *The Art of Dura Europos*, Oxford 1973, 58 writes on the movement in the paintings at Dura: "In the Durene style there is no rapid action, there are only vague suggestions of abrupt movements."

⁷ A. Perkins, op.cit., 60 describes the Red Sea in the following way: "The colorful water, dark green with light hues, the red and brown bodies create the effect of a tapestry in the center of the painting;" Perkins designates the composition of The Crossing scene at Dura as 'dappled' because the block-like configuration of all the elements of the scene gives such an impression. A composition at this kind rules out any movement due to the lack of plastic connection between the components of the scene.

⁸ Op. cit., 118.

scene (in the background of the scene three) and on the double role played by the group of Israelites⁹. In addition, the overall impression the composition of the picture makes on the beholder defies the thesis about the multiplicity of scenes in the painting, for it is composed of two parts divided by the strip of the sea. This brings about the idea that the artist intended to show two stories with the Red Sea as a link or a border between them.

Given such premises I believe that originally the artist-intended to present only two scenes namely the exodus from Egypt and the miracle in Mara. Having accepted this assumption we can see that the composition of the whole painting becomes obvious and that the individual scenes are clearly built. The scene earlier referred to as the second (getting to the shore and singing thanksgiving songs) disappears in this configuration because on the other side of the sea there is only one scene, the miracle in Mara, well elaborated along with the People organized into the tribes and with Manus Dei.

I am of the opinion that the painting as a whole must have been expanded. The wide strip of the sea is filled with the drowning Egyptians, either in order to reinforce the dramatic quality of the events or as an illustration of the actual fact. Perhaps the idea was after all, to show important participants in the events, especially as there is no other image of the Egyptians in the painting. The image of the drowning is not a full scene. Moreover, it would be inconsistent temporally because the Israelites only draw near to the sea. In order to introduce the motif of the sea in the composition the sea shore was linked with the left part of the painting, that is with the crowd of the Israelites who belong to the scene of the miracle in Mara, by means of dark strips. The figure of Moses was added as well, out of necessity being of a smaller size, and in order to strengthen the unity of the content of all elements Manus Dei was painted for the second time. A new scene has thus appeared in the background of the miracle in Mara, and due to this its structure is more complex than that of other scenes.

The content of *The Crossing of the Red Sea* at Dura will be unraveled on condition that those elements which make it different from Christian representations of the scene, are distinguished. Out of 21 pictures of *The Crossing of the Red Sea* collected by me, 20 are examples of Christian art: sarcophagi (3rd - 4th c. AD) from Rome and Gallia; paintings from catacombs in via Latina (mid. 4th c. AD), a mosaic in the basilica of S. Maria Maggiore (5th c. AD), a door in the basilica of S. Sabina (5th c. AD) in Rome; the painting in the dome of the Exodus mausoleum at el-Bagawat in Egypt (5th c. AD)¹⁰. The difference between the Christian representations and the one at Dura are considerable and are a requisite of its message. Contrary to the Christian examples, at Dura, there is no pharaoh nor armed Egyptian pursuers (I), Israel is shown as organized along with the army carrying weapons (II) and Moses is shown in a monumental way three times (III). Moreover, there are two more elements which can be clues as to how the composition should be interpreted, and perhaps also as to

⁹ Mesnil du Buisson, op.cit., 30 admits that the landing of the Israelites on the shore merges with the miracle in Mara. On another occasion Mesnil du Buisson, op. cit., 146-147 sees in the composition the triptych pattern, the Red Sea with a large figure of Moses on either side. 14

¹⁰ R. Bulas, 'Przejście przez Morze Czerwone jako symbol chrztu na sarkofagach IV wieku' (The Crossing of the Red Sea as the Symbol of Baptism on the sarcophagi of 4th c. AD), *Roczniki Humanistyczne KUL*, 32 (1984), 4.; Bulas, 'Wyjście z Egiptu czy Wskrzeszenie Łazarza? Katakumba przy via Latina w Rzymie' (The Exodus from Egypt or the Raising of Lazarus from the Dead. The Catacomb in Via Latina in Rome.), *Roczniki Humanistyczne KUL*, 38 (1990), 4; Bulas, 'Ikonografia ptaskorzeźbionych drzwi z kościoła S. Sabina w Rzymie' (The Iconography of the bass-relief door in S. Sabina Church in Rome), *Vox Patrum*, vol. XVII (1990).

the iconographic program of the synagogue in general, the group of Israelites is less numerous in the second scene than it is in the first one and in the second scene the leaders of the generations have small tablets on long sticks, probably with the names of the families written on them.

The lack of the Egyptian pursuers and the pharaoh, as well as the way the drowning Egyptians are presented (naked, unarmed) is evidence that the picture was painted in accordance with the a priori conception of playing down and minimizing the role of Egyptians in it, which diverges from Christian representations in which the galloping pursuers play an important role.

The pharaoh, who is an important agent in Christian examples and a counterbalance for Moses, does not appear in the painting at Dura. The Israelites in the synagogue are the organized People led by the chiefs and guarded by the army carrying weapons. They are powerful and they occupy the whole height of the picture in scene one. In the Christian representations, on the other hand, they are shown as simple folk in poor clothing.

The Moses in the synagogue at Dura is impossible to compare with any of the Christian representations. Here, he is something more than a tool in Yahweh's hands, more than a worker of miracles, more than a prophet. "Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt - to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deed that Moses did in the sight of all Israel." (Deut 34,10-12). The role of Moses had been incomparable in the whole Exodus.

Thus the theme of the painting and its axis are the People and the leader. They appear consecutively as if shots of the story told. It seems important to ask now about the character and the tone of the representation of the People in individual shots. Are they the same People in each case? An outstanding expert on Jewish art, Erwin Goudenough, puts forward a very interesting hypothesis: "In Christian scenes the pharaoh and his army are grouped on one shore or are in the water whereas the Israelites are safe on the other shore. At Dura the pattern includes the remnant of the Israel's army who are depicted in the sea while the pharaoh and his army do not appear in the painting at all."¹¹ The suggestion of Goudenough is controversial formally because we can see a horse among the drowning whereas the Israelites, who approach the sea, have no horses. Moreover the expressiveness with which Moses divides and closes the waters of the sea would be at odds with the fact that a part of the Chosen People are drowning. However, the hypothesis is fundamental for the interpretation of the content of the work. For Goudenough admits the idea that the painters changed the biblical text as in the Bible there is no mention of the drowning of Israelites. Following in Goudenough footsteps I have found two points where the painting diverges from the literary model, namely the Israelites are shown as armed and they have leaders in the scene of Exodus; in the second scene, in turn, two temporally remote events are conflated, the miracle in Mara as well as the division into the twelve generations of Jacob's and a gathering around the Tent of Meeting (Nu 1,52; 2,2-33) .

¹¹ "In the Christian scenes the hosts of Pharaoh are massed on one side or in the water, and the Israelites stand safely on the farther bank. In Dura scheme is adopted with the rest of hosts of Israel, and they are the persons drowned in the sea while Pharaoh and his hosts appear nowhere in the painting at all." 'Catacomb Art.' *The Journal of Biblical Literature* 1962, 121.

The changes introduced in the painting suggest that we deal here not with a simple illustration of the events but rather with a proposition of a certain reality, and that it is an allegorical painting. The allegory of the first scene is not very difficult to understand. It is a **flight from Egypt** not of helpless folk but of The People who are armed and have the elements of organizational structures.

The allegorical nature of the second scene requires deeper analysis. It will be of some help, I think, to focus the attention on the most important place in the synagogue, edikula, where the Torah is read, and on the painting which covers it. The sacrifice of Isaac is in question here because it is the axis of the artistic program of the paintings in the synagogue¹². In Judaism the Sacrifice of Isaac has the effect of begging forgiveness, a supplication for intercession, and hope of purification, *Akedah*.¹³ The idea of Akedah has been vital for the mentality of the Hebrew for millennia. During public Jewish holidays it has been read aloud: "May be He, who answered our father Abraham at the Moria mountain, will answer you and will hear your voice calling on this day."¹⁴ It was also a kind of readiness for martyrdom, and so, numerous examples of martyrdom were considered Akedah.¹⁵

The image of the Sacrifice of Isaac has been found in many Jewish temples, for example the big floor mosaic in the synagogue at Beth Alpha discovered by E.L. Sukenik, to mention one.¹⁶ The fact that this scene was placed on the floor where everybody would tread on it is of great importance because it confirms the expiatory character of the scene.¹⁷ "On entering the synagogue the Jews hoped to be purified through Akedah in order to be able to rise to God."¹⁸

From many facts it is evident that the paintings in the synagogue are of a supplicatory and expiatory character, as well as expressing the contrition of the People in Diaspora.¹⁹ The selection of

¹² In the opinion of A. Grabar, *L'art de la fin de l'antiquité, Paris 1968*, 290., the fact that the scene of the sacrifice of Isaac is the central one must necessarily imply its being the most important.

¹³ Akedah means bonds, ties (cf. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. II, col. 480) . It is an allusion to the ties which bound Isaac when going to death. It is also an identification of a sinner with Isaac who could be saved only by the God's mercy. On Akedah cf. also: E. Goudenough, *Jewish Symbols In Greco-Roman periods*, vol.1, 231, 250; vol. IV, 172,189-194.

¹⁴ Op.cit., vol.11, col.480.

¹⁵ See L.Ginzberg, *The Legends of Jew*, Philadelphia 1911, vol. V (1925), 2.18.

¹⁶ *Reallexicon für Antike und Christentum*, vol I, 241, fig. 631,532.; E.L. Sukenik, *The Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha*, Jerusalem 1932.

¹⁷ E.Goudenough, *Jewish Symbols*, vol. IV, 188-189 traces Akedah from shofar which accompanies the holiday of The New Year (Nu 29,1). Shofar is a symbol of atonement and of the Last Judgment. According to Goudenough it is connected with the scene of the sacrifice at Dura. The painting depicts the moment when " ... Abraham and Isaac returned to her (Sara) in the tent, and she heard how nearly Isaac had been killed she cried out six times ... and died.' Cf. *Encycl. Jud.*, vol. XIV, Shofar, col.1442-1447.

¹⁸ Goudenough, *Jewish Symbols*, vol.11, 250.

¹⁹ On the iconographic program of the synagogue see: J. Leveen, 'The Wall paintings at Dura-Europos' *Hebrew Bible in Art*, London 1944, 22-65; E.J. Bickerman, 'Symbolism in the Dura Synagogue' *The Harvard Theological Review* 58 (1965), 136,143.; J. Soone, 'The Paintings of the Dura Synagogue' *Hebrew Union*

scenes and their plastic interpretation point out that the intention was to show various events in the life of Israel, including defeats like the snatching of the Ark of the Covenant by the Philistines, and destroying the temple. Thus the opinion popular with the scholars that the paintings in the synagogue express the idea of the Great Israel and Yahweh's undaunted care for the Chosen People seems incomplete and superficial.²⁰

The idea of Akedah appears to be the axis of the program of the paintings in the synagogue. It occurs also in the scene of *The Crossing of the Red Sea* analyzed by us. We notice the traits typical of Akedah like readiness for martyrdom and the promise of transformation both in the character of the composition of the whole picture (two parts divided by the strip of the sea) and in the arrangement of individual scenes. It seems that this exceptional composition of the whole and of the particular scenes is indicative of the desire of the Dura Europos community to change the history of its ancestors for "the stops on the way from the Sea of Cane to the gate of Canaan had been the centers of rebellion, complaining and lament. The wrath and the mercy of God had been no good. The effect had been only temporary."

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that in the scene of the Exodus the direction of movement is parallel to the surface of the picture and the movement takes place from the right to the left whereas in the scene of the miracle the movement is perpendicular and takes place from within the picture toward the spectator. This aspect of the composition is of importance for interpreting the painting. Two aims have been attained in this way, the People, in other words the Remnant faithful to Yahweh, have been presented, and the narration has been completed the scene two being the last scene of the story as well as ending the chain of events.

The allegorical scene of the miracle, which ends the story includes the event in Mara as well as the division into the twelve generations of Jacob's which is temporally remote from it. Owing to this device it was possible to 'strike off' the history a lot of 'rebellions and complaining' and other inglorious events, like the making of the Golden Calf, which took place in the course of time between the two events in the scene.

The sea in our painting, which is the border between the past things and 'the other history' must have devoured not only the enemy but also a part of the Chosen People, who entered it, because no *Crossing* can happen without a certain loss and a kind of benefit.²¹ Those died who did not deserve the waters of Mara while the transformed Israel was the benefit. Many scholars emphasize the plastic aspect of the picture, which does suggest that the story consists of two parts, and the vertical strip of the sea divides the history of Israel into two stages.

College Annual 20 (1947). 255-362; J. Morgenstern, 'The Painting of Dura Synagogue' *Hebrew Union College Annual* 20 (1947), 15.

²⁰ M. Simon, *Verus Israel. Études sur les relations entre chrétiens et juifs dans l'empire romain (135-425)*. Paris 1948, 444, writes « L'idée centrale qui anime la décoration de la synagogue, c'est la souveraineté de Jahvé, dogme fondamental du judaïsme ... elle se manifeste sous la cadre national et s'exprime par les actes du gouvernement de Jahvé sur son peuple. »

²¹ A. van Gennep, *Les rites de passage, Études systématique des cérémonies de la poste et du seuil de l'hospitalité de l'adoption de la grossesse et de l'accouchement de la naissance, de l'enfance, de la puberté, de l'initiation, de l'ordination, du couronnement, des fiançailles et du mariage, de funérailles, des saisons, etc.*, Paris 1909.

The painting at Dura Europos appears to be not a simple illustration of Hebrew stories, but an allegory of the history of Israel. This is an adjusted history, superimposed on the situation of the Jewish Diaspora at that time, and an attempt at settling the accounts with the past. Having crossed the Red Sea the Israelites enter the 'newly-outlined' history of Israel, the Israel without the Golden Calf, the Israel singing the song of thanksgiving, the Israel endowed with all the abundance. The nature of the painting I have been discussing is that of a prayer, Akedah. It is a supplication for forgiveness, a hope of cleansing and the declaration of the Remnant of the People with whom the community of Dura Europos had probably identified.

ANNEXES :

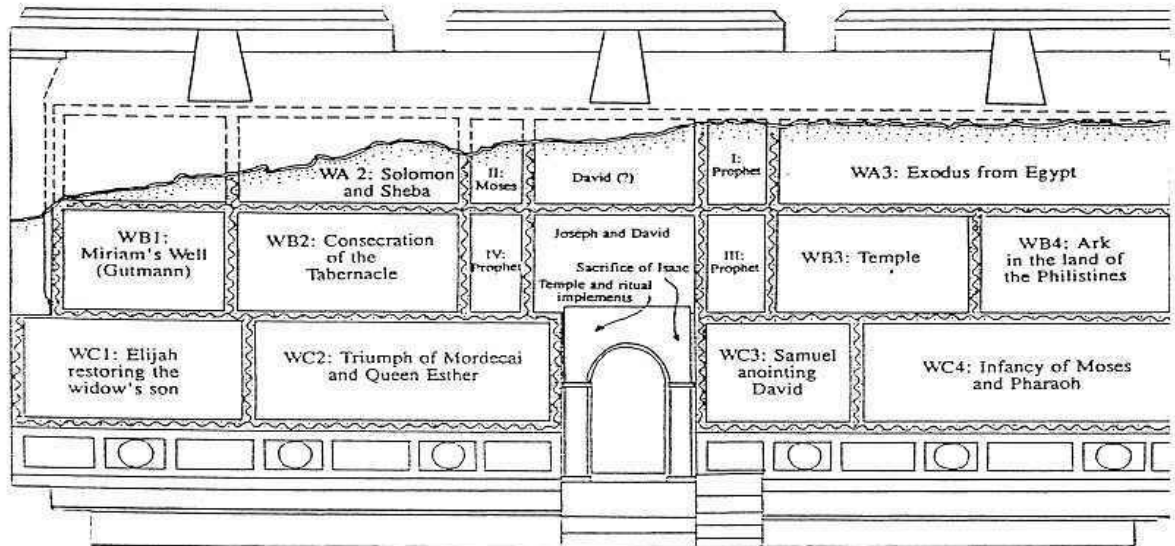


Fig. 1 - After: A.J. Wharton, Good and Bad Images from the *synagogue* of Dura Europos: Contexts, Intertexts, Art. History 17 (march 1994)

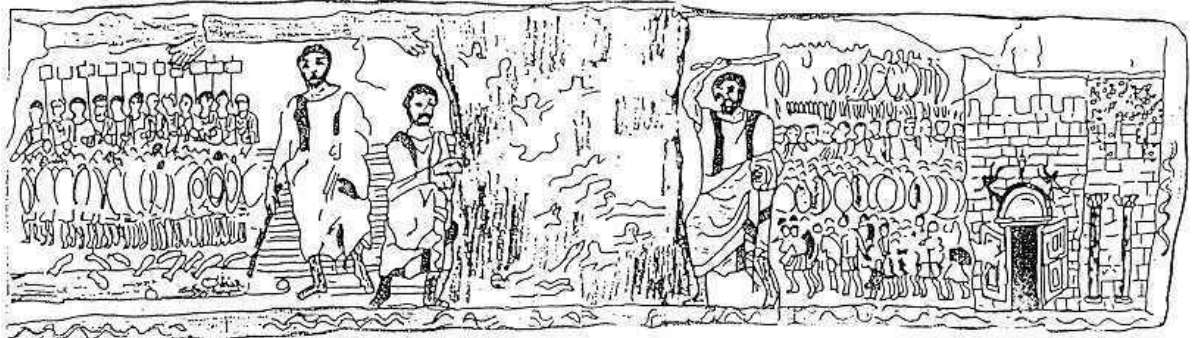


Fig. 2 - I have copied the picture after: R. Mesnil du Bulsson, Les peintures de la synagogue de Doura-Europos, 245-256 après J.-C., Roma 1939, (chart XV-XVII).

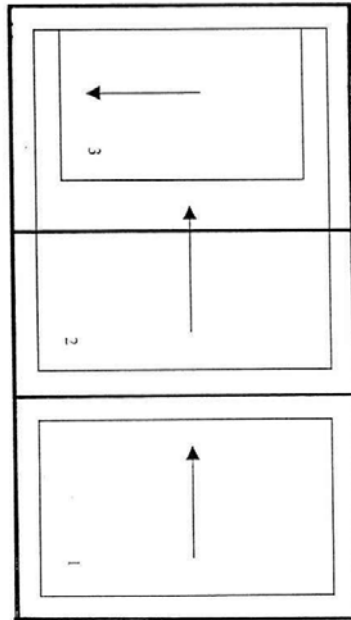


Fig. 3 – Reconstruction of the composition of *the Crossing of the Red Sea*.