

# Art and Architecture of the Synagogue in Byzantine Palaestina



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By

Asaf Friedman

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## PREFACE

There are many books available on the subject of synagogues in Byzantine Palaestina. All of these books reject the notion that there is any meaning to the mosaic patterns, with the exception of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough. This made the Byzantine synagogue unimportant since it had no special meaning. The plans of the synagogues' mosaics are not even available in most excavation files. Such a claim did not make any sense to me, I propose an alternative reading. This book represents the fruits of my efforts to show the synagogues' mosaic meaning.

In 2018 the publishers—Cambridge Scholars Publishing—and I decided that I should write and illustrate a book that would narrate the synagogues' architecture and art drawings, showing the development and interdependence of the mosaics in twelve selected synagogues, and their concerns at the time that they were built.

The book, which will be published in 2019, has occupied six years of my time and travels. The area covered was mostly confined to the geographical limits of the State of Israel, the Golan Heights and the West Bank. The aim is to present as clear a picture as possible of the style and taste in different areas, illustrating which political and social trends influenced certain areas at certain times. I have given space to synagogues that were of paramount importance in leading certain movements and that produced the finest work of that age.

Since 1948, with the birth of modern Israel, the expansion of education and, above all, a curiosity facilitated by travel, Israel has opened up to tourists and students, and academic study has broadened its base. Since 1967 it has become easier to visit synagogues in Israel, the Golan Heights and the West Bank. I hope that one of the uses of this book may be to encourage readers to go to see buildings in situ. Bearing this in mind, I have not followed the traditional writing of a conventional book; instead I have allowed people to visit the synagogues with the full information at hand, with a chapter for each individual synagogue.

I would like to thank Prof. Israel Bar-Yehuda Idalovichi, who first showed me the mosaic at Susya and asked if I could make any sense out of it. Prof. Bar-Yehuda also assisted me in the first stages of my work – many thanks. I also wish to thank the Israel Antiquities Authority and the Israel Museum for their kind help, and all the people who helped me along.

Asaf Friedman  
Tel Aviv, Israel 2019



## HISTORICAL—CULTURAL INTRODUCTION

Over thousands of years, the Land of Israel came under the dominion and cultural influence of many great empires: Indo—European Hittites, Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Macedonians and Romans. All these great empires had a dominant influence over the life and culture of the region's people. The time period covered by this book begins in the third century CE, after the severe consequences of the Jewish—Roman wars during and after 66-135 CE—the beginning of the Byzantine era—and ends in the seventh century, when the area was conquered by the Islamic Empire in 634 CE. The victory of Constantine in Tetrarchy in 324 signaled the beginning of the Christianization of the Roman Empire, uniting people in the belief that Jesus had a unique significance. Constantine's mother, Saint Helena, visited Jerusalem in 326 and began construction of churches and shrines, making Palaestina a center, attracting numerous monks and religious scholars. It was "a turbulent period which holds the last winter fruits of the Classical world as well as the spring flowers of the new world of Christianity" (Goldman 1966, p. 19). The reemergence of religious forces that took place is indicated in sculpture and painting by a transformation from representational pagan art to the abstract forms of the Byzantine era. "From reliance on canons of physical form as media expression of ideals (physioplasic) to emphasis on conceptual forms in order to express the transcendental (ideoplasic)" (Goldman 1966, p. 19).

When focusing on the Jewish historical and cultural background during the Byzantine epoch in Palaestina, it is necessary to recall important milestones, from the building of the Second Temple in 515 BCE until the Christianization of the Roman Empire. After the building of the Temple, Ezra and Nehemiah, the religious and political leaders of the Jewish people who returned from Babylonian exile, established the Torah of Moses as the authorized law of the Jews. From this time onward, the main religious columns—namely, God, the Temple and the Torah—were symbolically central in Palestinian Judaism. Judaism was, at that time, the worship of one God in the one Temple of Jerusalem, in accordance with the laws of His Torah. God, Temple and Torah constituted an ideological complex of remarkable simplicity. If its neatness and coherence gave it a certain force, its clear inadequacy as an explanation of how the human world operates was its potential weakness. Everything in the Jewish system was unique: the one God chose the one people of Israel as His own (the "chosen people"), and the one Temple as the only place where they might worship Him. God gave His people the Torah, whose laws they are obliged to study and observe.

Like other groups living under Roman and Byzantine domination, the Jews could not remain impervious to the cultural, social, political, religious and economic forces that held sway. "They reacted to them in various ways: by choosing suitable features for incorporation into their own culture, adopting regnant patterns without giving much thought to selectivity, or simply rejecting elements as foreign and undesirable" (Levine 2005). Their reaction to Hellenism served at the time as a stimulant, and the act of rejection created new and unforeseen consequences. Since in this epoch there were many dramatic changes in political, cultural and religious circumstances, they implied changes in the Jewish tradition, rituals and forms of expression. Those changes in the second and third centuries CE directly influenced Jewish art.

Jewish tradition had been divided between the Torah as the authoritative, sacred writings but with an opaque text, and various sets of oral traditional but not fully authorized practices. Nevertheless, the Torah had a symbolic and practical importance in ancient Palestinian Jewish society. Although the bond between God, Temple, Torah and the Jewish people was culturally, politically and symbolically powerful, this does not imply that all Jews actually lived their lives according to the rules prescribed by Halacha (Jewish law). Hence, it implies disappointingly little about the texture of daily, private life. This means that during the Second Temple epoch, as well as during Byzantine times, no set of prescriptions can be assumed to have completely controlled the lives of those to whom they were addressed. Furthermore, the laws of Halacha, whose desirability had been to some extent internalized and theoretically backed by the full force of a

religious and cultural authoritarian regime, had been violated and evaded by the Jewish society, which in this respect did not differ from any other society.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, when the excavations in Na'aran and Beit Alpha revealed the mosaics of the synagogues there, a new era in Jewish archaeology, history and arts became visible. What the archeologists saw, to their horror, was the ancient world looking back, full of images of people, pagan gods and a zodiac wheel. It seems that the Jewish religious leaders permitted iconic, representational decoration, and the sources testify to a policy of religious pragmatism and avoidance of the formulation of binding teachings. "Everything specifically forbidden in the Halacha of the rabbis appears in the remains of their religious culture: apart from the fantastic images on the amulets and charms, even the synagogues have yielded images of pagan gods" (Goodenough 1956, 4:26). With elements such as plants, hands, animals, fish, snakes, as well as birds of all kinds, the archeologists were left to their own devices to decipher these newly exposed visual images.

The archaeological evidence shows many dramatic changes in the Jewish visual expression. There is much evidence to suggest that the great mass of Jews accepted the amalgamation of pagan art with typical Jewish art forms. The visual art itself indicates the high level of influence that the Greco—Roman culture and the Christian tradition had. Thus, the observation into popular Judaism at the time of its religious conceptions, if not its rituals, was revealed by these excavations. The common reaction to this was disbelief. Afterward, the majority of the researchers turned to the traditional view, which maintained that Jews disregarded images, and therefore viewed the style as insignificant—hence, the revealed style was "mere decoration."

This diversity is especially striking with regard to art. On the one hand, the synagogues in communities holding a very conservative attitude toward art forms—such as Rehob, Meiron, Khirbet—Shema and Jericho's Tel es-Sultan—bore no signs of figural representation, neither of humans nor of animals; on the other hand, many more acculturated communities made use of figural decorations in their synagogues, as occurs, for instance, in Yafia, Beit Alpha, Hammath Tiberias, Tel-Istaba, Hamat Gader, Ma'on, Na'aran, Sepphoris and Susya. A more conservative approach toward figural representation is strikingly evident in the synagogue at Ein Gedi, where a written list of the zodiac signs, rather than their figural representation, is found. The community there apparently was vigorously opposed to figural representation, especially of humans, though birds do appear in the synagogue's mosaic. This, however, does not mean that they were not thinking visually; abstract form was common to all.

This raises the question of the representation of humans or Greco—Roman gods in various synagogues during the Byzantine epoch in Palaestina. The question still remains: How did Jews, as adherents of cultural and religious systems of thought and faith that tended to frown on representations of humans, let alone of gods, defend their use of figurative art? Furthermore, this use of figurative, including paganizing, representations by Jews, revealed by archeologists and historians, caused debates that are still alive in our time. For Orthodox and ultra—Orthodox Jews at the present time, it is a very problematic issue—so much so that they simply ignore it.

The theory accepted by most scholars is that from the third century CE onward, the pagan motifs used in Jewish representational art lost their original, symbolic, idolatrous significance and were regarded as merely ornamental motifs (Avigad 1976). They assume that the Jews in Palaestina during the Byzantine era utilized such threatening images because they were unaware of the implications of those images. They also maintain that in the second and third centuries, paganism was no longer dominant, and therefore the images were largely free of any noisome religious content. On the other hand, Jewish art utilizing both biblical themes and pagan symbols, as sometimes occurs, for instance, on adjacent panels of a mosaic pavement in a synagogue nave, was profoundly meaningful. Some researchers even claimed that the Jews of the Byzantine era had no awareness of the surrounding visual culture. However, though the Jews of that time could be seen as motivated by the internal dynamics of rabbinic law, they can also be seen as part of the larger, dominant sociocultural process.

The mosaic inlay in Jewish synagogues was thought by Michael Avi-Yonah and his colleagues to be "mere" decoration. Decoration, as opposed to fine art, carries no meaning. Decorations are arrangements of visual



elements according to established compositions whose principles are based on symmetry. Given that meaning can be achieved by allowing the breaking of symmetry that produces difference (the dialectic method), in examining the mosaics in a synagogue it is possible to observe that there are asymmetrical design elements that could denote meaning, a method used by the Rabbis themselves—dialectic. Art with recognizably Jewish or biblical themes, even when found in the same context as the pagan, for example, on adjacent panels of a mosaic pavement in a synagogue nave, is assumed to have been profoundly meaningful (Avigad 1976). The problem with the theory of “mere decoration,” as applied to the mosaics in the synagogues, can be summarized in the following way: the Temple shrine and the zodiac panels are symbols of the Jewish and pagan religions, respectively, and therefore cannot exist in adjacent panels within a larger frame.

The Jews, especially in Palaestina, borrowed a limited number of symbols, mainly pagan. Thus, to understand the mosaics’ symbols in a synagogue, “it is necessary to reconstruct the lingua franca of the religious symbolism of the time” (Goodenough 1992). The lingua franca during Byzantine times had many sources: starting with pagan symbols, and elements from Mesopotamia to Egypt, and extending to the Greco-Roman and Sassanid empires which on the whole influenced art in Palaestina. It follows that all symbols must be categorized in order to define the elements that appear most frequently in the synagogues. A systematic categorization that will lead to comprehending the visual language used during Byzantine times demands a deep understanding of the symbols and elements of art by means of a hermeneutical method, as well as an overarching iconographic theory having a universal aesthetic value. Although the continuous use of visual and linguistic elements formed a common meaning of religious ideas at all levels of society, the Jewish symbolic imagery of that time is still an open setting for visual discourse. Common sense tells us that if a synagogue functions as a place of religious congregation, its visual design must contain certain religious meanings, so that nothing could have a “mere” decorative denotation. Hence, every image has significance, and every design infers a particular content or reality that goes beyond its more obvious one or beyond mere recognition of what is literally presented in the given structure. The implication of this statement is that the uses of religious visual rhetoric were sociocultural equalizers in their immediacy, which was impossible in the case of written texts.

The approach taken by Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough (1992) differs from that of Avi-Yonah (1994). Goodenough formulates a method to decipher this ancient Jewish Byzantine phenomenon and starts to categorize the various elements of the mosaics. Visual discourse is in the background of a religious setting in which Jewish symbolic imagery is formed. Given that the visual representations appeal to all people regardless of social status, all images were in a more or less straightforward way aspects of—and evidence for—the popular Judaism practiced for centuries throughout the Mediterranean world in the Byzantine Empire. Yet, since the Jewish art of that time became anchored in pictures, the source of its created narrative is still unknown in our time. It follows that “these figures had real meaning for Jews as symbols—symbols whose values they had thoroughly Judaized by giving them Jewish explanations” (Goodenough 1992). For Goodenough, all designs and patterns had religious meaning, nothing was simply decorative. Goodenough, however, with limited and diverse findings, fails to produce such proof, and no one has supplied such proof until now. The first task of this book is to show how the synagogues’ mosaics can be interpreted. The problem to be overcome is how to decipher visual messages from fifteen hundred years ago, when our cultural references have almost disappeared.

The main task of this book is to examine the meanings of artistic expressions and the iconography of various synagogues during the Byzantine era, and to show how the synagogues’ mosaics can be interpreted, thus exploring the meaning of the figurative as well as the geometric panels. There can be few qualms about a working assumption that many (even most) narrative and figural depictions, as well as representations of Jewish religious artifacts, in synagogues have symbolic implications. This holds true for biblical representations and for most, if not all, depictions of Jewish religious symbols, as well as the pagan motifs. It is hard to imagine, for example, that mosaic floors in synagogues were laid simply for ornamental purposes or that a panel with zodiac motifs had been chosen merely for its aesthetic value and placed at random next to one containing a cluster of Jewish symbols or a biblical scene fraught with religious significance.

Thus, the book will show that during the time of the Byzantine Empire, the synagogues in Palaestina developed a visual language adhering to traditional literary sources. The visual language that emerged is a trope that utilizes literal and figurative readings to arrive at an inquisitive mixture—a probing language that facilitates learning. It is a visual language of “becoming,” of inward introspection and outward scrutiny. This visual language analysis goes back to Ernst Gombrich’s, Rudolf Arnheim’s, Gyorgy Kepes’s, and Roland Barthes’s attempts to synthesize visual rhetoric. These were attempts that went beyond the limits of compositional rules to form malleable perception and structure, producing a cultural interpretation that required a rational, analytical thought process, as well as an emotional one.

The book is divided into two parts: The first part examines the context of ancient synagogues. The methodology used relies on two components: what the rabbis thought, and the claim that recurring elements in the synagogue must have meaning. By gathering all the recurring elements and examining the geometric forms for intrinsic value entrenched in the visual culture, the chronology and architecture of ancient synagogues is put into context through an examination of this visual language. The second part is a survey of twelve synagogues. It describes the development of the visual language as a dialogue both with the church and between the various sects within Judaism.

## 1 Method and Rabbinic Text

The chapter starts by describing the Jewish art of the time and the problems the modern viewer has when encountering it. Since pagan images were found in the synagogue, it asks how to approach such volatile and distant images and how those images could have been tolerated. The methodology used to examine such works relies on repeated or common elements in the synagogues and the rabbinic commentary on mosaic and wall painting in the synagogue.

## 2 The Ancient Synagogue

Next, the role of the synagogue in the community is discussed. The synagogue was a revolutionary institution from its inception, embodying dramatic religious and social changes; it served first and foremost as a center for all communal needs. From a religious point of view, the reading of the Torah and its ancillary activities were central. The Dura-Europos synagogue is the only synagogue where wall paintings remain, and its mosaic floors had a profound influence on synagogues in Palaestina.

## 3 The Tripartite Panel Design

A distinctive tripartite panel scheme of carpet—like design appears in several synagogue pavements and consists of symbolic and narrative panels—those, for example, in Beit Alpha, Beth—She’an, Hammath Tiberias, Na’aran, Sepphoris, and Susya, as well as at Hammath Gader. Such a carpet in the nave usually has a field that is divided lengthwise into three (or seven as is the case in Sepphoris) rectangular carpets (bands or panels), each thematically distinct and appropriate to its position in the building, in a recurring design and theme that is repeated on the various synagogue floors. The panels are usually divided into (a) a panel of Jewish symbols, which is situated in front of the Torah shrine, (b) a central panel decorated with a zodiac scheme, and (c) a third panel, sometimes with a biblical scene or a geometric design. The Jewish iconographic scheme of the tripartite panel design stimulates various queries as to the meaning and significance of each panel and of the composition as a whole. The chapter will propose a new theory for their construction.

## 4 The Geometric Panels

The fourth chapter discusses some of the recurring geometric panels, examining aspects such as the four sons, the octagon, and repetition and variation. Those panels contain geometric elements that are influenced by the four worlds (*olamot*) of the *Haggadah*, a Jewish text that sets forth the order of the Passover seder. Reading the *Haggadah* at the seder table is a fulfillment of the scriptural commandment that each Jew “tell your son” of the Jewish liberation from slavery in Egypt as described in the book of Exodus.

## 5 The Religious Visual Rhetoric

This chapter discusses some of the issues concerning the syntax that forms the visual language. Jewish symbolism differs from that of the Greek and Roman worlds in its ability to take common elements and subvert them. The syntax is of a conceptual nature and includes recognition of the limits of representation. This language is both modern, in the sense of isolation of an image, and old in its linear reading.

### Part 2

#### 12 Individual Synagogues

The last part lays out a comprehensive view of twelve synagogues:

Beit Alpha	518–527	Na'aran	6 <sup>th</sup>
Ein Gedi	6 <sup>th</sup>	Sepphoris	late 5 <sup>th</sup>
Hammath Gader	6 <sup>th</sup>	Susya	6 <sup>th</sup>
Hammath Tiberias	4 <sup>th</sup>	Tel es-Sultan–Jericho	late 6 <sup>th</sup> –7 <sup>th</sup>
Huseifa	late 5 <sup>th</sup> –6 <sup>th</sup>	Tel Ictaba–Beith She'an	late 6 <sup>th</sup> –7 <sup>th</sup>
Ma'on–Nirim	5 <sup>th</sup>	Yafia	6 <sup>th</sup>



# PART I

## UNDERSTANDING THE LANGUAGE



## CHAPTER ONE

### THE METHOD AND RABBINIC TEXT

#### **Jewish Art in the Synagogue**

According to Lee I. Levine “More than any other Jewish institution of antiquity, the synagogue demonstrates a fascinating synthesis of Jewish and non-Jewish elements within a single framework” (2005). Jewish symbols should therefore be interpreted in the cultural context of their time because “people used symbols which could pass thus from religion to religion precisely because the forms did not have any literal, denotative meaning” (Goodenough 1922). The Jews, especially in Palaestina, on the whole borrowed an extremely limited number of symbols, mainly pagan symbols still in use. So to understand the mosaic symbols in a synagogue, it is necessary to reconstruct their many sources: Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greco—Roman and Sassanid symbols, all of which had an influence on art in Palaestina. All these components, together with the development of Byzantine art, led to an integration and a new synthesis that constituted the essence of a new Jewish art: it was neither merely an Oriental influence on the art of mosaic (Avi-Yonah 1994) nor solely the Byzantine art, which was based on a synthesis of Eastern and Western elements, (Ovadia and Ovadia 1987), that influenced the mosaic art of the ancient synagogue.

The physical appearance of the Palestinian synagogue was similar to many of the other religious and public buildings, and was mainly influenced by the Hellenistic culture in the region. Roman influence can also be seen with regard to the architecture of synagogues, which were often basilica—like structures. The synagogue adopted many of the then—prevalent artistic forms of ornamentation. This influence can be detected in the synagogue façade, and such buildings are indistinguishable from contemporary pagan edifices: their decorations and plans are identical, consisting of a main entrance, two side entrances, decorated windows, columns, a semicircular arch above the main entrance, and a gable crowning the façade. One rabbinic source (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 7:2.) tells of a man who walked along the street and bowed down before a building, thinking it was a synagogue. Only afterward did he realize that the building was, in fact, a pagan temple. “Aramaic and Greek were regnant languages in the Near East at the time, and thus it is not surprising that more than 85 percent of all synagogue inscriptions are in those languages. Influence from the outside world also affected the synagogue liturgy. In many communities prayers were conducted in Greek” (Levine 1981, pp. 1—10). This immersion into Greek culture can be seen in the translation of the Torah into Greek by Aquilas in the Yavnean period that was meant for Jewish communities in Roman Palaestina.

Synagogue art in late antiquity had developed over a long period of time. Its first phase started with the Hasmonean rebellion and ended with the Bar Kokhba Revolt, a period of some four hundred years. At this time, there was a general prohibition among the Jews regarding figural representation. Remains of buildings from the Second Temple period and from the third century CE are almost entirely devoid of such symbols. Beginning in the third century, representational art began to flourish, and figurative art played an extensive and essential role: figural representations appeared in many synagogues, often depicting human, and even pagan, motifs. A distinctive systematic scheme of nave carpet designs appears on several synagogue pavements, consisting of symbolic and narrative panels. Most striking is the appearance of zodiac signs and Helios in a number of synagogues throughout the country (Hammath Tiberias, Beit Alpha, Huseifa, Na’aran, and Sepphoris). These nave carpets usually have a field divided lengthwise into three rectangular panels, each thematically distinct and appropriate to its position in the construction, in a recurring design and theme that is repeated on the different synagogue floors with few variations in the panel designs. The tripartite panel designs are usually divided into (a) a Jewish symbols panel, which is situated in front of the Torah shrine, (b) a central panel decorated with a zodiac, with Helios at the center,

and (c) a third panel, sometimes with a biblical scene (or a geometric design). This development is all the more surprising in light of the previous attitude toward art that animates the imagination. The changes, reflected in Talmudic literature, were the result of political, economic and social circumstances. This Jewish iconographic scheme stimulates various queries as to the meaning and significance of each panel as well as that of the whole composition. Did the Jews of this period no longer fear idolatry? The answer lies with the leading rabbis who emphasized the latter part of the commandment, "You shall not bow down to them or serve them" and tended to enforce the prohibition only where the danger of idolatry was present (Hachlili 2013). In the synagogues, biblical scenes or figures were only sparingly used. Thus, for instance, the Aqedah (the binding of Isaac) scene at Beit Alpha is an elaborate example of biblical art. Additionally, there are figures of Daniel at Na'aran and Susya, of David at Gaza and possibly at Merot. Fragmentary representations of the Aqedah, and possibly of the visit of the three angels to Abraham and Sarah, are to be found at Sepphoris. These objects often appear together with a depiction of a Temple shrine in a mosaic panel near the stage (bima), and the use of Jewish symbols and depictions of Jewish ritual objects such as the menorah, shofar (horn), lulav (palm frond), and etrog (citron) became popular and widespread.

In each synagogue having a zodiac wheel (for example, in Beit Alpha, Hammath Tiberias, Na'aran, Sepphoris and the partially covered zodiac in Susya) there is a central motif of the image of the sun god in frontal position (en face) with a crown on his head and a nimbus with rays emanating from it, riding his quadriga. The quadriga is a chariot with two wheels in front and is drawn by four horses, two on either side. At Sepphoris, however, the sun itself is riding the chariot. The representation at Hammath Tiberias shows the central figure driving the solar chariot: a young man with a crown and a halo with rays emanating from it. He looks up toward his raised right hand; in his left hand he holds a globe and whip. A star and crescent moon are rendered in the upper background. Very little remains of the chariot, only the tips of hooves in the lower part of the panel have survived (Dothan 1983). The Hammath Tiberias sun god has all the attributes of Sol Invictus (Levine 2013).

The liberal attitude toward the interpretation of "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down yourself to them, nor serve them: for I am the LORD . . ." (Exodus 20:4 All biblical quotations are from the King James Version), should be understood against the background of various influences and struggles within the Jewish faith and with external forces exerting their influence. This liberal attitude is important in order to compare the laws governing idolatry in the Mishnah and Talmud in light of the archaeological finds. The reason for this liberal attitude is that after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, there was an inevitable decline in the power of the court priests. The focus of power shifted to the "rabbis" who began the formulation of what became known as the "Oral Law" (*Torah SheBe'al Peh*). The rabbis still had to preserve their influence on the Jewish society and could not maintain a rigorist approach to idolatry. With the waning power of paganism there were less problems with Jews worshipping pagan gods; thus the rabbis slowly modified their approach, from uncompromising rejection of anything remotely connected to pagan cults to an acceptance of pagan culture, allowing the Jews to tolerate and function in Palaestina's cities where they no longer were the majority. However, the main reason for the liberal attitude was the power struggle with Christianity, which made wide use of art for instituting its faith. Thus, gradually pagan symbols were incorporated into Jewish art through the influence of Jewish legends and midrashic literature.

### **The Method of Deciphering the Various Signs and Symbols**

The religious setting in which the Jewish symbolic imagery was formed was an environment predisposed to express a visual discourse. In addition, the selection of a relatively small number of repeated motifs and compositions is evidence of their symbolic value. Every image has its significance, and infers a content or a reality that is beyond its representation, beyond recognition of what is literally presented. If one analyzes forms and discovers repeated elements, one can assume that they have meaning. Nevertheless, the remaining synagogues with mosaics need to be examined as a whole, so their commonality can be extracted. If there are commonalities, perhaps one can establish the dialogue between the different



synagogues, and forms can be named. In this case we need both a catalog of forms, following Avi—Yonah, Ruth and Asher Ovadiah, and Goodenough, as well as a canon, to make it possible to find out the names of all the elements.

Jews formulated their art by creating an original synthesis: adopting regnant patterns of the Greco—Roman culture, on the one hand, and Babylonian and Persian signs and symbols, on the other, creating a subtle, coded expression of traditional Jewish signs and symbols. Each community expressed its own significant ideas, creating a language of visual discourse. The various images, symbols and signs used in Roman art were, however, exploited to display cultural status and affiliation: they spoke of the values (Latin *otium*, Greek *paideia*) that sustained Roman social life. Late antique sources bear witness to the close engagement of the educated classes in the sophisticated philosophical arguments of the day. These arguments involved a detailed reading of history, allegory and myth (Perring 2003). This is not an idea unique to Rome but throughout the ancient world, where ideas were expressed through both words and pictures. One of the purposes of such royal art and architecture is that they were set up as part of propaganda wars and provided an appropriate setting for court discussions and the display of poetry and art. In the case of the synagogue, art and poetry were vehicles to display the community relationship with the outside world.

The issue to clarify is the contextualization of interpretation: that is, symbolic and representational interpretations were not necessarily constant in varying historical and social contexts. Changes in interpretation were inevitable over the centuries, and even over generations. As Jaś Elsner has argued in his work on Roman and Byzantine artistic perspectives, “People relate to works of art in different ways, depending upon different contexts and at different times” (1998). An urban setting may have given rise to an interpretation that would have been unknown or unacceptable in a rural context, and the same holds true of a community in the Roman east as opposed to one in the west, or one in a Greek—speaking (and presumably more acculturated) environment as opposed to one in which Aramaic was the lingua franca. The façade of the Temple, the Temple shrine, or representations of Jewish symbols may not have meant the same thing in third—century Dura as they did in fourth-century Rome, fifth-century Sepphoris, or sixth—century Beit Alpha. Likewise, Helios in fourth-century Tiberias may have evoked a set of beliefs and associations different from those evoked in Rome in the fifth century. An additional question is related to the Jewish community involved: Were they the congregation that existed there when the synagogue was built there; fifty or a hundred years later? The worldview of the donors or the synagogue leaders, who undoubtedly had a decisive say in the choice of artistic motifs, is also unknown. The question boils down to whether the community was aware of such problems? This question of interpretation can be answered in labeling the figures as can be seen in the different panels of the synagogues.

The method of deciphering the various signs and symbols follows Goodenough’s system; by following his examination of recurring elements, it is possible to overcome the lack of sufficient information and determine their meaning. We have not however anchored our theory and method in a certain philosophy or particular method of thought, as Goodenough has done with, for instance, Philo of Alexandria’s Neo—Platonist writings, which developed in the context of mystical Judaism. The artwork should be understood and interpreted through the amalgamation of the various temporal fields of culture and science. By analyzing the archaeological excavations and restorations, adapting them to the written texts or inscriptions of that time and reality with the purpose of finding their actual meaning, the recurring symbols will reveal their true significance.

Deciphering the various signs and symbols follows a method in which first there is formal analysis, followed by semantic evaluation. The formal analysis of every mosaic floor is based on an examination of the archaeological excavations and restorations, followed by their adaptation to a conceptual description. The conceptual description incorporates the object’s unique intrinsic and extrinsic character and its relation to other objects, either by sharing certain characteristics or by drawing comparisons between the panels’ geometry. This is followed by a detailed semantic evaluation of the objects, signs, icons and symbols in their context, coordinated with an examination of the written texts. With the purpose of finding their actual meaning, the consequential interpretations should amalgamate the various fields of culture and science of

their times. Such a goal can be achieved by introducing artistic, theological, mystical, philosophical, literary, scientific, psychosocial and historical factors, which together give us a hermeneutical spectrum of the work of art. Given that thinking is based on memory as its arsenal of data and its perceived nature, while knowledge is based on comprehension of the entire reality, it is the function of creative, artistic imagination to fashion all human faculties. Thus, it is possible to improve human understanding, to reconstruct past experience and symbols, as well as to generate new knowledge. Additionally, the concepts, forms, shapes or ideas that are linked to our visual and linguistic abilities are created on the basis of their vital aspirations and artistic impulses, which are expressed initially through the power of imagination. In principle, the power of imagination should not be used merely in a speculative way, just by excluding any objective method; rather, the initial intuition and imagination should be systematically developed into an objective, universal system. Following this path means that we should restrict ourselves neither to one discipline nor to one philosophical system, particular belief or certain ideology, nor should we assume that our sources must be only written sources: they should be extended to include visual archaeological sources.

In every language of expression across the ages, meaning and methods change, as do the attributes of the representation. Rediscovering the comprehensive structure, which holds the individual iconographic signs, is followed by an analysis of other floor designs to comprehend the vocabulary used. Thus, for instance, a similar process of interpretation is conducted with regard to other visual clues—for example, Egyptian hieroglyphs—where each individual character or image is examined in relation to the whole. The pictographic logogram schema should hold true for most mosaic floors of other synagogues of the period

The basic notion employed in interpreting a synagogue's imagery is that images in the synagogue have functional religious aspects, and they are not mere decorative elements. Representation is a manifestation of thought, evident through a physical act, which can be either a reflection of the environment or a reflection of an individual's mental vision. Thus, in the synagogue are to be found representations of physical or mental structures, as well as combinations of both. According to John Wilkinson (1978), the Byzantine synagogue provides an example of a type of symbolism that operates on multiple levels, wherein the basic patterns of existence are perceived as sacred because contemplation means focusing on the origin of all things. The forms or the ideas are also seen as the basis of sacred geometry and are a further proof of the cosmic significance of geometric forms, phenomena that can be explained through natural principles. By studying the nature of forms and their relationship to each other, one may seek to gain insight, through cognitive process and rhetoric, into the philosophical, aesthetic and mystical laws of the people who created them.

The function of creative, artistic imagination is the fashioning of reality to improve our understanding, to reconstruct past experience and symbols, and to generate new knowledge. It follows that concepts, forms, shapes or ideas, which are linked to our visual and linguistic abilities, have been created on the basis of vital human aspirations and artistic impulses, which are expressed initially through the power of imagination. Yet the power of imagination should not be used in a merely speculative way, by excluding any objective method. In fact the opposite should prevail: the objects and the subjects of imagination should be systematically developed into an objective, universal system. Following this path means that we should not restrict ourselves to one discipline, philosophy, belief or ideology, nor should we assume that our sources must be merely written sources, archaeological sources, or a certain tradition, religion, or ideology. Thus, for instance, our understanding of reality could be improved simply by being aware of the fact that an object whose "inherent beauty of color or form recalls some other object, and is designed . . . to call that object to mind; but since the object represented may in itself have symbolic power in the deeper sense, a painting may be more profoundly symbolic than an ordinary word can be in its literal implication" (Goodenough 1992).

The Christian (for that matter also the Jewish) interpretation of pagan figures reflected a general tendency within classical antiquity to draw on images received from earlier art and give them fresh meanings by deploying them in new contexts and combinations or syncretism. The exercise of an eclectic approach to the use of iconography does not imply that the individual components were somehow less well understood or

more casually deployed (Perring 2003). The richness of the images available at the time is an expression of the complexity of the concepts being expressed, and this adds to the burden of meaning that we can expect to find carried by iconographic choice.

Given the limited array of archaeological material at our disposal, together with the minimal amount of literary data that may in some way relate to these artistic motifs and their possible meanings, the nature of the geometric figure and its relation to the whole can yield valuable clues to its interpretation. Rabbinic texts—most often midrashim or targumim are invoked to reinforce one or another interpretation. The interdisciplinary theory of visual art focuses on the social context of the art, and the target audience. This approach examines the communicative relationships between people and their objects: their participation, engagement and actions, as well as the artist's intention and his/her knowledge. This is an architectural cultural interface which allows one to examine architectural elements and artifacts within their context and sanctions the artist to have a sense of understanding that allows one to educate, to leave clues for the other.

How does the method work in deciphering visual works? The first thing to acknowledge is that the artists were aware of the technical as well as the philosophical aspects of the work, and left traces behind for people to decipher the design. The artists introduced new elements into the design gradually. For example, in the introduction of an element, it is repeated in various situations within the synagogue. For instance, in Beit Alpha the square within a square is first introduced at the entrance, then at the aisle, and finally at the Temple shrine panel (see Figure 1.1.).

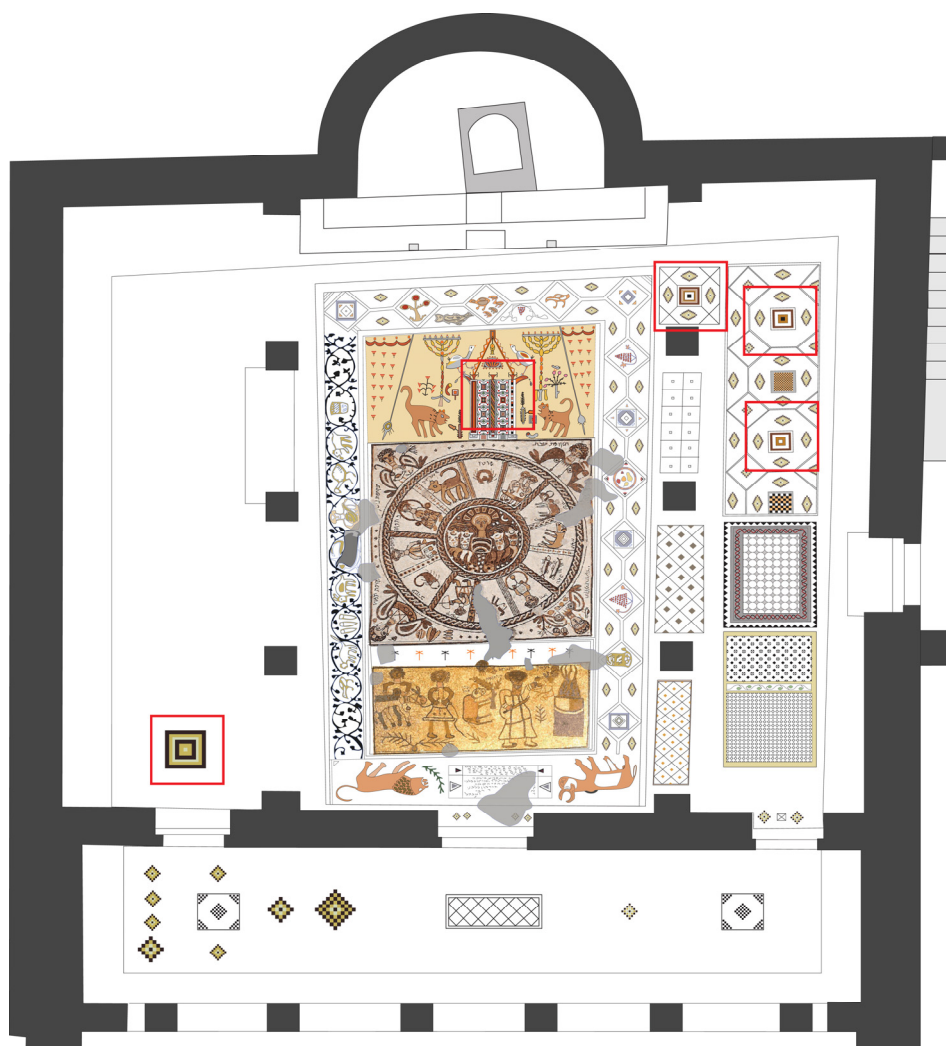


Figure 1.1. Plan of Beit Alpha synagogue; clues for a square within a square marked with a red square

## The Rabbinic Perspective

After the destruction of the Second Temple, the reality for Jews in Palaestina changed dramatically. Although their economic situation was decent, the conflict between Jews and Christians was always there. Thus, in order to survive, the Jews became accustomed to the new reality, especially to the Christian propaganda machine. Nevertheless, it is believed that this propaganda war was only fought in Jewish and Christian writings. The Mishnah (the first major written redaction of the Jewish oral tradition) is an excellent source of descriptions of this time. To make sense of the rabbis' view of paganism, it may be best for us to focus on tractate *Avodah Zarah* (3:3), which is unusual in the context of the Mishnah in that it lacks any clear legal content. It may in fact appear in the Mishnah for no other reason than that one of its protagonists quotes Deuteronomy (13:18), which is also quoted in the Mishnah. This section in *Avodah Zarah* articulates the metalegal principles that underlie rabbinic legislation on idolatry in a way that highlights their contrast with the sort of literal interpretation of the Pentateuch that may have prevailed in some contemporary non-rabbinic circles and had almost certainly been widespread among the Jews after the destruction of the Second Temple.

Rabbinic commentaries on the Mishnah from the third through the sixth centuries were eventually redacted and compiled as well, in a corpus known as the Gemara. The Talmud consists of books that present the Mishnah in its original structure, together with the associated Gemara, and it exists in two versions: the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud. Unlike the Hebrew Mishnah, the Gemara was written primarily in Aramaic. By convention a reference to the Gemara or the Talmud, without further qualification, refers to the Babylonian version. In the Talmud, tractate *Avodah Zarah* was the main target of controversy and criticism. The main concerns of this tractate (Mishnah, *Avodah Zarah* 3:3) are how to avoid any semblance of participation in or collusion with pagan cultic activity; how to treat items associated or suspected of being associated with such activity, especially images and wine; how to treat images of the gods in general; and how to cope with aspects of city life that are objectionable.

There is no doubt that Jews in late antiquity incorporated conceptual changes at the end of the second and the beginning of the third centuries CE, when representational art began to flourish. During this period the Jews developed not only the Mishnah and the Talmud but also their own figurative art. They also absorbed customs and decorative elements from the surrounding cultures, including pagan motifs. The development of Jewish figurative art is in fact very surprising in light of the previous attitude toward stimulating the imagination. The art during the Second Temple era was purely aniconic and had no figurative designs, following the prohibition of the second of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:4-5; Deuteronomy 5:8-9). There is much archaeological evidence to confirm that during the Second Temple era representations of living beings were avoided (Hachlili 2009, pp. 17-18).

The Jews of this period no longer feared idolatry. "The changes, reflected in Talmudic literature, were the result of political, economic, and social circumstances. The Jews of this period no longer feared idolatry. The leading rabbis emphasized the latter part of the Commandment, 'You shall not bow down to them or serve them,' and tended to enforce the prohibition only where the danger of idolatry was present" (Hachlili 2009, pp. 223). Such changes in the rabbinic attitude, as for instance the relationship between the second of the Ten Commandments and its visual dimensions, have been revealed by contemporary scholars (Gutman, Yeivin and Netzer 1981, Avi-Yonah 1938). Gerald Blidstein (1973) surveys the tannaitic Midrashim (literature and teachings) with regard to plastic art and maintains that the rabbis were quite aware of the difference between an image that was worshiped and one that served a decorative function alone. This rabbinical evidence demonstrates that figurative art was tolerated as long as it did not encourage cultic worship. A further reason for the lenient attitude toward figurative art was that no Jewish law forbids the depiction of religious subjects; on the contrary, such depictions were allowed.

In the Jewish literature there are references that seem to recognize the phenomenon of mosaic decoration in synagogues. "In the days of Rabbi Abun they began depicting figures in mosaic and he did not protest against it" (Mishnah, *Avodah Zarah* 3:3). It is assumed that if the mosaic pavement is shaped for aesthetic reasons and people do not bow down to it, it is acceptable. There is even a midrash that attempts to justify

the zodiac phenomenon: “The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him [Abraham]: Just as the zodiac [mazalot] surrounds me, and my glory is in the center, so shall your descendants multiply and camp under many flags, with my *Shechinah* in the center” (Geniza fragment of Midrash Deuteronomy Rabba). *Shechinah* is the presence or manifestation of God who “dwells” among humanity; it represents the feminine attributes of the presence of God. The term never appears in the Bible; later rabbis in the Mishnah and Talmud used it in reference to God dwelling either in the Tabernacle or among the ten people gathered to pray (minyan, quorum).

Such references could explain both the archaeologists’ misconception that the rabbis did not protest the existence of pagan design mixed with Jewish symbols in the synagogue, and their maintaining that such art was merely decorative. Nevertheless, after one hundred and fifty years of excavations, the reality that has been revealed is that there was a visual art in Judaism that comprised many non-Jewish symbols, art, crafts, myths and signs that were used by the various cultures in the ancient world.

There is a story in the Mishnah about Proklos ben Philosophos, who spoke with Rabban Gamaliel in Akko when they were bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite:

“It is written in your Torah, ‘Let nothing of the *herem* [boycott, roughly equivalent to *sacer*, a status that the Pentateuch ascribes to any object associated with idolatry] remain in your hand’ (Deuteronomy 13:18); why then are you bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite?” He said, “One may not respond [to questions about Torah] in a bathhouse.” When they went out, Rabban Gamaliel said, “I did not enter her territory; she entered mine. You do not say ‘the bathhouse is made as an ornament for Aphrodite,’ but ‘Aphrodite is made as an ornament for the bathhouse.’ Furthermore, if you were given much money, you would not enter your temple naked, having just ejaculated, and urinating before the goddess. And yet here she is set over the drain and everyone urinates before her. It is written ‘their gods’ [probably an allusion to Deuteronomy, 12:3], ‘You shall dismember the idols of their gods,’ in cases where they are treated as gods they are forbidden, when they are not they are permitted” (Mishnah, *Avodah Zarah* 3:3).

This elucidation of Rabban Gamaliel could be taken as a dictum and the key to understanding the mosaic decoration, which is the basis for the regulation, “Those revered are forbidden; those disgraced are allowed” (Schwartz 2001, p. 353). Clearly the rabbis supposed that Proklos was convinced by Rabban Gamaliel’s arguments (Schwartz 2004, p. 165).

Pagans would claim that the figural representation and sacrifice are the center of their religious life. The deity’s image is a concrete representation of an otherwise nebulous concept. “Others would have claimed that the individual gods were only aspects of the divine, all legitimately worshiped because, as the fourth-century orator and poet Quintus Aurelius Symmachus said, It is impossible that there is only one road to so great a mystery” (Schwartz 2004, 170). Whereas rabbis were opposed to figural depictions, especially if they were related to pagan worship and religion, the late antique synagogues show a variety of images adopted from pagan art, such as the zodiac cycle in Hammath Tiberias, Beit Alpha and elsewhere, and David as Orpheus, playing the harp in the Gaza synagogue. Orpheus as a disciple of Moses, and typologically later related to David, is represented in ancient Jewish synagogues. The representation of Orpheus on a mural of the Dura—Europos synagogue and of David on the mosaic of Gaza—Maiumas explicitly shows the ideological and iconographic relationship between the heroes.

The Hammath Tiberias synagogue is an excellent prototype for understanding the dialectics between the Talmudic text and the structure, symbols and decoration of a synagogue in the third and fourth centuries CE. The Hammath Tiberias synagogue is an ancient synagogue on the outskirts of Tiberias. Located near the hot springs just south of the city, it is noted for its elaborate mosaic floor. The synagogue dates from between 286 and 337 CE, when Tiberias was the seat of the Sanhedrin (an assembly of men appointed in every city in the Land of Israel; a rabbinical court). The mosaic floor is made up of three panels: the top panel shows a Temple shrine with the Temple front or the Ark of Scrolls flanked by two seven-branched menorahs and other Jewish ritual objects; in the center is the sun god, Helios, sitting in his chariot and holding the celestial sphere and a whip, surrounded by the zodiac signs (nine of the twelve signs of the zodiac survived intact); below is a dedicatory inscription flanked by two lions (see Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.2 The three main panels at Hammath Tiberias synagogue: the Temple shrine, the zodiac wheel and the dedication.

On the subject of idolatry, the Gemara tells us about a debate that a group of rabbis had at an unknown location: we have located it in the synagogue at Hammath Tiberias, built in the fourth century CE. The discussion is concerned with the mosaic floor of this synagogue. Rabbi Yochanan begins with, "A broken idol is prohibited." Shimon Ben Lakish replies, "No, it is allowed, each generation should smash idols; if not our lives would be meaningless." Rabbi Yochanan then says, "It is meaningless to repeat the same operation of shattering." Replies Shimon Ben Lakish, "It is meaningless to leave them there." Rabbi Yuden and Rabbi Matanya agree that such a non-action is equal to the future shattering. Rabbi Shimon Ben Lakish replies to Rabbi Yochanan that idolatry exists in the synagogue. Yet this [idolatry] will prevent pagans from entering the synagogue and they will be forced to stand at the threshold. This means that the synagogue has more than one threshold. Rabbi Jeremiah: "Blessed is the name of Rabbi Oshaya who said other nations have one doorstep and Israel has several thresholds. But what is the point of it if today's gentile can skip the doorway and ask the question 'Is idolatry here? This idolatry does not exist anymore! It's passé.'" [!] Rabbi Simeon: "The work of idolaters never ends." Rabbi Bon: "Is there a basis? It has a vision of things [the complete design]. It is Halacha. You have changed the shape of the sun and the moon, but the signs of the zodiac have not changed. You have recreated the dragon [the sun god, Helios] and added rays to his neck: Is this allowed?" Rabbi Shimon Ben Elazar: "But halos are allowed. Dragon [Helios] the sun god riding a horse cart [dragon riding a centipede] is prohibited, but what is allowed is a horse cart." Rabbi Shimon: "The sun associated with the zodiac is prohibited. The zodiac is allowed." Rabbi Oshaya: "The sun god shattered is allowed but to break the work is forbidden, what remains is the idolatry [painting], and that is prohibited, and breakages did not arise from the whole [on the contrary, to see the whole one must examine the parts]." Rabbi Hezekiah, in the name of Rabbi Hachni: "I saw people come and worship the sun god, and broken remains are prohibited [to destroy such an image in the synagogue does not make sense]. We prohibit it, but why should we prohibit broken remains [of idols]. Is it healthy that idols are still worshiped and still we prohibit broken remains? If an image is not worshiped but still respected and we would give up [fighting idols], our lives would be meaningless." Rabbi Chiya Bar-Yosef: "The southern panel has sacred images. But you wash [the vestibule], [causing] flooding [of Helios], which is a disgrace. But to clean it with water is a disgrace. In the days of Rabbi Yochanan they did not object when they drew on the walls. In the days of Rabbi Avon they did not object when they laid the mosaic." Rabbi Yossi: "This dictates the sin, as you did with the calf; from this we can learn that Moses examined Israel as they check the level of the vestibule by pouring water; we know where to increase or decrease the level. If we remove