

Jewish Worship, Pagan Symbols

Zodiac mosaics in ancient synagogues

Walter Zanger • 08/24/2012



AN INCREDIBLE FIND. In December 1928, a work crew from kibbutz Beth Alpha was digging a drainage channel when mosaic pieces began to appear in their shovel loads.

Ein Harod is a spring that rises in the valley of Jezreel at the foot of Mt. Gilboa. Gideon gathered his men there to sort out the good soldiers from the bad ones (Judges 7). From the pool, the spring makes its weary and meandering way east down the valley for some 18 km, passing through Beth-Shean to empty into the Jordan River.

A thousand years of neglect had resulted in a valley full of silted and blocked-up waterways creating a marshy and swampy landscape as the spring of Harod – and half a dozen other springs that empty into it – filled the land with water faster than the natural outlets – now blocked – could drain it.

That was the scene that greeted the first modern settlers of the valley of Jezreel. And it was obvious that their first task, if they hoped to farm this land, was to drain the swamps. Thus it happened that at the end of December 1928 a work crew from

kibbutz Beth Alpha (founded 6 years earlier) was digging yet another drainage canal when someone's shovel started picking up pieces of mosaic.

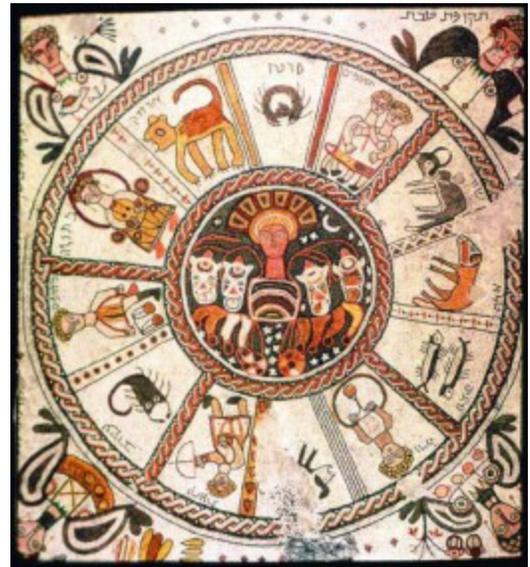
Work on the channel stopped at once. They called the Hebrew University (then all of 3 years old!) and within a fortnight Eliezer Lippa Sukenik¹ and Nahman Avigad had begun to excavate the site. Work began on January 9, 1929, and continued for 7 weeks, until February 26, despite heavy rains (610 mm instead of the usual 400 mm) that flooded the valley that year.

The mosaic they uncovered was almost complete, its astonishing preservation caused by a layer of plaster, thrown down from the ceiling by the earthquake that destroyed the building, that covered and protected the floor from the damage of falling stones. When it was completely exposed, the mosaic measured 28 meters long and 14 meters wide. It had an inscription at the doorway leading to three panels in the central apse: a rectangular panel, a square panel with a circle in the middle, and then another rectangle at the far end.

The middle square, the first to be uncovered, was the most spectacular. Figures of four women were at the four corners, with inscriptions (in Hebrew) identifying each as a season of the year. Inside the square was a wheel, 3.12 meters in diameter, with a smaller circle (1.2 m) in its center. The wheel was divided into 12 panels, each with a figure and a name identifying it as a sign of the zodiac. And in the center, a man was pictured driving a *quadriga* (four-horse chariot) through the moon and stars. Rays of the sun were coming out of his head; it was clear that he was Helios, god of the sun.

In the square panel of the Beth Alpha mosaic was a zodiac wheel with all 12 symbols and names of the zodiac, surrounded by four female figures at the corners, identifying the seasons of the year. *Credit: Art Resource, NY*

What had they found? Could this have been the temple of a Jewish community (it *had* to be Jewish; everything was written in Hebrew and Aramaic) turned pagan? Further digging dispelled that notion, for there, just above the central square of the mosaic, they found a mosaic panel of symbols instantly familiar to any Jew of that century (or this): the Ark of the Covenant (*aron kodesh*), eternal light (*ner tamid*), seven-branched candelabrum (*menorah*), palm frond (*lulav*), citron (*etrog*), and an incense shovel (*mahta*).²



Many of the symbols included in the uppermost mosaic panel reaffirmed the Jewish nature of the synagogue at Beth Alpha: the Ark of the Covenant at the center (*aron kodesh*), eternal light (*ner tamid*), two seven-branched candelabra (*menorot*; plural, *menorah*), palm frond (*lulav*), citron (*etrog*), and an incense shovel (*mahta*). From these items it takes the type name of a synagogue panel.

Then, in a third panel, closer to the front door, they uncovered a scene easily recognizable to anyone who knows the Bible. We are in Genesis 22, and Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac. In case we might have forgotten our Bible class, the names of the principals – Abraham, Isaac and the ram – are spelled out in inscriptions above their heads, and the hand of God stopping the sacrifice is clearly marked with the words “do not put forth your hand [against the lad].”



In the lower rectangular panel, closer to the door, the familiar story of Genesis 22 is depicted on the mosaic. Abraham is preparing to sacrifice Isaac (at right) as the hand of God reaches from heaven to stop him. Nearby the ram is caught with its horns in a thicket, and a servant waits at far left with the donkey. This type of scene came to be known as a righteous ancestors panel and is found in several other synagogue mosaics.



So this was definitely a synagogue, a Jewish house of worship, in a basilica building that dates to about 520 C.E.³ The building was destroyed in an earthquake soon after it was built,⁴ hence the near-perfect preservation of its mosaic floor; their misfortune became our good fortune. And because Beth Alpha is the best preserved of the seven synagogues we know, we use it here as the basis for our discussion.⁵

Now, of course, we have problems. We know that Jewish life moved to the Galilee after the total destruction of Jewish Jerusalem that followed the Bar-Kokhba Revolt of the 130s C.E. We are, therefore, not surprised to have found – and to keep finding – synagogues from the following centuries all over the Galilee and Golan. It isn't the synagogues themselves that are the problem; it is the decorations in them. What in heaven's name were they doing? How could they be making pictures, especially in the synagogue? Didn't they know the second commandment?

You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness of what is in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them” (Exodus 20:4–5)

That problem is not as formidable as it first appears. The second commandment can be read in several ways because the Hebrew original of this text is entirely without vowels and punctuation points. We, writing English, have put in a period after the word “earth.”⁶ But if the period weren't there, the verse could be read as a long conditional clause: “make no graven images ... which you worship.” In this case it's not the making that is prohibited, but the worshipping. Historically, the Jewish community often

understood that it was acceptable to make images as long as one doesn't worship them. And there is, consequently, a long and varied history of Jewish art, beginning with the cherubim over the Ark in the desert (Exodus 25:18), recorded presumably not long after the giving of the Commandments, and without protest.

A second problem is less easily resolved. The zodiac is pagan religion. It is what we see in the horoscope in every weekend newspaper on earth, generally the stuff of amusement. We know this system; it is based on the (extraordinary) assumption that the stars control the earth and that what happens on earth is a result of influences from what happens in the sky. All we need in order to understand the earth (that is, about our destiny) is to understand the stars. If, according to this view, one knows the exact date and time of one's birth, and can chart the exact position of the heavenly bodies at that moment, then forevermore one knows what is fortunate, unfortunate, worth doing, worth avoiding, wise, unwise, etc. Our universe, therefore, is fixed and determined. There are no values, no good, no evil and no repentance. We live in a great mechanical machine of a cosmos.

The conflict of interest is obvious, and we are not surprised to learn that Jews detested that idea. For if the cosmos is like that, why do we need God giving the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai? The Christians also had their own very strong reservations. If the cosmos is like that, who needed God to sacrifice His son for the sins of the world? Who indeed? The early Church in fact absolutely prohibited the making of zodiacs, and there is *not one* zodiac mosaic in a church that dates before the Middle Ages, and very few even then. The zodiac/horoscope perception is the antithesis and enemy of monotheistic religion. An ancient and honorable enemy, to be sure, far older than Judaism and Christianity, but still the enemy.

It is true that one who goes through Jewish literature with a fine-tooth comb can find a citation here and there that seems to recognize the phenomenon of mosaic decoration, presumably zodiac, in synagogues. "In the days of Rabbi Abun they began depicting figures in mosaic and he did not protest against it."⁷ More to the point, we find a line in Aramaic translation, "... you may place a mosaic pavement impressed with figures and images in the floors of synagogue; but not for bowing down to it."⁸ 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 *shekhina* in the center."⁹

But this is surely grasping at straws. The odd line here and there accounts for nothing in view of the overwhelming opposition in rabbinic literature to anything related to the making of pictures of any sort, and doubly so the fierce opposition to anything suggesting idolatry and pagan worship. Indeed, one of the ways to say "pagan" in rabbinical Hebrew is by the abbreviation עבדי כוכבים [*ovedei kokhavim u-mazalot*, "worshippers of stars and constellations"]. The rabbis of the Talmud recognized the popularity of astrology and were even prepared to admit that there might be truth in its predictions, but opposed the whole endeavor on principle. *Ein mazal le-Yisrael* (literally, "Israel has no constellation") is perhaps the most commonly quoted opinion on the subject,¹⁰ but it is only one of many.

All the more are we astonished by the figure of Helios, Sol Invictus, pagan god of the sun, riding his *quadriga* right through the middle of the synagogue! This doesn't look like it belongs here. And we need to ask again, what was this all about?

To set our minds at rest (for the time being), we can say what all this *wasn't*. It could not have been astrology (predicting the future, etc.) and it could not have been scientific astronomy, because the seasons in the corners are in the wrong places. The upper right corner at Beth Alpha is marked טבת (*Tevet*), the winter month, and the upper left corner ניסן (*Nissan*) the month of Passover in spring. But between them you have the zodiac sign of Cancer, the Crab, which falls in mid-summer, not early spring. The same thing with the sign for Libra, the Scales. The mosaic has placed it between the spring and summer seasons, whereas it belongs in the fall. Clumsy astronomy.

The conclusion is inescapable: whoever did this mosaic hadn't a clue about real astronomy or astrology, doubtless because he was a Jew and couldn't care less.¹¹

For the same reason, this mosaic floor could not have been a calendar, an idea that has been suggested by several important scholars of the subject.¹² The incorrect placement of the seasons would have made that completely impossible.

Then perhaps it's all just decoration, pretty pictures, the common designs of the era. That is the most common explanation, the one found in guide books. But it can't be true. In the first place, the designs were by no means common in the Byzantine era. The Church, as stated, absolutely banned their use. More important, these signs are too loaded with meaning. We might argue "pretty pictures" if Beth Alpha were a solitary, unique find. We could then, at best, say that we had found here a group of Jews who had become so Hellenized that they had slipped over into paganism. But Beth Alpha is not unique; we will visit half a dozen other synagogues before we're done. In addition, we have found *hundreds* of Jewish tombstones and catacombs from all over the Roman Empire. And despite the fact that there are countless millions of possible symbols, forms, designs, pictures, animals, etc. they *could* have used, the fact is that they all use the same 10-12 symbols.¹³ We are forced to conclude that these were more than pretty pictures.

The Other Three Of "The Big Four"



Another stunning mosaic was unearthed at the Hammath Tiberias synagogue. It contains a beautifully executed zodiac wheel (interrupted by a later wall on top) and a synagogue panel, but no righteous ancestors theme. *Credit: Garo Nalbandian*



In the Hammath Tiberias square mosaic panel containing the zodiac wheel, the four corners are marked with depictions of the four seasons in the corner, as seen here.



Hammath Tiberias is the second most famous (and the most technically accomplished) mosaic synagogue floor.¹⁴ We have a zodiac wheel in the middle of the floor,¹⁵ a rendering of Helios riding his *quadriga* through the heavens in the central circle, the seasons in the corners, and the synagogue panel above, between the zodiac and the *bema* of the synagogue. There is no depiction of the righteous ancestors theme, as there was with Abraham at Beth Alpha.¹⁶

The synagogue at Ein Gedi contains a mosaic that is even more complete than those at Beth Alpha and Hammath Tiberias, although relatively simpler in decoration. All of the usual elements are present – as well as some new ones – but in written form rather than figural depictions.

Actually, the synagogue at Ein Gedi¹⁷ (recently opened as a National Park) is more complete than those of Beth Alpha and Hammath Tiberias. All the elements we usually look for – and some new ones – are here, in mosaic on the floor. Except that they are all in lists. There are no pictures here at all. We have a list of all of the signs of the zodiac. The ancestors (Adam, Seth, Enosh, Keinan, etc.) are listed,¹⁸ as are "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, shalom" and three new righteous ones we haven't seen before: Hananiah,

Mishael and Azariah¹⁹ have been added for good measure. The other interesting new element in Ein Gedi is the identification of the zodiac signs with the months of the Hebrew calendar.² We didn't see that at Beth Alpha or Hammath Tiberias.



Inscriptions, instead of pictures, cover the floor of the Ein Gedi synagogue mosaic. All the signs of the zodiac are listed (and for the first time associated with the corresponding months of the Hebrew calendar), as well as a long list of righteous ancestors, from Adam, Seth and Enosh, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.



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That leads us to the newest of the synagogue zodiac discoveries, the synagogue at Zippori (Sepphoris) in the lower Galilee.²¹ Discovered only in 1993, this floor is the most elaborate of the seven floors we know and contains items not to be found in any of the others. Unhappily, it is in a very bad state of preservation and most scenes are only fragmentary.

The synagogue at Zippori (Sepphoris) provided the most recent of the zodiac mosaic discoveries, although unfortunately it is not very well preserved. In the center of the zodiac wheel, Helios once again drives his four-horse chariot, but rather than the figure of a man, the god is depicted as the sun itself.

The zodiac is elegant indeed. Each constellation has its own name and the name of its corresponding calendar month written right in the panel. So, for example, we find Scorpio (עקרב) together with its Hebrew month Heshvan (חשוון), Sagittarius (קשת) together with Kislev (כסליו), and so forth.



As at Ein Gedi, each sign of the zodiac at Zippori is associated with the corresponding month of the Hebrew calendar, both written in Hebrew. In the close-ups at top, Scorpio shares a panel with the month Heshvan (above), while Sagittarius is together with the month Kislev. The close-ups at right show the seasons in the four corners, as we have seen elsewhere, but here they are labeled with both Greek and Hebrew inscriptions.



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There are seasons in each of the four corners, but a new element has been added here too: Greek inscriptions defining the seasons in addition to the Hebrew ones we have seen before. And, as in Beth Alpha and Ein Gedi, the righteous ancestor theme has been well and truly represented. Again we find Abraham binding Isaac. The scenes are very poorly preserved, but we have a fragment of the ram caught in the thicket and at least part of the picture of two servants holding the ass (Genesis 22:5) while Abraham and his son went off to Moriah. Helios rides his *quadriga* in the central circle but, extraordinarily, there is no male figure in the picture; just the sun itself driving the chariot.

Although poorly preserved, the Zippori synagogue mosaic clearly contained a panel of the binding of Isaac to complete the righteous ancestors theme. All that remains are fragments showing the servants holding the donkey (above) and the ram caught in the thicket.

The synagogue panel, divided here into three sections, is quite well preserved. The two candelabra flank the Ark of the Covenant with the ram's horn, palm frond and citron, and incense shovel in place

below. The Zippori synagogue floor, however, provides several other elements not found elsewhere: scenes of the ornaments, instruments and sacrifices of the Temple and an additional (very fragmentary) scene of the angels visiting Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18). Pity it's all in such bad condition. And how fortunate we have been to have found Beth Alpha so perfectly preserved!



Unlike much of the rest of the Zippori mosaic, the synagogue panel, divided here into three sections, is quite well preserved. The two candelabra flank the Ark of the Covenant with the ram's horn, palm frond and citron, and incense shovel in place below. *Credit: Gabi Laron/Courtesy Zeev Weiss*

These are the "Big Four" sites we needed to visit. There are three others that are very fragmentary indeed—some destroyed or changed in antiquity, others looted and destroyed in modern times, some both.

The "Little Three"



Little remains of the synagogue at Na'aran, which was discovered when a Turkish artillery shell fell on the spot during World War I, revealing the mosaic. Much of the mosaic was badly defaced, but enough was found to suggest the presence of the zodiac wheel, including Helios in his chariot (only one wheel remains), the four seasons in the corners, and the Ark flanked by candelabra.

Very little is left of the synagogue at Na'aran, now in the Palestinian Authority area some 5 km northwest of Jericho.²² Hardly surprising, the mosaic floor was

discovered when the British army was camped in Na'aran during the First World War and a Turkish artillery shell fell on the spot, uncovering the mosaic!²³ There was a zodiac wheel here once, and one sees the lines dividing the panels, but the panels themselves have been defaced. One may find remains of the claws of Cancer, the Crab, and at least one other sign, Aries, is identifiable because the caption is preserved even though the picture is gone.²⁴ Old Helios is gone too, but we find one wheel of his chariot (older pictures by archaeologists show two wheels) in the central circle. There were four seasons in the four corners, badly defaced, and two candelabra flanking the Ark were seen by Père Vincent, excavator of the site, who sketched them at the time.²⁵



The mosaic at Na'aran was badly damaged, but one can still make out the legs of Cancer on the zodiac wheel (left) and one of the four seasons in the corner of the square panel (right).



The mosaic at Na'aran was badly damaged, but one can still make out the legs of Cancer on the zodiac wheel (left) and one of the four seasons in the corner of the square panel (right).

Even less remains in Sussiya. This is a mysterious place, a large Jewish town high in the Judean hills south of Hebron on the way to Beersheba. It is a town without a name and without a history – we use the Arabic name for the place for lack of an alternative – but it was a big place and it lasted a long time. Very odd. The synagogue building, large and well built, also lasted a long time, and that longevity was the undoing of its mosaic floor. Fashions change, and when it was no longer acceptable to put pictures in synagogues,²⁶ the floor was ripped out and a new “carpet” of geometric patterns, itself changed and repaired over time, was laid in its place. But there was a zodiac wheel here; a piece of the outer arc of the wheel is still in place. And we know the building was a synagogue because at least two elements we recognize from other places, the candelabra and the Ark, are still quite recognizable. The survival of a fragment of the righteous ancestors panel is even more unexpected. But it is indeed there on the floor: the tail of an animal and two Hebrew letters “-el” (אֵל). Surely that is Daniel in the lions’ den.



The Sussiya building was identified as a synagogue because the so-called synagogue panel of the mosaic was still quite visible, containing the Ark flanked by two candelabra.



The well-built synagogue at Sussiya lasted for a long time, which was ultimately the downfall of some of its mosaics. As tastes changed, new mosaic floors were paved over the old one. Still, there are glimpses of the traditional elements, such as the inner circle (now filled with a rosette, not Helios) and a portion of the outer arc of the zodiac wheel (visible a few feet below the inner circle).

Barely a hint of the righteous ancestors panel remains at Sussiya, but the tail of a lion and the end of a Hebrew inscription “-el” is enough to reconstruct the scene of Daniel in the lions’ den.

We have nearly reached the end of our survey. One more site is left, and it is so obscure that only the smallest fraction of the synagogue mosaic remains. The area was a construction site in the Druze village of Usifiyya, east of Haifa on Mt. Carmel.²⁷



A mosaic synagogue inscription, flanked by two candelabra,²⁸ was discovered during construction, together with one corner of a zodiac wheel. The smiling face of one of the seasons, not identified by an inscription, and a piece of two zodiac panels – one of them obviously Cancer, the other unidentifiable – are all that’s left of the zodiac.

The last example of a synagogue zodiac mosaic consists of only a few fragments. This corner from the square panel shows the smiling face of the one of the seasons in the corner, as well as the edges of two zodiac segments, one of which can be identified as Cancer (the other is unclear).

A Search for Meaning

What have we found? We have found seven places in Israel where Jews put zodiac wheels, Helios, the four seasons, a panel of synagogue objects, and sometimes remembrance of righteous ancestors in mosaic on the floor of their synagogues. For the record, we have never found a zodiac in a Jewish context outside of Israel, and every zodiac found in Israel was in a synagogue.

That fact tells us what we already knew: that these zodiacs were certainly not just decorations or pretty pictures. Nor were they attempts at astrology (predicting the future) or astronomy. The Ark, candelabrum, shofar, etc. were put in synagogues (and on tombstones, lintels, doorposts and catacombs), the most serious of places for the Jewish community. And the inscriptions on the zodiacs themselves were invariably in Hebrew, even if the common languages of the day, Aramaic or Greek were added. That is, the



zodiacs were important and meant something to the people who made them. The question is: What? It is time to suggest some conclusions.

The evidence indicates that we are in the presence of a mystical Hellenistic-Byzantine Jewish tradition, a tradition that Talmudic Judaism either ignored or suppressed,²⁹ a tradition we would not know anything about (for it left no literature) were it not for the discovery of this artwork, these symbols.³⁰ The mosaics are in fact the literature of the movement. We need to learn how to read them.

Historically, the mosaics were made at a time when what is sometimes called normative, or Talmudic, Judaism – the Judaism of the rabbis – was just developing. And it was going a different way.³¹ We might say that Talmudic Judaism was moving horizontally: A man walks a path, with God giving him the Law to tell him what to do and what not to do, how to stay straight on the path and not stray off. God is pleased when man obeys and angry when he disobeys. This is the religion of the Hebrew Bible, and it is what normative Judaism became in the Talmud, the Middle Ages and, for the most part, up to our own time.

But there was, and still is, a different kind of religion, much older than the Judaism we have just described. We can call it vertical. Men always knew that their life depended on higher powers. First and most obvious, life depended on nature – on seed and growth, rain, sun, moon, land, wind and fire. That was natural religion; it was what primitive man *did*. It was only a short step from there to making each of these elements into a god. Ancient man thus prayed to rain and sacrificed to earth, worshiped the moon and adored the sun.

The cosmos was chaotic at first. The gods were busy having arguments (and orgies) with each other. In between the arguments they could torture and abuse men, and seduce women as they liked. But nature became orderly as the Greeks developed science – biology, astronomy and physics – and tamed the cosmos. They defined the forces influencing other forces; wind influences clouds, clouds influence rain, rain influences earth, and earth influences men. Thus the ladder of cosmic power was taking shape.

On this issue there is bad news and good news. The bad news is that the regular cycle of nature was pretty grim, not to mention completely predestined. There was no good and no evil – no value – which is why the Jews never bought into it. The good news is that the cosmos was also consoling. Nature was no longer random or dependent on the whim of the gods. Indeed, the regularity of the cycle of growth and death and rebirth in nature did give hope for immortality.³² And when Greek philosophy, following Plato, organized the forms and powers into a proper hierarchy, with the Highest Form, the First Uncaused Cause, being God, then the spiritual ladder was firmly in place.

And that, we suggest, is what they were doing by walking into the synagogue. We see the worshipers climbing the mystical ladder from the mundane and transient things down here at the entrance – who made the floor, when, and how much it cost – to a union with God at His holy Ark up there at the far end.

The first step was through our righteous ancestors. Their good deeds atone for our sins.³⁴ Then, as we walk farther into the synagogue, we begin to climb the ladder, encountering the earth and its seasons. We are among friends; the seasons have friendly, sometimes smiling, women's faces. We progress even higher, through the stars and constellations (the Hebrew word *mazal*, "constellation," means luck). But the vertical path of Jewish mysticism is beyond luck, beyond the stars. It is beyond even the strongest and most fearful of all natural powers, the sun. Here is the sun, indeed at the center of the universe, in a chariot controlled by a charioteer,³⁵ in a vision recalling Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot (Ezekiel 1). The charioteer is God,³⁶ in control of the four horses, over and above the stars and the constellations, that is, over fate and destiny. This is the God who rules over the moon and the seasons, the rain, the land and the elements. Four elements like the four horses: earth, air, fire and water. This is the God who has graciously made a covenant and given Torah to His people Israel, whose sins are atoned for by the righteousness of their ancestors.

And that understanding brought the worshiper to the holy symbols of the synagogue, which is God's house. That is why, in all of the synagogue mosaic panels³⁷ depicting the symbols of God's house, the Ark of the Covenant is always in the center of its panel, and the panel is always located right at the foot of the Ark itself.

We have come through our stages of ascent. We are in front of the Ark, the dwelling place of God's Torah. Yet the door is always closed. God, inside, is still a mystery. But our long mystical journey to salvation is almost over.

All uncredited photos courtesy of the author.

Notes

¹ E.L. Sukenik, *The Ancient Synagogue of Beth-Alpha*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1932)

² The incense shovel was a universally recognized Jewish symbol in the Byzantine era. It disappeared from the Jewish iconographic lexicon because the Jews stopped using incense when the Christians started.

³ The Aramaic inscription at the front door was damaged. It says that the mosaic was made "during the ... year of the reign of the emperor Justinus". The exact year is missing. The reference is probably to the emperor Justin I (adopted uncle and immediate predecessor of Justinian the Great) who ruled from 518-527 C.E. and whose coins were found on the site. It is of course possible that the building was older than the mosaic floor.

⁴ The earliest possible "candidate" was a major quake that hit the country on July 9, 551. It was the earthquake that finally destroyed Petra. More likely was an earthquake of lesser magnitude but located closer to the site which did great damage to the Jordan Valley in 659/660.

⁵ We have not entered into a discussion of the artistic merits of this work of art. It is the writer's opinion that this work, with its naive and primitive style, has a child-like immediacy and freshness that makes it one of the masterpieces of world art.

⁶ Thus the new JPS *Tanakh*. The King James translation puts a colon after the word "earth", while the New American Bible (Catholic) and the Revised Standard Version (Protestant) translations both use a semi-colon instead of period at this point.

⁷ From a Geniza manuscript of JT *Avoda Zarah*

⁸ In the Pseudo-Jonathan Targum to Lev. 26:1

⁹ From a Geniza fragment of *Midrash Deut. Rabba*) These quotations are cited by Michael Klein, "Palestinian Targum and Synagogue Mosaics," Jerusalem, *Immanuel* 11 (1980)

¹⁰ The matter is discussed in BT *Shabbat*, 156a

¹¹ At Beth Alpha the signs and the seasons both progress counter-clockwise, although they are misaligned. The Hammat Tiberias zodiac shows both signs and seasons also rotating counter-clockwise, and in correct alignment with each other. At Na'aran the seasons run counter-clockwise, as above, but the signs go clockwise!

¹² That position was argued by Prof. Avi-Yonah, among many others, and by the excavator of Hammat Tiberias. See Moshe Dothan, *Hammat Tiberias*, (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1983). Hammat Tiberias is the only mosaic we know where the signs and seasons are correctly aligned, which may have influenced the excavator's judgment as to its purpose

¹³ The cataloging of all of these finds and the interpretation of what they might mean constitute the *magnum opus* of Erwin Goodenough (1893-1965), Professor of Religion at Yale and one of the greatest scholars of religion America ever produced. Goodenough's 13 volume study, E.R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, (New York: Pantheon, 1958), form the core text for the study of this subject, Everyone who has subsequently dealt with the subject is in his debt. The book has been re-issued in a 1-volume paperback, abridged and edited by Jacob Neusner (Princeton: *Bollingen Series*, 1988)

¹⁴ Dothan, *op cit*. See endnote 6, above.

¹⁵ We are amazed to discover that later generations built a wall right through the middle of the zodiac!

¹⁶ A complete description of the 4 mosaics known at the time of publication: Beth Alpha, Hammat Tiberias, Na'aran and Usifiyya, together with a comprehensive bibliography, may be found in Rachel Hachlili, "The Zodiac in Ancient Jewish Art," *Bulletin of the American Society for Biblical Research*, 228, (1977), pp. 61-77

¹⁷ Dan Barag, Yosef Porat and Ehud Netzer, "The Synagogue at 'Ein Gedi", *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981), pp. 116-119.

¹⁸ The text is copied from I Chron. 1:1

¹⁹ They are the 3 "children in the fiery furnace", Shadrach, Mishach and Abednego, in the book of Daniel.

²⁰ There are, of course, many groups of 12 in the Bible and throughout ancient literature: 12 sons of Jacob, 12 tribes of Israel, 12 disciples of Jesus, 12 signs of the zodiac, 12 months of the year, etc.

²¹ The synagogue floor is thoroughly discussed in Ze'ev Weiss and others, *The Sepphoris Synagogue*, (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2005), In this writer's opinion, however, the authors have completely missed the point by

beginning at the top, the Ark and the holy synagogue objects, and working their way back out the front door. The spiritual progression which we discuss requires exactly the opposite course.

22 The Bible called the place both Na'arah (Joshua 16:7) and Na'aran (I Chronicles 7:28). Josephus knew it as Nearah (*Antiquities*. book 17, ch. 13, para. 1) and the Talmud called it Na'arah (Lamentations R.1:17 No 52)

23 The site was examined in 1919 by the British staff archaeologist, studied again by Père Vincent & M.J. Lagrange in 1921, and published by Prof. Sukenik in his book on Beth Alpha (see endnote 1, above)

24 The Hebrew word is טלה (*taleh*), which in modern Hebrew means lamb. But it was always used for the Ram in the zodiac.

25 This writer has seen the remains of a figure of a man, 2 arms raised to heaven, with the inscription "Dani[el] shalom". But that fragment is not to be found on the site any more. The menorot are said to be at the École Biblique in Jerusalem

26 The iconoclastic movement in Judaism and Christianity was certainly influenced by the uncompromising iconoclasm of militant Islam. But the trend in Judaism may have been a parallel rather than a dependent development.

27 The remains of site, identified as ancient Huseifa, were excavated in 1933 and published the following year by Prof. Michael Avi-Yonah and M. Makhoul in *The Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine*, 3, 1934.

28 The inscription, which is incomplete, reads שלום על ישראל (*shalom al yisrael*), and is on display in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem. The zodiac fragment is in the collection of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

29 Only the works of Philo and Josephus, together with some mystical apocalypses, survive as the literature from the Hellenistic Jewish world. They survive because of the Christians, who preserved them, not the Jews, who ignored them. There is no other mystical literature from the period of the mosaic making which might help us understand what the mosaic makers meant to say.

30 It would be a safe bet to say that 9 out of 10 Jews living today (especially orthodox Jews) don't know, and never knew, that such a Judaism ever existed.

31 This formulation, from Goodenough (q.v.), ch. 1, has been extraordinarily useful to this writer.

32 The Jews were not much interested in immortality, but everybody else was!

33 We are not surprised to discover that the oldest known manifestation of what we might call "religion" is the decorated skull of an ancestor found under the floor of a house in pre-pottery Neolithic Jericho.

34 There are any number of examples of pious Jews venerating the tombs of saints and forefathers. A visit to any tomb of a holy man in the Galilee, to Elijah's cave on Mt. Carmel, or indeed to a cemetery where someone of special interest to one or another Hassidic group is buried provides a fascinating glimpse into a Judaism which we of the liberated western world did not know still existed.

35 The origin and symbolism of the Divine quadriga and its connection to *merkava* mysticism are discussed in a monograph by James Russell in the *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 4, (Tubingen 1997).

36 We recall that in the Zippori zodiac the quadriga is driven by the sun itself, without the figure of a man. Compare Is.60:19ff.

37 Some ancient synagogues, as in Beth-Shean, show only the synagogue panel without any of the other elements.

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