To sum up, despite some stylistic and linguistic shortcomings and although potentially controversial, Shahar's thesis offers provocative implications which are intriguing and contain the seeds of future scholarly discussion.

Daniela Dueck Bar-Ilan University

R. Talgam and Z. Weiss, *The Mosaics of the House of Dionysos at Sepphoris, Excavated by E.M. Meyers, E. Netzer and C.L. Meyers*. Qedem 44. Jerusalem: Institute of Archaeology, the Hebrew University, 2004. xvi +136 pp. ISSN 0333 5844.

Z. Weiss, *The Sepphoris Synagogue: Deciphering an Ancient Message through Its Archaeological and Socio-Historical Contexts*. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2005. xvi + 360 pp. ISBN 965 221 057 9.

Historians of ancient Palestine should be extremely grateful to the excavators of Sepphoris for the energy with which the work has been pursued over the last few decades, for the stream of spectacular discoveries which so complicate any attempt to write the social and religious history of the region, and in particular to the excavators of the 'House of Dionysos' for the decision that Rita Talgam and Zeev Weiss could go ahead with a detailed report on the main mosaic, in advance of a full publication of the house itself.

The result is the extremely useful Qedem Monograph, devoted to the elaborate mosaic laid in the floor of the *triclinium* of the grand mansion in question, located just south of the theatre. The mosaic consists of a central oblong panel surrounded by 15 further panels, all showing episodes from the myth of Dionysos and Herakles, and all (of the 11 preserved panels at least) carrying Greek inscriptions identifying either persons or events ('Drunkenness', 'Procession', 'Marriage', and so forth). A U-shaped outer set of panels complements this with a representation of worshippers participating in a Dionysiac procession.

The authors survey comparable mosaics from the region, revealing as they do so how fragile, and often circular, the available arguments for dating them are; and then move to a very careful and useful step-by-step analysis of the various elements. The programme of the mosaic is of exceptional complexity, and is not merely unmistakably pagan, but carries a message as to the restraint and moderation of alcoholic consumption by Dionysos compared to the excesses and lack of control of Herakles; and it is also exceptional in combining the representation of myth with that of real-life worship.

While in its detailed execution the mosaic, made with relatively large *tesserae*, is not of the highest order, its very explicit and elaborate mythological design is of exceptional interest, and not least because the excavators date it to the late second or early third century CE — earlier, that is, than two other important 'pagan' mosaics from Sepphoris, the Orpheus mosaic of perhaps the second half of the third century, and the 'Nile Festival' mosaic of perhaps the early fifth: see the same two authors, 'The Nile Festival Building and Its Mosaics', in J.H. Humphrey (ed.), *The Roman and Byzantine Near East* 3 (*JRA* Supp. 49, 2002), 55.

If this dating is correct, and *if* the traditional story, based on later Talmudic sources, that R. Judah ha-Nasi moved to Sepphoris about this time and redacted the Mishnah there, is also correct, then of course a range of fundamental questions about what sort of place Sepphoris was come into play. But here we have to be rather more careful about the historical framework and its multiple ambiguities than the authors are. For a start, the official name of the town in this period was not 'Sepphoris', but 'Diocaesarea' ('Caesarea of Zeus'). As M. Avi-Yonah set out in *The Holy Land from the Persian to the Arab Conquests (536 BC to AD 640): a Historical Geography* (1966), 108f. — and as the reviewer tried to emphasise in *The Roman Near East* (1993), ch. 10.4, 'Syria

Palaestina' — this renaming, along with recognition of city-status and consequent attachment of a territory, was part of a fundamental process which from the later first century onwards transformed Palestine into a network of Greek cities — Mabartha/Flavia Neapolis, Sepphoris/Diocaesarea, Baitogabra/Eleutheropolis, Lydda/Diospolis, Emmaus/Nicopolis, not to speak of Jerusalem/Aelia Capitolina. Sepphoris/Diocaesarea could not in any case have been in any official sense 'the capital of the Galilee' (128), for there was no such thing; Galilee was not a province. While Syria Palaestina remained as a single province, its metropolis was Caesarea. When eventually, by the early fifth century, there were three 'Palestines', the metropolis of Palaestina Secunda was to be Scythopolis. Nor can Sepphoris/Diocaesarea, with its quite newly-acquired Graeco-Latin name with a specific pagan reference, possibly be described simply as a 'Jewish city'. Viewed from outside, at any rate, such a place, with a surrounding territory, and at one time issuing coins with Greek legends, will have been seen as a city like any other — not to speak of the archaeological evidence for its having a theatre, built in the late first or early second century CE, a basilica, three bath-houses, and eventually two churches; a bishop of Diocaesarea is attested, but only very late by comparison with other Palestinian cities, namely in 518.

There is also evidence suggesting a substantial Jewish presence, possibly even a majority, in the city. So far at least, neither literary nor documentary nor archaeological evidence attests the presence there of any pagan temples. See now the extremely valuable survey by N. Belayche, *Iudaea/Palaestina: the Pagan Cults in Roman Palestine* (2001), esp. 85-91. For what it is worth, Epiphanius, the most fanciful and unreliable of witnesses, claims both that (in the earlier fourth century) the local Jews kept all pagans ('Hellenes'), Samaritans and Christians out of Tiberias, Diocaesarea/Sepphoris, Nazareth and Capernaum, and that Joseph of Tiberias, a Jewish convert to Christianity, succeeded, if with difficulty, in constructing churches in Tiberias, Diocaesarea and elsewhere (*Panarion* XXX.11-12); see most recently M. Perkams, 'Der Comes Iosef und der frühe Kirchenbau in Galiläa', *Jahrb. f. Ant. u. Chr.* 44 (2001), 23. It is also true that in their brief accounts of the Jewish revolt of the 350s, Socrates and Sozomenus attribute responsibility to the Jews in Diocaesarea (Socrates, *HE* II.33; Sozomenus, *HE* IV.7), while Philostorgius (222 Bidez) says that 'their (the Jews') city' Diocaesarea was destroyed, and Jerome (*Chron.* for CE 352) uses this expression not only of Diocaesarea but of Tiberias and Diospolis. But, as the already famous synagogue-mosaic of (it seems) the fifth century shows, the destruction was less than definitive, while a continuing Jewish presence, which cannot be doubted, is again confirmed (Z. Weiss, E. Netzer, *Promise and Redemption: a Synagogue Mosaic from Sepphoris* (1996); L.I. Levine, Z. Weiss (eds.), *Studies in Jewish Art and Society in Late Antiquity* (*JRA* Supp. 40, 2000). And now, just in time for a brief and wholly inadequate notice (see below), comes Zeev Weiss's magnificent final publication of the synagogue itself.

It is best to accept that the two cities of southern Galilee, Diocaesarea/Sepphoris and Tiberias, represented in Late Antiquity a marginal zone between Jews, Samaritans, pagans and Christians, in which the nature of the balance in successive centuries is not yet understood, and may well have been constantly in flux. In the interesting section at the end of the book (127-31) where Talgam and Weiss agree to differ and to put forward conflicting interpretations of the original ownership of the House of Dionysos, Talgam is surely right to assert that we must start from the hypothesis of gentile, pagan, ownership. Weiss's speculation that the Talmudic reports about Judah ha-Nasi allow us to hypothesise that he might have been the owner only serves, alas, to demonstrate that the study of the social and religious history of Late Antique Palestine will never move forward until scholars abandon the assumption that anecdotes in the 'Jerusalem', or even the Babylonian, Talmud can be treated as unambiguous factual reports on real life in earlier centuries. That is not to say that we can assert that such stories are false, merely that the entire set of traditions, or disparate bundles of traditions, have to be re-examined, and first of all in the light of both the relevant textual transmission, and medieval manuscripts, on the one hand, and of genuinely

contemporary documentation and archaeological finds on the other. Precisely the least justifiable step is to interpret such contemporary evidence in the light of later Talmudic anecdotes.

Step-by-step, none the less, the real, and very complex, world of competing religious communities from which 'Talmudic Judaism' emerged is coming to light — and to that process Talgam and Weiss's study of the House of Dionysos makes a invaluable contribution.

As noted above, this review is just in time to add a brief concluding section, designed not to offer any serious assessment of Zeev Weiss's final publication of the Sepphoris synagogue, appearing a mere eleven years after its first discovery, but to salute an extraordinary achievement, which will take a central place in the study of Late Antique Judaism, in the archaeological literature of the Holy Land, and in the art history and iconography of the Graeco-Roman world in the period of the victory of monotheism. The book is beautifully printed on art paper, with very full illustrations both of the material from Sepphoris and of comparative material from elsewhere (which will make it a major resource for Late Antique art history), and there is also valuable work on the distinctive architecture of the building (long and narrow, apparently as a result of being fitted into an already existing urban context), and on the coins (by the late Yaakov Meshorer), the pottery (by Katia Cytryn-Silverman), the glass (by Yael Gorin-Rosen) and the lamps (by Judit Gärtner). But the central importance of the synagogue of course lies in the complex programme of the mosaic floor of its central hall, to be read (literally and figuratively) in sequence from the small entrance-hall ('narthex') up to the bema. I have two small complaints here. The dating, proposed as the early fifth century, is extremely crucial, and depends primarily on late-fourth-century coins found under the mosaic. In the spirit of Jodi Magness' revolutionary work in the dating of the synagogue at Sardis (due to appear in *AJA* this year), the location and exact archaeological context of these particular coins should have been set out more fully. Secondly, the sequence in which the panels actually will have been read by contemporaries, and need to be interpreted by us, is absolutely certain, from the structure of the building, the orientation of the representational panels and the positioning of all the writing except that on the central zodiac. So why, as already in Weiss and Netzer, *Promise and Redemption* (1996), not only number but discuss the panels in reverse order (see 61)?

That said, the volume offers both a beautifully full account of all the elements, not least in the first publication of all the Aramaic and (in the zodiac) Hebrew inscriptions and the Greek ones (by Leah di Segni), but also in a very full presentation of the proposed interpretation, with discussion of alternative views. There is no space here to say more than that I fully accept that the intention of the iconographic scheme was to represent the following sequence: Abraham and the Binding of Isaac; Central Zodiac; Consecration of Aaron; the Temple and its Sacrificial Ritual. In other words the meaning of the mosaic programme depends on the identification of the 'land of Moriah' (Genesis 22:2), where the Binding took place, with the subsequent site of the Temple (2 Chron. 3:1; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.226). Beyond that, there are complex issues, fully and fairly discussed, about the relation of this to 'rabbinic' Judaism, to the contemporary role of Priests and Levites (one each of whom is named in the Aramaic inscriptions) and to the hope of the restoration of the Temple. I would add only two brief final points. Firstly, if the dating proposed is correct, the synagogue was built some time close to the last years of Jerome (who died in 420), the closest Christian observer of contemporary Palestine, and even of rabbinic Judaism; we need to read him again in this light. He confirms that – as the mosaic inscriptions of synagogues show — the Judaism of Palestine in his time was bilingual, even in the context of its religious life: *unde et doctores eorum* σοφοί, *id est 'sapientes', vocantur, et si quando certis diebus traditiones suas exponunt, discipulis suis solent dicere:* οἱ σοφοὶ δευτεροῦσιν, *id est 'sapientes docent traditiones'* (*Ep.* 121, 10,21, written in about CE 410). Secondly, it is these images and texts (along with those from Beth Alpha, Ein Gedi, Hammat Tiberias and — let us hope one day — Rehov, with the archaeological evidence fully published) which are the primary evidence, not least for language and belief — and the

'Talmudic' texts, which can be read in medieval manuscripts, which are secondary. This magnificent volume marks a new era in the study of Judaism in Late Antiquity.

Fergus Millar Oriental Institute, Oxford

B. Bitton-Ashkelony and A. Kofsky, *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity*. Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 3. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004. viii + 247 pp. ISBN 90 04 13868 4.

Late Antique Gazan monasticism is finally getting the attention it deserves as the rising number of dissertations and publications reveals. Let me mention only the recent edition of the voluminous correspondence of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza by François Neyt, Paula de Angelis-Noah and Lucien Regnault, as well as the works of Jennifer Hevelone-Harper, Cornelia Horn, Lorenzo Perrone and Jan-Eric Steppa.[1] The editors of the present collection of essays are already known for their proficiency in this field, especially through their important survey article of Late Antique Gazan monasticism.[2] They are currently preparing a monograph entitled *The Monastic School of Gaza* (see 'about the authors', 235-6). The present collection of thirteen essays, the third volume of the new Brill series, 'Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture', represents a selection of contributions from a conference on Christian Gaza in Jerusalem, October 2000, a conference that, most regrettably, fell victim to the surge of the second Intifada.

A concise introduction (1-4) informs the reader about the birth of the collection and briefly summarizes the papers. The papers progress chronologically from the fourth to the sixth century, and deal not only with monasticism (though that does stand in the spotlight) but also with Gazan and Palestinian Christianity in its late antique pagan setting. As such, the book is a synthesis of a broad spectrum of fields, among them archaeology, art history, classics, history, religious studies and theology. Though no paper is devoted specifically to Gazan Judaism, Jews and Samaritans appear on many a page. Numerous maps and pictures illustrate the archaeological papers. Finally, brief biographies of the authors (235-7), a list of illustrations (239-40), and indices of names (241-3) and places (245-7 [not 249 as indicated in the table of contents]) round off the book.

The very interesting opening essay by Nicole Belayche, 'Pagan Festivals in Fourth-Century Gaza' (5-22), examines the data for public pagan celebrations in the era before the Christianization of the city. In her usual thorough manner (cf. her recent study *Iudaea Palaestina*, reviewed in *Scripta Classica Israelica* 22, 2003), she discusses the evidence for Hadrianic panegyrics, the

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1 *Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaza. Correspondance* (*SC* 426, 427, 450, 451, 468; Paris, 1998-2002); J. Hevelone-Harper, 'Letters to the Great Old Man: Monks, Laity, and Spiritual Authority in Sixth-Century Gaza [Palestine]', (Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University 2000); C. Horn, 'Beyond Theology: The Career of Peter the Iberian in the Christological Controversies of Fifth-Century Palestine', (Ph.D. thesis, Catholic University of America 2001); J.-E. Steppa, *John Rufus and the World Vision of Anti-Chalcedonian Culture* (Piscataway, NY 2002); L. Perrone, 'Dissenso dottrinale e propaganda visionaria: le *Pleroforie* di Giovanni di Maiuma', *Augustinianum* 29 (1989), 451-95.

2 B. Bitton-Ashkelony and A. Kofsky, 'Gazan Monasticism in the Fourth-Sixth Centuries', *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 50, 2000, 14-62; id., 'The Monasticism of Gaza in the Byzantine Period', *Cathedra* 96, 2000, 69-110 (Hebrew); cf. A. Kofsky 'Peter the Iberian: Pilgrimage, Monasticism and Ecclesiastical Politics in Byzantine Palestine', *Liber Annuus* 47, 1997, 209-22; id., 'Peter the Iberian and the Question of the Holy Places', *Cathedra* 91, 1999, 79-96 (Hebrew); id., 'Aspects of Sin in the Monastic School of Gaza', in J. Assman and G.G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Transformation of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions* (Studies in the History of Religions [Numen Book Series] 83), Leiden 1999, 421-37; id., 'The Byzantine Holy Person: The Case of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza', in M. Poorthuis and J. Schwartz (eds.), *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity* (Jewish and Christian Perspectives 7; Leiden 2004).