

13 | Local Identities of Synagogue Communities in the Roman Empire

JONATHAN J. PRICE

A recently published volume of essays, under the title *Local Knowledge and Microidentities in the Imperial Greek World*,¹ explores an issue central to the theme of this volume, “Empire of Many Nations.” The book examines, from different perspectives, what happened to Greek culture and “identities” when the lands of *paideia* were incorporated into the Roman Empire. Like many other books on ancient history, this one was inspired or suggested by current trends, in this case, globalization. The Roman Empire is viewed as an all-encompassing, globalizing, “translocal” or “supralocal” force. The collective argument of the essays is that the subsumption of the Greek world into the Roman Empire emphasized and sharpened local identities while at the same time providing material for Rome to build its own imperial identity, so that “the local and imperial are mutually reliant.”² Aelius Aristides exalted the unity of a vast, diverse world under the rubric “Roman,” but the imposition of Rome compelled local communities towards “an increased awareness, even questioning of, the power dynamics between the local and non-local.” Thus local identities were “in constant dialogue with the translocal.”³

The illuminating treatments of “micro-identities” in the volume do not include the Jews in the Roman Empire, either synagogues or predominantly Jewish settlements, as localized communities or identities.⁴ There is no reason that the Jews had to be included. The essays in the collection are informed by the lingering issues from the furious debates about the Second Sophistic, and there should be no expectation that Jewish communities would find a natural place even in a composite study of different, particular manifestations of Greek cultural knowledge and localizations within the Roman sphere of influence. Moreover, Jewish status and identity in a “supralocal” context are inherently ambiguous, presenting both a strong, unifying, national/ethnic identity – their most-noticed feature

¹ Edited by Whitmarsh, 2010a. ² Whitmarsh 2010b: 16. ³ Whitmarsh 2010b: 2, 3.

⁴ Greg Woolf, in his conclusion to the volume, does mention the Jews in a list of examples of “difference but connectedness” (p. 192), but the Jews were significantly different from the other members of that list: Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Syrians.

in antiquity and also in most modern treatments – and widely varied local attachments and languages.⁵

It is this latter, less-studied element, *videlicet*, Jews' local identities in the Roman Empire, that is the subject of the present limited investigation, informed *inter alia* by the setting of the conference from which the present volume arose – Tel Aviv. Other chapters in the present volume deal with the Jews as an undifferentiated *ethnos* across the empire – with regard to “pluralism” (Gruen), law (Rotman), imperial policy (Yakobson), relations with emperors and Jewish attitudes to Romans (Shahar, Oppenheimer) – but the Jews' lived reality in their immediate settings in the city or countryside, in larger regional identities and in the Roman Empire itself would have forced Jewish communities – both in Iudaea/Palaestina and in the Diaspora – to face similar challenges of self-definition vis-à-vis their micro-environment (village, city) and larger regional environment.

Thus it may be asked – even if a full and detailed answer cannot be expected – whether individual, localized Jewish communities, without any obvious connection to each other across the ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse Roman Empire,⁶ can be said to have had, or displayed, a “micro-identity” in addition to their nonlocal ethnic one, or whether this feature, if not entirely absent in some cases, was indeed overshadowed by their shared history and ethnic origins.⁷ Let me reveal at the outset that my answer to this question here is partial and inconclusive, but not entirely negative.

The question will be approached by concentrating on synagogues, which, as time went on, especially from the third century CE to the end of antiquity, were the focal point of whole Jewish communities – communities within cities and villages, or (most noticeably in Iudaea/Palaestina) the whole village itself – and not just ancillary buildings for worship or specific activities separate from civic life. Synagogues could represent the identity of a community, and were used, in addition to worship and study, for community gatherings and public meetings, schools, communal meals, courts and other legal procedures, rudimentary banking functions, lodging – everything

⁵ Cohen 1999: 69–106 is fundamental. Two recent entries in the ongoing debate about Jewish identity (identities), the meaning of *Ioudaios*, etc., are “A ‘Jew’ by Any Other Name?” (Baker 2011: 153–80) and in the same volume, Schwartz 2011: 208–38. Schwartz's book (Schwartz 2001) argues that in Late Antiquity, Jewish identity formed in reaction to Christianity.

⁶ Collar 2013; the complex networks that she hypothesizes are not convincing, being mostly based on rather loose evidence.

⁷ This question is notably different from the questions motivating I. Gafni's useful essay, “At Home While Abroad: Expressions of Local Patriotism in the Jewish Diaspora of Late Antiquity,” in Gafni 1997: 41–57.

connected with civic life, and even some aspects of private life.⁸ A synagogue could be referred to as *בית עם*, lit. “house of the people” (bShabb. 32a).

While it is true that the synagogue buildings can be suggestive of the activities of communities and their extent – the presence of multiuse halls and side chambers, for example – the most useful evidence on the question of the localized or micro-identities of synagogues will be the several hundred inscriptions surviving from the floors, columns and walls of the ancient structures. This methodological choice is dictated not only by the real differences between literary and epigraphical attestations of synagogue communities. The inscriptions are the only unmediated written self-expression of the communities that built and used the synagogues. The inscriptions in synagogues are, despite their apparent public nature, directed to visitors to the synagogue, mostly (but not exclusively) Jews. They are valuable, internally focused evidence. Inscriptions are, moreover, the sole self-documentation of most Jewish communities otherwise undocumented in the literary sources. That is, the more than 200 surviving or partially surviving synagogue buildings from Roman antiquity (including those outside the bounds of direct Roman rule) represent the only evidence for almost all of those synagogal communities. Although there are hundreds, perhaps thousands of references to synagogues in literary sources (rabbinic and Christian literature), it is possible in only a very few instances to match up a literarily attested synagogal community to the actual physical remains of an ancient building (e.g., Beth She’an/ Scythopolis, Capernaum, possibly Caesarea and Sepphoris).⁹ Occasionally, inscriptional evidence demonstrates that some synagogues served as focal points for whole regions, such as the building at Ḥammad Gader, which records donations and participation by individuals from Sepphoris, Capernaum, Arbel and other places – some of which places had their own synagogues. The relationship between the synagogues, and the affiliation or citizenship of individuals in each, can only be guessed, since the inscriptions are the only evidence for the synagogue at Ḥammad Gader.

Naturally, the authors of synagogue inscriptions – the texts are mostly dedications, vows and acclamations (e.g., *hyper soterias*), and labels for art – did not have the purpose of directly answering the questions asked here. It could be that community charter or rules were inscribed on the walls of some synagogues, as at Ein Gedi and Rehov (see next). Even were it possible to translate “micro-identities” into Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic,

⁸ Levine 2000: 357–86; 2012: 357–402. See also S. Safrai 1976: 942–4; and Z. Safrai 1995: 181–204.

⁹ Despite the subtitle in his article, Stuart Miller deals with a different question, i.e., the problem of “pagan” imagery in synagogue art: 2004: 27–76.

no one in the ancient period would have understood it in the same way as the scholar equipped with (burdened by?) heavy modern theoretical apparatus.

This chapter will be primarily concerned with aspects of localized identities that can be assumed to have existed at a higher rate than they are actually found in the evidence. Yet one mark of localized identity can be said at the outset not to be found because it did not exist: a particular language or set of symbols, any kind of unique mode of expression that focuses or reflects how the members of community perceived themselves. As Woolf points out in the last essay in Whitmarsh's volume,¹⁰ both isolation and connection can account for localism. There was no separate, Jewish epigraphic language in any region of the Roman Empire. As a rule, Jews adopted and adapted local epigraphic idioms in both their public and private inscriptions. Synagogues are identified by architectural elements, Jewish symbols, the content of the inscriptions rather than any peculiar idiom. Thus the distinctly local and imitative character of Jewish inscriptions can be interpreted both as the failure of the Jews in any particular place to create a localized linguistic idiom of their own, but also, on the contrary, their identification with and participation in the local epigraphic culture.¹¹

We shall be paying close attention to an aspect of the evidence not normally noticed in discussions of ancient Jewish communities, highlighted in Whitmarsh's anthology: the origins of the communities, including foundation stories and myths. It has been well established, from the standard discussions,¹² that in Roman antiquity, synagogues and Jewish communities – which, as stated, were sometimes but not always coextensive – had internal structures, often particular laws and regulations, magistrates, treasuries, which made them communities within communities in every respect. It has been clearly demonstrated that the internal structures and magistracies of the Jewish communities mimicked those where the Jews lived, and synagogues have been compared to civic guilds, which accounted for so much of citizens' private and social lives.¹³ What is less

¹⁰ Whitmarsh 2010a: 189–200.

¹¹ Important discussion by Ameling 2007: 253–82; and see my “The Different Faces of Euergetism in Iudaea/ Palaestina and Syria in Late Antiquity: The Evidence of Synagogue Inscriptions,” forthcoming in *Coping with Religious Change: Adopting Transformations and Adapting Rituals in the Late Antique Eastern Mediterranean*, edited by Eduard Iricinschi and Chrysi Kotsifo.

¹² For a summary of the ancient evidence and *status quaestionis* up to then, see Levine 2000: Ch. 10–11, “The Communal Dimension” and “Leadership.”

¹³ Ameling 1999.

in Susiya, which use identical language to commemorate “[members of] the holy congregation” (קה. . . לה קדישה דאתחזוקין) and “members of the town” (דכירין לטב [כ]ל בני קרתה [ד]מתחזוקין), synagogue and town being separate physical entities with the same membership.¹⁸ And the same can be said for the blessing on all בני קרתה in the mosaic inscription at Ḥuseifa.¹⁹ An extremely impressive example of a synagogue inscription that seems to represent an entire community tightly organized around a specific purpose and area is the halakhic inscription from Rehov,²⁰ though naturally the community using the Rehov synagogue was not the only one which strictly observed agricultural laws in the Land of Israel, and laws spelled out in the inscription had regional relevance and application. Roman citizenship, or really any form of participation in the Roman Empire, seems to have had little part in their identity and daily lives.

The formula דכיר לטב *dekir letav*, was not only the most prevalent formula in Jewish Aramaic dedications but also the most widespread dedicatory formula throughout the Aramaic-speaking world.²¹ The formula is found in synagogue inscriptions in Batanea and Dura Europus in Syria and throughout Iudaea/Palaestina from north to south,²² but its first use predates its first appearance in a Jewish text by centuries. The Jews’ use of the formula differed from their surroundings in important respects: the target audience, for whom the dedicatee was meant to be remembered for the good, was the living community and not a deity, thus there are hardly any Jewish texts with דכיר לטב קדם plus a divine name, unlike, for example, Nabataean uses of the formula.²³ Moreover, the dedicatee in Jewish texts was a living person; the Jewish dedications were not, as in other non-Jewish contexts, memorials for the deceased.²⁴ The *dekir letav* synagogue dedications seem to reinforce the community from within, by commemorating, either by name or anonymously, contributions by particularly generous

¹⁸ CIIP IV, 3878, 3880; parallels to “holy congregation” in Jericho, CIIP IV, 2806, and in Beth She’an, Naveh 1978: no. 46, see Levine 2000: 236–9. Barag’s notion (1972: 453f.) that town and synagogue represented non-Jewish and Jewish entities is not supported by the evidence.

¹⁹ Naveh 1978: no. 39.

²⁰ Naveh 1978: 79–85, and for a detailed discussion of the halakhic inscription, dealing primarily with agricultural laws, Y. Sussman 1973: 87–158; id. 1974: 193–5 (Hebr.); Vitto 1993: 1272–4. The painted inscriptions on the wall plaster from the synagogue are being prepared for publication by H. Misgav.

²¹ Healey 2011: Chapter 20; Gudme 2011, citing abundant *comparanda*.

²² IJO III Syr35, Syr91–92. There is a long list in Naveh 1978: index, p. 150; to these add the Aramaic dedications in the synagogue floor at Sepphoris, Weiss 2005: 199–208.

²³ A rare exception is in IJO III, Syr91 at Dura: [מרי ש]מיא אמן | [דכיר לטב קדם].

²⁴ See Gudme 2011. Again, there is one exception: Beth Guvrin (Naveh 1978: no. 71) גיח נפש. Sorek 2010 contends that the *dekir* inscriptions in synagogues regularly signified a memorial to a deceased donor rather than a dedication to a living patron; this thesis is untenable.

members of the community.²⁵ Jews' adaptation of the formula stressed *community* recognition of the dedicatee rather than *divine* confirmation; but a formula, even modified, is not a distinctive language, and the Jews' adaptation of it was similar throughout the East and cannot be read as a linguistic peculiarity of a particular city or region.

The commemorations of members of the town or congregation are collective and anonymous, stressing the importance of the community above the generosity of any individual, even if some anonymous benefactions are recorded together with named contributions, including another inscription at Huseifa.²⁶ As Stemberger noted, "worship was a common responsibility of all members of the community."²⁷ The use of the formula *dekir letav* and the anonymity of a relatively large number of Aramaic dedications in synagogues are evidence of local knowledge, since the local community knew and recognized even their unnamed benefactors, but that local knowledge is not communicated to the outside world, or even to the next generations, in the inscriptions. The extent to which that knowledge was preserved in the oral tradition of the communities is a fascinating, unanswerable question.

Thus, according to the standard conception of Jewish communities under Roman rule, they could function as independent entities that provided and strengthened the Jews' local identity, their separation from but also connection to the larger urban or regional setting. This does not precisely answer the specific questions of micro-identities in the ancient equivalent of a globalizing imperial power. For that, we turn our attention to Jewish communities' account of their own origins and possibly distinctive features in their identity and self-accounting.

There is some evidence, if scrappy, suggesting that some Jewish communities had, aside from their shared national story of origins derived from the Bible, additional stories to explain how they got to their present location and why their community exists. In some cases, certainly more than the evidence shows, members of a synagogue would have had an interesting and unique answer to the question: Why are you in this particular spot?

Ancient synagogue communities, in contrast to the modern practice, did not inscribe their names or identities on their lintels or mosaic floors – at least,

²⁵ Cf. Schwartz 2004: 275–89: synagogue inscriptions (focusing on Roman Near East) reflect an egalitarian, self-enclosed community ideology, differing from pagan and Christian surroundings.

²⁶ Naveh 1978: no. 43; other combined named and anonymous contributions at Ḥamat Gader and Beth Alfa, Naveh 1978: nos. 33, 34. Anonymity is found only in inscriptions in Iudaea/Palaestina: in addition to those mentioned, Na'aran CIIP IV, 2733; Ma'on (Naveh 1978: no. 57); Jericho (CIIP IV, 2806); Beth She'an (Naveh 1978: nos. 46, 47 and Roth-Gerson 1987: no. 9).

²⁷ Stemberger 1998: 139.

no epigraphical instance has been found so far, although synagogues are given distinct names in literary sources, such as the Synagogue of Rebellion (בנישתיא מרדתא דקיסריין) in Caesarea;²⁸ the name is suggestive of both “local knowledge” and “micro-community,” but nothing is known beyond the evocative name. Slightly more insight – if very slightly more – may be gained from the synagogue names indicating origins elsewhere. The many epitaphs recovered from the Jewish catacombs in Rome mention synagogues with names suggesting communities,²⁹ such as the συναγωγὴ Τριπολιτῶν,³⁰ whose meaning seems straightforward, even if the foundational story is not revealed in the name, nor can it be known which Tripolis is referred to. Similarly, the synagogues Ἐλέας and Σεκηνῶν at Rome refer to places that can be variously identified.³¹ In all such cases, one wonders how long, after the original founding of the synagogue by Tripolitans, Sekenoi, and others, the membership remained identified with their city of origin, or even ethnically insulated from Jews of other origins (was there a custom against “intermarriage” with Jews from different backgrounds, as in some ethnically tight Jewish communities today?). So far as this last point is concerned, the συναγωγὴ Αἰβρρέων (Ἐβρέων), as Leon suggests, possibly represents the first synagogue founded in Rome, therefore by Jews from Palestine, speakers of Aramaic and Hebrew, thus several generations before the date of the catacomb inscriptions.³² A similar kind of chauvinism may be represented in συναγωγὴ Βερνάκλων (βερκακλησίων), which has been interpreted as an attempt to distinguish native-born Jews, *vernaculi*, from all the immigrant communities.³³

Some of the questions arising from these mere mentions of communities, such as their age and longevity, could have been solved by the discovery of the actual buildings where they met, but not one physical structure identified as an ancient synagogue has been discovered in Rome.

In Iudaea/Palaestina, there is similar slight evidence for communities transplanted from abroad. I have recently explored this issue in print, and there is no need to repeat all of the arguments and evidence here.³⁴ I shall

²⁸ yBikk. 3,3,65d et al.

²⁹ The exact number is debated, but there are probably eleven discrete congregations mentioned; see index in Noy 1995: 539–40; Leon 1960: 135–66.

³⁰ Noy 1993: 166. ³¹ Noy 1995: 406, 576, cf. Leon, 145–7; Noy 1993: 436.

³² Noy, 1995: 2, 33, 578, 579. If Leon’s conjecture is correct, then the self-named community celebrated their ethnic and linguistic origin, not the circumstances of their arrival there.

³³ Noy 1995: 106, 114, 117, maybe 540.

³⁴ Price 2015. The Theodotos synagogue inscription in Jerusalem does seem to represent a whole synagogal community transplanted from Italy or a western province, but the inscription itself indicates an openness of the institution rather than a closely self-identified “community.”

only reiterate the conclusion that the literary and epigraphic data are ambiguous at best for any presumed micro-community other than in Jaffa, where one inscription testifies to a community of Cappadocians within the city, even though its origins and history are not revealed by the inscription. Other epitaphs in Jaffa document the presence of many Egyptian Jews in the city, although the history of that transplanted ethnic group is unknown – were they refugees from the second-century rebellion in Egypt, or opportunistic merchants who settled before then (or possibly even afterwards)? – and there is no indication that they organized into a micro-community within the Jewish population of Jaffa. We may suppose that the move of a Jewish community from one distinct different cultural and linguistic environment to another – like the move from Asia Minor or Alexandria to Iudaea/Palaestina – sharpened an idiosyncratic identity as well as their identity as Jews. Fully transplanted communities obviously had – like colonies – corresponding stories about the reasons and circumstances of their transplantation, and those stories would have been part of their particular identities in their specific location.

Another possible topos of origins involves a *ktistes* – or if not technically a *ktistes*, then an important and imposing figure who imprinted his personality on the building or community.³⁵ In the Greek world, a *ktistes* could be divine or semidivine, which is not possible in a Jewish context. Several synagogue inscriptions in fact use the word κτίστης or κτιζειν in connection with a person or persons, but the problem is that in none of the instances does the word mean “founder”; the meaning is, rather, “donor.” This is clear in a dedication from the synagogue at Capernaum, in which the verb ἔκτισαν has a specific direct object: Ἡρώδης Μο[κί?]|μου καὶ Ἰουστὸς | υἱὸς ἄμα τοῖς | τέκνοις ἔκτισαν τὸν | κίονα.³⁶ Here, “founded the pillar” must mean “contributed towards construction of the pillar.” In Dura Europus, the two Greek inscriptions on ceiling tiles using the same verb are to be interpreted in the same way:

- Σαμουήλ | Εἰδδέου | πρεσβύτερος | τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἔκτισεν.
- Σαμουήλ | Βαρσαφάρα | μνησθη ἔκ[τ]ισεν ταῦτα οὕτως.³⁷

The second of these texts has a direct object that is vague but nonetheless limiting the action of the verb: he did not “found” but contributed toward the construction of this or that element of the new building. Accordingly, the first Samuel was also one of many donors to the synagogue’s construction. The main foundational inscription at Dura, set into the ceiling and

³⁵ Cf. Jones 2010: 111–24; for an outstanding example, Rogers 1991.

³⁶ Roth-Gerson 1987: no. 29. ³⁷ IJO III, Syr 86–7.

written on the same kind of tiles, is in Aramaic and records the specific date during which the entire building was constructed (244–5 CE), the distinguished individuals in charge of the work (the “building committee” in today’s parlance), and blessings on all who worked on and contributed to the building.³⁸

- (A) This building was erected in the year five hundred and fifty six, which is the second year of Philip Julius Caesar, during the presbyterate of Samuel |5| the priest, son of Yedaya the archon. Now those who stood in charge of this work (were): Abraham [Abram] the treasurer, and Samuel son of Sphara, and . . . the proselyte. With a willing spirit they began to build in the fifty-fifty-sixth year, and they sent to |10| . . . and they made haste . . . and they worked in . . . Blessing from the elders and from all the children of . . . they worked and toiled . . . Peace to them and their wives and all their children.
- (B) And the 2nd (part). And like all those who worked were their brethren (in Dura?) . . . all of them who with their money . . . and in the eager desire of their souls . . . Their reward, all whatever . . . that the world which is to come . . . assured to them . . . on every Sabbath . . . spreading out their hands in it
- (prayer?).

The date is determined by the Seleucid era, the regnal year of Philip Julius Caesar and the presbyterate of the priest Samuel son of Yedaya שמואל בר ידעי, who is obviously the Samuel in the first Greek inscription here. The Samuel in the second Greek inscription is named as one of those “who stood in charge of this work” (דקמו על עיבידה). Thus the two Samuels at Dura were members in the elite “founders’ circle,” as contemporary fundraisers would say, but they were not *ktistai*/founders of the community itself in the classical Greek sense, that is, they were not part of the foundational story of the community of people who used the new building; they were not the stuff of local legend or “local knowledge” that contributes to a community’s unique identity.

The same interpretation of the noun κτίστης or verb κτίζειν is necessary for all but one of the remaining synagogue texts using those words. The many donors listed on one side of the inscribed stele at Aphrodisias are the collective subject of ἐκτίσαν,³⁹ meaning that they were the ones who provided the necessary funds. In Ḥulda, the dedication to Εὐτυχῶς | Εὐστοχίῳ | καὶ Ἡσυχίῳ | καὶ Εὐαγγρίῳ | τοῖς κτίσ|τες⁴⁰ records their

³⁸ IJO III, Syr 84, trans. Noy-Bloedhorn. ³⁹ IJO II, 14 A 7, with Ameling’s commentary, p. 90.

⁴⁰ Roth-Gerson 1987: no. 13.

financial benefaction to the building; they could be either the exclusive, or just the major funders, but not “founders” in any other sense. In Daburra (Golan), [Ῥο]ύστικος ἔκτισεν[-?] is inscribed on a lintel underneath an Aramaic inscription recording that a certain Eleazar contributed some of the columns in the building.⁴¹ Here, not only is Rusticus’ inscription beneath Eleazar’s dedication, and in smaller letters, but the missing part of the lintel could very well have recorded exactly what Rusticus donated.

All of these instances of *ktistai* as donors but not founders influence the interpretation of the complete inscription from the broken mosaic floor in Tiberias: Πρόκλος | Κρίσπου | ἔκτισεν.⁴² Published translations of the text have Proclus son of Crispus as actual founder of the synagogue.⁴³ But in light of the many clear parallels, the inscription must indicate that Proclus contributed the funds for the mosaic, without the far-reaching implications of his being the founder of the building, much less the community. In fact, there is no word or expression in any surviving Greek synagogue inscription signifying “founding” in the sense required by the theory of local knowledge and micro-community.

Thus the κτίσται in synagogue inscriptions are major donors, and as such do not bring us any closer to discovering local knowledge or micro-identities. The same goes for the few instances of the individuals who claim responsibility in inscriptions for construction or renovation of a synagogue without being called κτίσται. A certain Leontis funded the lavish mosaic floor of the synagogue (or is it just a building next to the synagogue?) in Beth She’an and thereby purchased the right to advertise his benefaction in almost exclusive terms, but even if the building was known locally as “the Leontis synagogue,” as it is in modern scholarship – perhaps even because it was in fact his private house? – that would describe the building and not the identity of the worshippers.

The most extravagant example of a single benefactor giving himself public credit for the synagogue building is, of course, the donation of Tiberius Claudius Polycharmus at Stobi.⁴⁴ That long text begins in this way:

[Κλ.] Τιβέριος Πολύ|χαρμος ὁ καὶ Ἀχύρι|ος ὁ πατήρ τῆς ἐν | [5] Στόβοις
 συναγωγῆς. | ὅς πολιτευσάμε|νος πᾶσαν πολειτεί|αν κατὰ τὸν Ἰουδαί|σμον
 κτλ.

⁴¹ Naveh’s idea (1978: no. 7) that Rusticus was the craftsman cannot be right.

⁴² Roth-Gerson 1987: no. 15.

⁴³ Roth-Gerson, *ibid.*; Milson 2007: 469; Hezser 2001: 402; Hachlili 2013: 476, “built or founded.” L. Di Segni correctly translates the word as “built” = “had built” in 1988: 75 (Hebr.) and in 1998: 120.

⁴⁴ IJO I, Mac1 with bibliography; cf. commentary there for what follows.

There follows a list of the parts of the building that he subsidized, and provisions for keeping ownership within his family. In return for his benefaction, Polycharmos received the honorary title “Father of the synagogue in Stobi,” obviously granted to him by the grateful, already existing community, which the wording suggests was organized around the only synagogue in Stobi. The expression *πολιτευσάμενος πᾶσαν πολειτείαν κατὰ τὸν Ἰουδαϊσμὸν* in ll. 5–8 means that he lived his entire public life according to the precepts of Judaism. Thus Polycharmos’ rather typical and formulaic euergetic inscription, if untypically long for a synagogue, perpetuates benefaction but does not represent or record the community’s identity as such. It could even be said that, in contrast to other Jewish synagogue donor inscriptions, Polycharmos’ does not contain explicit expressions of his personal devotion to the community but is really all about himself.

The one possible record of a Jewish *ktistes* as being a real founder is a dedicatory inscription from Sidibunda in Asia Minor.⁴⁵

θεῶ ὑψίστῳ καὶ | ἀγείᾳ καταφυγῆ | Ἄρτιμας υἱὸς Ἄρ|τίμου Μομμίου | καὶ
[Μ]αρκίας, ὁ αὐ|τὸς κτίστης, ἀ|νέστησεν καὶ | τὸν θυμιατ|τήρον καὶ
κέον<α> | ἐκ τῶν ιδίῳν

To the highest God and the holy refuge, Artimas son of Artimos Mommios and Markia, who himself is the founder (*ktistes*), donated the censer and column.

Here Artimas stresses that he is the *κτίστης* himself, and he uses an unrelated verb for the parts of the building he funded. There is not enough evidence in the short text to assert that Artimas’ “foundation” gave the synagogue an exclusive identity or personal story, or that he really is not a *κτίστης* like Polycharmos and took special interest in these two components of the building; anything is possible, but not every possibility is likely. The inscription *prima facie* is a typical donor inscription, recording parts of the building for which Artimas provided all or most of the funds. This text is the only evidence of Jews in this city; but even its Jewishness is not certain.⁴⁶

Before moving on to the next type of possible Jewish micro-community, we should briefly consider the basalt lintel from Dabbura, similar to the one cited previously, inscribed in Hebrew:⁴⁷

זה בית | מדרשו | של רבי | אליעזר | הקפר

This is the *beth midrash* of Rabbi Eliezer Ha-Qappar.

⁴⁵ IJO II, 215. ⁴⁶ Ameling, *ibid.*, and Schürer 1986: 32.

⁴⁷ Gregg and Urman 1996: 125–6, AF59; Naveh 1978: no. 6.

Here the rabbinic figure mentioned seems not to have been a founder but the main pedagogical or spiritual figure, and indeed the building could have been used exclusively by and identified with a small circle of R. Eliezer's students and followers. There is some doubt as to whether the rabbi of this inscription is the famous Talmudic sage,⁴⁸ but the question concerning us here is whether a school or academy is useful in consideration of a micro-community. A *beth midrash* was not a synagogue or a constituted community.⁴⁹ It is true that a teacher plus group of disciples could turn into a religio-social movement or the sort of "community" that provided its members a stronger sense of identity and belonging than their locality, city or Empire; Christianity is only the most obvious example. But a single *beth midrash* is not a religious movement, and furthermore it cannot be known from this single inscription how long the academy continued to function, with the strong identity of its intellectual leader, after his death. A stone building and carved inscription would presume such a continuation, no matter whether the foundation of the building, or the group that later moved into the building, can be dated to the lifetime of the sage. In this specific case, it seems the lintel is to be dated much later than the lifetime of the tanna R. Eliezer. But we are again poking around in the dark, and without further light from another source, the rabbi's academy remains an academy, not a full-blown community.

The cases adduced suggest that while some synagogues both in Iudaea/Palaestina and the Diaspora may have had founders and founders' stories that afforded them a particular local identity distinguishing them both from their immediate surroundings and all other Jewish synagogues, no clear case emerges from any synagogue's self-documentation. The dim and partial picture is a matter of chance: fuller evidence, both epigraphical and literary, could reveal a wider, richer phenomenon. A few names of congregations and founders suggest that there were once many more, with their own unique stories.

Notably missing from the Jewish evidence – given the importance of Greek and Roman myths in the foundation of colonies and the identification of micro-identities in the Graeco-Roman world – is any connection between a certain Jewish community and a story or character from the Bible. It is true that the Jews of Babylonia traced their origins to the expulsion after the destruction of the First Temple in the sixth century BCE – a humble origin which became a mark of honor – and the Egyptian

⁴⁸ See discussion and previous bibliography in Miller 2014: 239–73. Cohen 1981: 11 and 14.

⁴⁹ Fine 2014: 123–37, who critiques Dan Urman's "oversized claims" that the southern Golan had become a Talmudic village by the fifth century.

Jews of the Hellenistic period, as well, related that the founding members of their large population were first brought to Egypt by the Persians and then by Ptolemy I.⁵⁰ So far as the Babylonian Jews are concerned, it would be instructive to have even one synagogue from there; there is no physical or epigraphical evidence for the phenomenon we seek. Egypt is a more complex case, not only because of the very clear, legitimizing aetiological legends involving as well the translation of the Bible into Greek, and the vigorously assertive Jewish community in Alexandria, but also because of the Jewish *politeumata*, which functioned more or less as independent or semi-independent communities, as well as the Temple of Onias at the center of a very particular self-defining community.⁵¹ Yet we can preempt further discussion by noting that the Temple of Onias was destroyed in 73 CE, and the Jewish communities in Egypt were destroyed and dwindled to practically nothing in the second century CE, so that there is no real comparative evidence for the period under consideration here.

While much synagogue figurative art consists of nonlocalized images like the zodiac or – most prominently – depictions of shared national symbols like the Temple and its implements and symbols of Jewish holidays like the lulav and etrog, some synagogue floors and walls were illustrated with narrative scenes and figures from the Bible.⁵² Do any of these figures or stories appear in a place connected with them in the Bible, thus providing a local connection to the national story? The answer is no. The usefulness of this observation is limited, since most surviving synagogue buildings are located in places not mentioned in the Bible, or where no important events occurred; and most important locations in the Biblical

⁵⁰ *Letter of Aristeas* 13 and 35, and see the commentary on these passages by Wright 2015.

⁵¹ Schürer 1986: 47–8, 145–7; Gruen 1997: 47–70. On the Jewish *politeuma*, see now Sängner 2016: <http://classics.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-8036?rskey=1tHUGO&result=1>.

Aside from the *politeumata*, the inscriptions from the third- to second-century BCE synagogues in Egypt give no indication of the kind of thing we are looking for here; cf. Horbury and Noy 1992: nos. 9, 13, 18, 20, 27, etc.

⁵² Levine 2012: 350–4; Hachlili 2013: 389–434; Fine 2005: 57–134. Note Hachlili, 434: “The Jewish communities wanted to decorate their major religious and social structures with didactic, narrative illustrations expressing their religious and national tradition, their legacy and their shared experiences, evoking memories of past glory. The communities used folk tales based on biblical stories with additions taken from the world of legend, which found artistic expression in painted narrative scenes; the wall paintings of the third-century CE Dura Europus synagogue are the earliest evidence of this. Subsequently, this folk art would evolve and develop in synagogue mosaic pavements of the Byzantine period. The narrative scenes were considered historical events, yet they were also treated as parables and had symbolic implications.” The richly decorated walls at Dura Europus and extensively inscribed walls at Rehov serve as a sober warning about the mass of material that has been lost, and against attempting definitive conclusions about what was and was not.

patriarchal and monarchical narratives, such as they were identified in antiquity, do not have the remains of Jewish synagogues.⁵³ Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that the main figures, the primary formative moments and the famous instances of heroism in synagogue art – Abraham (the binding of Isaac), King David, Daniel in the lions' den, Noah, Samson, the investment of Aaron and the priests, the panoply of unique figures and scenes in the Dura Europus paintings – have no textual connection with their place. Samson, for example, is depicted in the Lower Galilee, in one scene even carrying the Gate of Gaza on his shoulders, but not in any surviving part of the Gaza floor.⁵⁴ David, who is depicted at Gaza, is not named in the long inscription at Ein Gedi; and other main locations of David's biblical story do not preserve the remains of synagogues.⁵⁵ It is just possible that the "Purim panel" in the Dura frescoes – a unique scene in synagogue art, placed significantly just to the left of the Torah shrine – highlights a presumed local association with the heroes Mordecai and Esther; some residents of Dura could very well have felt themselves to be more a part of Parthia/Persia than the Roman world, even at a great distance from the royal capital.⁵⁶ But since Dura is, of course, not mentioned in the Scroll of Esther, only a local text or tradition – not the Biblical one – would secure this connection.

This, of course, does not rule out for any synagogue some extrabiblical association with a figure, story or verse, such as a special association of the Sepphoris synagogue with priests, which could have been part of the community's local identity: the consecration of Aaron and his sons is portrayed there in a unique scene.⁵⁷ The locals knew.

In conclusion, this chapter took up a limited task within a limited set of evidence. It is somewhat artificial but nonetheless (hopefully) instructive to measure an aspect of ancient Judaism mainly by inscriptions in the ritual and civic centers in which they actually lived, without interference of partisan or particularistic literary sources. The phenomenon we are hunting probably had a stronger existence than what we have been able to uncover, but the evidence is too ambiguous – and the synagogal

⁵³ The situation is, of course, different for Samaritan synagogues, but they lie beyond the scope of the present inquiry.

⁵⁴ Magness 2013; Grey and Magness 2013. ⁵⁵ Barasch 1980.

⁵⁶ The Persian inscriptions in the building were written on that painted scene; this, however, was a sign of appreciation of visitors from Persia proper to the distant outpost IJO III, pp. 177–209. Sabar 2000: 154–63; Tawil 1979.

⁵⁷ Weiss 2005: 247–9; 2012: 91–111; Weiss downplays the actual role priests played in the synagogue in the period of the Sepphoris synagogue, but that does not rule out that a strong priestly presence contributed to the community's identity.

communities so uninterested in communicating it – that no clear and detailed instances can be added to the larger study of it. If you asked any Jewish community represented wholly by their synagogue – how did you get to this particular place? when were you founded, by whom and why? – they probably had answers, but none are advertised or perpetuated in mosaic or stone. The physical remains of Jewish synagogue communities show a connection to the shared Jewish story rather than any particularistic story connecting them to their actual location. When the members of the synagogues – or the synagogues themselves, as the collective donations show – erected inscriptions, they were talking more to themselves and perhaps other Jews and interested visitors than to random outsiders or the Roman authorities.

The cases of Ein Gedi and Rehov reveal extremely inward-looking communities who saw fit to publish in their synagogue floors and walls regulations and laws regulating their local society, in a particular, nonformulaic language. This inward focus, this identification with, if anything, the collective Jewish identity, mean that Jewish synagogal communities did not react to Roman “globalization” in the same way as Greek cultural or political entities.