

mosaic pavement of multicolored geometric patterns and surrounded by porticoes. In the center of the atrium stood a large and impressive marble basin for washing and perhaps drinking. Mention of a “fountain of the Jews” in a municipal inscription may refer to this basin.

Three portals—a large central door flanked by two smaller ones—led from the courtyard into the main sanctuary. Just inside, on the eastern wall facing Jerusalem and flanking the main entrance, were two *aediculae* set on masonry platforms, at least one of which

held the Torah scrolls; the second one may have been for other Torah scrolls, a large menorah, or a seat for a congregational leader. A stunning mosaic floor decorated with impressive and intricate geometric designs was divided into seven different patterns. The lower parts of the walls were revetted with marble panels, often bearing inscriptions; the upper parts featured panels of brightly colored marble inlay.

Inside the sanctuary, at the western end of the hall, opposite the entrance, was a massive stone table with two large

Roman eagles engraved in relief on its two supporting stones. Flanked by two pairs of lions, each sitting back to back, this table was undoubtedly used during the Torah-reading ceremony and may have been where the prayer leader stood. Nearby were three semicircular benches where synagogue leaders presumably sat. No traces of a balcony or other stone benches were found; other members of the congregation likely sat on mats or wooden benches.

**What can you tell us about the Sardis synagogue inscriptions?**

Of the eighty-six inscriptions, seventy-nine of them are in Greek and seven in Hebrew. The Hebrew ones are fragmentary; often the only recognizable word is *Shalom*. With rare exception, the Greek inscriptions were dedicatory in nature, honoring the thirty or so donors who contributed to the building. This corpus reveals to us the large proportion of municipal and imperial officials, almost a third, who were members of or identified with this synagogue. Also, some inscriptions mention converts to Judaism (referred to in Greek as *theosebeis*), or those who were drawn to the synagogue but did not fully convert.

**From the Dura Europos and Sardis examples, it seems that, architecturally speaking, Diaspora synagogues of the period had little in common.**

This is very true. Diaspora synagogues were markedly different from one another in their architectural styles, since each was heavily influenced by the regnant styles of the surrounding area, as has been the case throughout history. Synagogues differed in their size and shape as well as in their location within a city. Some were centrally situated, others peripherally. Some had an atrium; others did not. In some communities, the sanctuary was part of a larger complex that might have included a kitchen, a *triclinium* (dining hall), or a meeting/study hall. Some buildings had dining halls, which may signify the importance of communal meals; this is also indicated at Dura Europos by the discovery of parchment fragments containing what appears to be a form of *Birkat ha-Mazon* (Grace after Meals). Some synagogues housed a library; in fact, St. Jerome (d. ca.



“Difficult things we do quickly.  
The impossible takes a little longer.”  
— David Ben-Gurion



## If we can make the desert bloom, we can make fish swim in the Negev.

Water—not oil—is the world’s most precious resource. Finding new ways to conserve, manage and renew that resource is one of the greatest achievements of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Founded to help develop the Negev, BGU is now a world leader in water resource management. University researchers and scientists have developed revolutionary new technologies for converting sea water into drinking water,

harvesting brackish desert water and purifying waste water. These technologies are at the heart of the new Negev. Today, farmers are breeding giant sea bass, tilapia and ornamental fish in the middle of the desert. And former wastelands have been turned into bountiful orchards and nurseries. After all, if we can make the desert bloom, we can bring fresh water to a parched world.

For more information about how you can make a difference, please contact:



1430 Broadway, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10018  
212-687-7721 or 800-962-2248 • info@aabgu.org • www.aabgu.org