

Art of the Ancient Synagogues in Israel

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In memory of my father-in-law Rabbi Abraham Sofer (Schreiber).

His life work: redaction of the writings of Rabbi Menahem b. Solomon Meiri.

This article deals with the relief and mosaic art of the ancient synagogues of Israel (ranging in date between the IIIrd and VIIIth centuries C.E.) and specifically with two aspects of this art—the ornamental and iconographic—which invite certain questions:

1. What was the attitude of the rabbinic teachers to the plastic arts in general and to the figurative motifs in particular? How did they reconcile the latter (i.e. figurative motifs) with the commandment: «You shall not make for yourself any sort of carved image or any sort of picture»? (*Exod*, 20:4).

2. To what degree were the figurative representations and ornamental motifs intended to be symbolic and didactic?

3. Did a specifically Jewish art exist in antiquity?

In the prevailing absence of adequate evidence, these questions will not always admit of definitive and clear-cut answers. We shall thus have recourse to the talmudic writings as well as basing conclusions on archaeological data.

I. Relief Art in Synagogues

While it has been established that most of the synagogues in the Galilee and Golan regions were built in the IIIrd century C.E., archaeological

evidence indicates that some synagogues there were constructed during the IVth and Vth centuries C.E. as well¹.

As a general rule the facades of these synagogues were lavishly decorated with relief carving to create an impression of grandeur. However, the interior of the synagogue was kept simple and free of adornment so as not to distract the worshipper's attention from his prayers and devotion. The relief carvings were confined almost exclusively to the lintels and jambs of doors and windows and to the decoration of the architraves, friezes, etc. These relief carvings constitute a major discovery in that they prove clearly that the synagogue art of the mishnaic and talmudic periods, in contravention of the biblical prohibition regarding human representation, was rich in figurative motifs (i.e. human and animal representations) in addition to «permitted» geometric and plant designs. These ornamental carvings are infused with the Hellenistic and Roman spirit dominating the intellectual life and education of the architects, artists and donors of the synagogue building; this is equally evident throughout the architecture and art of the pagan temples of the East Mediterranean region (Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan and Israel)².

Scholarly opinion was at first inclined to view these ornamental relief carvings as the work of «apostate» Jewish artists (stemming from and sanctioned by the context of «apostate» Jewish communities) or, alternatively, as «bestowed» on the Jews by Roman emperors in a gesture of goodwill which would have been ungracious (and unwise) to reject. But the evidence of the wall-paintings of the Dura-Europos synagogue³, along with the coloured floor mosaics of the Israel synagogues⁴, clearly prove that figurative carvings were not banned for synagogue ornamentation by the Jews, and specifically by the Jews of the Galilee and Golan regions, who evidently did not regard them as offending against the Second Commandment. At the same time the Jews took care not to produce any three-dimensional sculptures for their synagogues. The sole exception here are the lion sculptures (apparently

¹ H. Kohl and C. Watzinger, *Antike Synagogen in Galilaea*, Leipzig 1916 (photocopy: Jerusalem 1973); N. Avigad, «On the Form of Ancient Synagogues in Galilee», in: H.Z. Hirschberg (ed.), *All the Land of Naphtali: The Twenty-Fourth Archaeological Convention, October, 1966*, Jerusalem 1967, 91-100 (Hebrew); M. Avi-Yonah, «Ancient Synagogue Architecture in Eretz Israel and the Diaspora», in: C. Roth (ed.), *Jewish Art*, Tel Aviv 1959, cols. 135-164 (Hebrew); *idem*, «Ancient Synagogues», *Ariel*, 32 (1973), 32-33; E.R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, I, New York 1953, 181-225; III, New York 1953, *passim*; Z. Ma'oz, «The Art and Architecture of the Synagogues of the Golan», in: L. I. Levine (ed.), *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, Jerusalem 1981, 98-115.

² H.C. Butler, *Publications of an American Archaeological Expedition to Syria in 1899-1900, Architecture and Other Arts*, New York 1903, *passim*; D. Krencker and W. Zschietzschmann, *Römische Tempel in Syrien*, Berlin-Leipzig 1938; C.H. Kraeling (ed.), *Gerasa - City of the Decapolis*, New Haven 1938, 125ff.; A. Ovadiah, M. Fischer, I. Roll and G. Solar, «The Roman Temple at Qadesh in Upper Galilee», *Qadmoniot*, XV, No. 4 (60), 1982, 121-125.

³ E.L. Sukenik, *The Synagogue of Dura-Europos and its Paintings*, Jerusalem 1947 (Hebrew).

⁴ See: M. Avi-Yonah, «Mosaic Pavements in Palestine», *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine*, II (1933), 136-181, *passim*; III (1934), 26-47, 49-73, *passim*; IV (1935), 187-193, *passim*; E. Kitzinger, *Israeli Mosaics of the Byzantine Period*, New York 1965, *passim*.

symbolizing the «lion of Judah») whose exact placement in the synagogue is still in dispute⁵.

The relief decorations of the Galilee and Golan synagogues embrace a very rich and varied range of subjects, forms and motifs, be they architectural, geometrical, plant, human or animal. The repertoire also includes such typical Jewish motifs as the *menorah* (seven-branched candlestick), Torah Ark, incense shovel, *lulab* and *ethrog*. Also found are the *Magen David* (Shield of David), Seal of Solomon (a five-pointed star), amphora and various zodiacal signs. Of special note is the basalt-carved throne known as «*kathedra diMoshe*» (Seat of Moses) of which an example was found in the synagogues of Chorazin⁶ and Hammath Tiberias⁷ respectively. These thrones are sumptuously ornamented, especially the one found in the Chorazin synagogue. Yet, despite the rich ornamentation —rosette-decorated back and carvings on the armrests— the style tends to be rather stiff and rustic.

The architectural motifs of the relief repertoire include the aedicula, conch, Torah Ark and Syrian gable. The function and placing of the actual aedicula are still under discussion. In the southern part of the nave of the Capernaum synagogue, between the southernmost pillars and the central entrance, there are indications of some kind of structure. According to Kohl and Watzinger the structure was an aedicula inside which stood a Torah Ark⁸. In Roman architecture aediculae or niches, topped with a gable or arch, were a common ornamental device for decorating wall areas. Examples of this architectural ornamentation with its hint of the «baroque», can be observed in various IInd and IIIrd century Roman buildings⁹.

The conch was a common ornament at the top of aediculae and niches as well as within small gables. The conch usually radiates upwards in the eastern Roman empire, and downwards in the west¹⁰. In Israel synagogues the conch invariably radiates upwards. Ornamental conches have been found in the synagogues of Capernaum, Chorazin, Umm el-Qanatir, Arbel, Rafid, and elsewhere¹¹, with those at Capernaum and Chorazin especially large and not

⁵ See: Goodenough, *op. cit.*, I (*supra*, n. 1), 189; E. L. Sukenik, «The present State of Ancient Synagogue Studies», *Bulletin, Louis M. Rabinowitz Fund for the Exploration of Ancient Synagogues*, I, Jerusalem 1949, 18-21; see also: G. Orfali, *Capharnaüm et ses ruines*, Paris 1922, 63.

⁶ Goodenough, *op. cit.*, III (*supra*, n. 1), Fig. 544.

⁷ Goodenough, *op. cit.*, III (*supra*, n. 1), Fig. 568.

⁸ Kohl and Watzinger, *op. cit.*, (*supra*, n. 1), 38, Abb. 73 (on p. 37), Pls. II, IV (above).

⁹ See for example: Kohl and Watzinger, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), Abb. 285-287 (on pp. 150-151); E. Weigand, *Das sogenannte Praetorium von Phaena*. Würzburger Festgabe für H. Bulle. Stuttgart 1938, 71-92; L.C. Cummings, «The Tychaion at is-Sanamén», *American Journal of Archaeology*, 13 (1909), 417ff.; H.C. Butler, *Ancient Architecture in Syria - Southern Syria (Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904-1905 and 1909)*, División II, Section A, Part 5, Leyden 1915, 308ff.; Section A, Part 7, Leyden 1919, 410, III. 352; M. Lyttelton, *Baroque Architecture in Classical Antiquity*, London 1974, Pls. 4, 50, 115, 132, 133, 139, 140, 142, 162, 173, 174, 182, 190, 191, 199, 204.

¹⁰ Kohl and Watzinger, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), 152.

¹¹ Goodenough, *op. cit.*, III (*supra*, n. 1), Figs. 462, 463, 479, 497, 498, 499, 502, 508, 521, 526, 527, 533, 538, 539, 540, 548, 573, 617.

carved within gables. In these two synagogues the conches apparently surmounted actual aediculae. In the synagogue of Dura-Europos, in the centre of the west wall, is an aedicula surmounted by a conch bearing the Hebrew inscription «*beth arona*» (Torah shrine)¹².

The conch as an ornament surmounting niches is observed in the Hellenistic world, as for instance at Caesarea Philippi (Paniás-Banias)¹³, and is commonly encountered in Roman architecture as well¹⁴. It may be safely stated that the conch motif was taken over by the synagogue from the pagan world for purely ornamental purpose with no symbolical content intended.

The Toran Ark occurs as an architectural motif in the synagogues at Capernaum, Chorazin, Peki'in, Horvat Shema' and elsewhere¹⁵, taking the form of a shrine-like structure with a sloping roof and carved doors surmounted by a gable. The same form of Torah Ark is depicted in synagogue floor mosaics of a later date. The Torah Arks appearing in the synagogue reliefs and mosaics are similar to the cabinets, specifically scroll cabinets, known in the Roman world. Carved on the synagogue frieze at Capernaum is a shrine in the form of a small temple mounted on wheels resembling a Roman temple in its construction. This type of structure was no doubt borrowed from Roman architecture for ritual and ornamental purposes in the synagogue. The shrine depicted at Capernaum is most likely a Torah Ark, since a passage in the *Mishnah* describes how on fast days and holy days the Torah Ark was taken to an open space within the city:

«They used to bring out the ark (according to R. Ovadiah from Bartenura: containing the Torah scrolls) into the open space in the town and put wood-ashes on the ark and the heads of the President and the Father of the court»¹⁶.

This literary testimony indicates that during mishnaic times the Torah Ark was mobile, further borne out by the shrine-on-wheels depicted in the Capernaum synagogue frieze. Only one similar movable shrine (ark) is known—that depicted in a wall-painting of the Dura-Europos synagogue—though evidently there the Ark of the Covenant and not the Torah Ark is intended¹⁷.

The Syrian gable, adopted as an ornamental element by synagogue builders under the influence of Syrian-Roman architecture¹⁸, appears in the

¹² Sukenik, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 3), Pl. IV; C.H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue: The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report VIII, Part I*, New Haven 1956, 269, Fig. 78, Pl. XLII (3).

¹³ D. Amir, *Banias - From Ancient till Modern Times*, Kibbutz Dan 1968, photos 24, 25, 28 (on pp. 33, 34, 35) (Hebrew).

¹⁴ Lyttelton, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 9), Pls., 50, 53, 143, 144, 162; M. Bratschkova, «Die Muschel in der antiken kunst», *Bulletin de l'Institut Archéologique Bulgare*, XII (1938), 1-131 (esp. p. 14).

¹⁵ See: Kohl and Watzinger, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), 34 (Abb. 68), 40 (Abb. 76), 51 (Abb. 100:1), 142-143 (Abb. 280-282); Goodenough, *op. cit.*, III (*supra*, n. 1), Figs. 471, 472, 497, 560, 573; E.M. Meyers, «The Synagogue at Horvat Shema'», in: Levine (ed.), *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), 72.

¹⁶ *Mishnah, Ta'anith II 1*.

¹⁷ Sukenik, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 3), Pl. IV; Goodenough, *op. cit.*, III (*supra*, n. 1), Fig. 602.

¹⁸ See: Kohl and Watzinger, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), 147-152; see also: S. Butler Murray, *Hellenistic Architecture in Syria*, Princeton 1917, 12-14; D.S. Robertson, *A Handbook of Greek*

synagogue at Capernaum, Kefar Bar'am, ed-Dikkeh, and Umm el-Qanatir¹⁹.

The non-figurative motifs in synagogue decoration are drawn from the Hellenistic, Roman and Oriental repertoires. This range embraces a broad and varied gamut of designs, including «egg-and-dart», meander and interlace patterns, dentils, bead-and-reel and loop patterns (all Hellenistic-Roman designs, mostly geometrical). The use of these elements and their incorporation into the architectural decoration of the synagogue bring to mind public buildings and temples of the Hellenistic-Roman world, where this type of architectural ornamentation originated. Such an extensive borrowing of pagan decorative motifs serves to underline the total dependence of the synagogue builders and artisans on foreign, non-Jewish artistic patterns and sources. Despite the derivative character of these synagogue decorations, they point to a refined aesthetic sense and an awareness of the effectiveness of modelled decoration.

The plant motifs in the architectural decoration include acanthus leaves, lattice-work, vine-trellis, wreaths, garlands and rosettes, as well as some of the «seven species» of the Land of Israel, such as bunches of grapes, pomegranates, dates, olives and ears of wheat. The use of these elements in architectural decoration did not originate with the synagogue; in carving, workmanship and style they embody and reflect the qualities typical of the ornamental art of the Hellenistic-Roman world. In their new architectural-ornamental context, these motifs lose whatever symbolical meaning they may have possessed and become purely elements of architectural surface decoration.

Figurative representations frequently appear in the synagogue decorations: signs of the zodiac, Victories, angels and cherubim, Hercules, Medusa, soldiers, grape-gatherers, grape-treaders, etc.²⁰. The animal representations include eagles and lions, and also legendary beasts such as griffins (a hybrid beast with an eagle's head and lion's body), centaurs and a beast half-horse, half fish, along with fish, birds, etc. The figurative and other motifs are, like the non-figurative, geometrical and floral, inspired by and borrowed from the decorative repertoire of Classical, Hellenistic and Roman art.

The motifs Jewish in character form a distinct assemblage within the ornamental repertoire of the synagogue, strikingly different from other decorative elements. Despite the assessments of some scholars²¹, we believe that data are insufficient to permit of any evaluation of the symbolical

and Roman Architecture, 2nd ed., Cambridge 1964, 226-227; R. Vallois, *L'architecture hellénique et hellénistique à Délos jusqu'à l'éviction des Déliens (166 av. J.-C.)*, Paris 1944, 364-373; L. Crema, *L'architettura romana*, Torino 1959, 139-145.

¹⁹ Kohl and Watzinger, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), 100 (Abb. 191), 124 (Abb. 251), 134 (Abb. 272); Pls. III, V, VI.

²⁰ See: Kohl and Watzinger, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), *passim*; Ma'oz, in: Levine (ed.), *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), 98-115 (*passim*); Goodenough, *op. cit.*, III (*supra*, n. 1), Figs. 459-461, 475, 487-489, 492-494, 501, 509-511, 513-515, 517, 522, 523-525, 531, 534, 536, 538, 541, 548, 569.

²¹ Kohl and Watzinger, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), 184-185, 187ff.; Goodenough, *op. cit.*, VII (*supra*, n. 1), New York 1958, 198-200.

significance and/or apotropaic function of the *Magen David* and Seal of Solomon in the Capernaum synagogue. However, the incorporation and integration of these two «Jewish» motifs into the general decorative repertoire emphasize their sole function as elements of architectural ornamentation²².

The effacing of many of the figurative depictions of the synagogue decorations makes it difficult to evaluate the quality of their carving. In the few cases where these depictions have been preserved intact one can detect considerable technical carving skill, as for instance, on the eagle motif of the cornice at Capernaum or on the lintel at Gush Halav²³. However, the artistic quality of these depictions is consistently inferior, with the shallow relief, lack of proportion and of plasticity typical of Oriental Roman sculptural art, as in the grape-gathering scene on the frieze at Chorazin and in the human and animal depictions in various synagogues in the Golan²⁴. The sculptural treatment of the plant motifs, especially the acanthus and vine scrolls, derives from Oriental Roman art. The acanthus and vine leaves, as well as the garlands, are carved in low relief in a highly stylised though rather lifeless manner. The sculptors and carvers endeavoured to create three-dimensionality by means of light-and-shade effects resulting from sharply differentiated treatment of the various surfaces of the relief. Among the various synagogue buildings, and sometimes even within the same building, differing sculptural styles can be observed. This is particularly evident in the treatment of the Corinthian capitals, for instance. Some of the garlands in the Capernaum synagogue are vividly plastic and realistic, while others are purely stylized. Variations in stylistic treatment are due to different hands at work. The decorative elements of the cornices point to efforts on part of the provincial carvers to copy the intricate mouldings of the Roman imperial period, such as «egg-and-dart», *cyma*, bead-and-reel, dentils, etc. However, due to remoteness from the major artistic centres they could hardly even be expected to fully comprehend the correct placing of certain decorative elements, or prevent a certain degree of deterioration in workmanship.

As can be seen, the synagogue decorations incorporate both Jewish and pagan motifs. The pagan motifs, borrowed from Classical, Hellenistic and Roman art, were applied in a new context by local artists who in details of their work betray the influence of Oriental tradition. The presence of typical pagan motifs and subjects among the synagogue decorations has always occasioned puzzlement, and invited questions, with scholars searching for an explanation for their presence in the synagogue context. Opinions are divided, with that favoured by most scholars holding that the decorative

²² Only in the Middle Ages the *Magen David* (Shield of David) became a Jewish symbol; see: G. Scholem, «The Curious History of the Six-Pointed Star», *Commentary*, VIII (1949), 243-251.

²³ See: Kohl and Watzinger, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), 34 (Abb. 65-66), 110 (Abb. 210); Goodenough, *op. cit.*, III (*supra*, n. 1), Figs. 475, 522.

²⁴ See: Kohl and Watzinger, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), 50 (Abb. 99b); Goodenough, *op. cit.*, III (*supra*, n. 1), Fig. 488; Ma'oz, in: Levine (ed.), *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), 98-115 (*passim*).

motifs in the synagogue (except for those connected with Jewish subjects) are purely ornamental and have no sort of symbolic meaning. However, there is also a minority opinion, whose major advocate was E.R. Goodenough²⁵, who insisted that these motifs did have a symbolic or apotropaic meaning. Goodenough does not exclude the Jewish motifs from this general view. He argues that any interpretation of the symbolism of the synagogue decorations must take into account the fact that the same or similar motifs appear on many Jewish gravestones and sarcophagi of this period (IIIrd-Vth centuries C.E.). Nor can one, in this opinion, ignore the prevailing *Zeitgeist* which was permeated by religious symbolism, equally affecting Jews and gentiles. Just as anyone else, the Jews were desirous of apotropaic symbols, a longing achieving expression in their synagogue ornamentation.

The pagan motifs among the synagogue decorations —regardless of their possible symbolic and/or apotropaic meaning— provide conclusive evidence as to the tolerant attitude of the spiritual leaders of the Galilee and Golan congregations during this period (IIIrd-Vth centuries C.E.). As for the figurative representations, what evidently favoured their inclusion in the ornamental repertoire was their not constituting three-dimensional free-standing sculpture (except for the lion figures), but merely shallow relief depictions, to which the biblical prohibition did not apply. Since these relief decorations were on the outside walls of the synagogue (often on its facade), but in any case not inside the building, they were regarded as purely architectural ornamentation which did not detract from the building's sacred purpose and function. One recalls the case of the statue of Aphrodite in the public bath at Acre where Rabban Gamliel came to bathe:

«Proklos the son of Philosophos asked Rabban Gamliel in Acre while he was bathing in the Bath of Aphrodite, and said to him, «It is written in your Law. And there shall cleave nought of the devoted thing in thine hand. Why then dost thou bathe in the Bath of Aphrodite». He answered: «One may not answer in the bath». And when he came out he said, «I came not within her limits: she came within mine»! They do not say, «Let us make a bath for Aphrodite», but «Let us make an Aphrodite as an adornment for the bath»²⁶.

Apparently for the Jews there was no connotation of idolatry in an Aphrodite statue in a public bath-house, since in this particular context no-one was likely to worship it or prostrate himself at its feet; it was thus permissible to bathe in its presence²⁷. Something about the enlightened attitude of the Jewish sages towards aesthetic matters can be learned from this incident.

«Behold in the synagogue of Shaph-weyathib in Nehardea a statue was set

²⁵ Goodenough, *op. cit.*, I (*supra*, n. 1), 30-31, 178-179; IV (*supra*, n. 1), New York 1954, 3-48.

²⁶ *Mishnah*, 'Abodah Zarah III 4.

²⁷ About the nature of idolatry see: *Babylonian Talmud*, *Kerithoth* 3b; see also: D. Kotlar, *Art and Religion*, Jerusalem - Tel Aviv 1971, 91 and n. 88.

up; yet Samuel's father and Levi entered it and preyed there without worrying about the possibility of suspicion»!²⁸.

This passage in the *Babylonian Talmud* makes it clear that even a synagogue housing a statue was not thereby disqualified to serve as a place of public worship. Another passage of the Talmud relates that two of the most eminent Babylonian rabbis, Rav and Shmuel, came to pray in the synagogue at Nehardea with its imperial statue²⁹.

In our investigations we have not found any literary-historical or archaeological evidence to support a tendency to view decorative motifs as fraught with symbolical meaning. Within the synagogue context these motifs, especially the figurative, appear to have an architectural-decorative function only. Conceived and executed according to the aesthetic concepts of the time, these elements formed an integral part of the embellishments of the region's architecture. The repertoire of motifs in the synagogue also included some purely Jewish designs which require special consideration. Given the circumstances and socio-political conditions of the post-Second Temple period in which these synagogues were erected, one perceives in these Jewish motifs a didactic purpose and the expression of Jewish identity, a desire both to adorn and remember. Thus the Temple utensils and the «Seven Species» are commemorated and at the same time brought to the forefront of the worshipper's attention. We see no symbolic intent here.

The moderate, tolerant and perhaps even sympathetic attitude of the rabbinic teachers to the plastic arts, including figurative motifs, came up at a certain stage against the opposition of zealot circles, who resorted to forceful means to eradicate the sculpture of figures. Their hostile attitude resulted in the defacing and/or breaking up of all figurative representations within their reach, making identification of the surviving carvings difficult. By way of example, this iconoclasm wrought destruction on the figurative representations in the synagogue of Capernaum, Kefar Bar'am, Rama and Chorazin. The archaeological data suggest that these iconoclasts may have been a localized phenomenon arising in a few settlements in Galilee, where they operated in an organized fashion. It may be that in these settlements a new, more conservative, generation of leaders took over, who were intolerant of figurative art.

II. Mosaic Art in Synagogues

The main artistic vehicle in synagogues dated to a period between the mid-IVth to the VIIth centuries C.E. was the polychrome mosaic floor³⁰.

²⁸ *Babylonian Talmud*, 'Abodah Zarah 43b.

²⁹ *Babylonian Talmud*, *Rosh ha-Shanah* 24b.

³⁰ For the various sites see: *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, M. Avi-Yonah and E. Stern (eds.), I-IV, Jerusalem 1975-1978; Levine (ed.), *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1).

Unfortunately only very few Jewish literary sources of the mishnaic and talmudic periods make any mention of the plastic arts.

R. Johanan, who lived in the Holy Land in the IIIrd century C.E., did not protest when his contemporaries began to paint on walls³¹. On the other hand, he did not hesitate to dispatch a person whose name was Bar Drosay to smash all the statues in the baths in Tiberias because incense seems to have been burned to them³². R. Abun (or Abin), head of the foremost Beth Midrash (theological school) in Tiberias during the first half of the IVth century C.E., also forbore from restraining his contemporaries from decorating mosaic pavements³³. It is also told of R. Abun that he showed to another Rabbi whose name was Mane the magnificent gates he caused to be installed in the Great Theological School in Tiberias. This provoked R. Mane's disapproval for he considered these gates to be luxury items³⁴. One may attribute to R. Abun the following saying in the *Abba Gurion Midrash*, portion A: «R. Abun said: a woman prefers regarding beautiful forms to feasting on fatted calves». E.E. Urbach, in making reference to R. Johanan and R. Abun, adds: «In both cases (of R. Johanan and R. Abun) the designs in question were reproductions of forms that had previously been regarded as forbidden. If these paintings and adornments were introduced into private houses for aesthetic reasons, it is not surprising that they should also have found their way into synagogues and cemeteries. The Sages themselves referred to the works of painters and sculptors to give vividness to their ideas and their expositions of biblical texts»³⁵. Additional support for the depiction of animate figures is found in *Tosefta*, 'Abodah Zarah V 2: «R. Eleazar ben R. Zadok says: All the faces were in Jerusalem, except only the human face»³⁶. This would indicate that objections to portraying animals had long been discontinued. R. Johanan and R. Abun even seem to have permitted the portrayal of human forms.

Synagogue mosaics, occupying as they do a special place in the art of the period, are rich in geometric, plant and figurative designs which create a «carpet of stone». A series of themes may be distinguished based on the following iconographic depictions: the biblical scene, the zodiac and the Torah Ark flanked by *menorahs*.

³¹ *Palestinian Talmud*, 'Abodah Zarah III 4, according to the Leningrad manuscript (=f. 42d).

³² *Palestinian Talmud*, 'Abodah Zarah IV 4.

³³ *Palestinian Talmud*, 'Abodah Zarah III 4, according to the Leningrad manuscript (=f. 42d); see also: J.N. Epstein, «Additional Fragments of the Jerushalmi», *Tarbiz*, III (1931), 15-16, 20 (Hebrew); S. Klein, «When was Mosaic Pictorial Art Introduced into Palestine?», *Bulletin of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society*, I, No. 2 (1933), 15-17 (Hebrew); E.E. Urbach, «The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in the Light of Archaeological and Historical Facts», *Israel Exploration Journal*, 9 (1959), 236f.

³⁴ *Palestinian Talmud*, *Sheqalim* V 4; see: *ibid.*, *Qorban ha-'Edah*, on a similar statement relating to R. Hosh'a'ya «and they shall not be strict as to the drawing in the synagogue building».

³⁵ Urbach, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 33), 236-237.

³⁶ Cf. also: *Palestinian Talmud*, 'Abodah Zarah III 1.

The biblical scenes depict the Binding of Isaac (Beth Alpha), King David as Orpheus (Gaza Maiumas), Daniel in the Lions' Den (Na'aran and Kh. Susiyah) and Noah's Ark (Gerasa in Jordan and Mopsuestia in Cilicia, Asia Minor)³⁷. Of the biblical scenes mentioned, Daniel in the Lions' Den at Na'aran near Jericho is of special historical interest. Although the scene was defaced, it may be identified on the basis of a clear inscription «Daniel Shalom». The synagogue at Na'aran was apparently built in the middle of the VIth century, during the reign of Justinian I or possibly slightly later, during Justin II's reign. The vicious attitude of the rulers towards the Jews of Eretz-Israel, with its repression and stringent royal edicts, permitted of the erection of only a very limited number of synagogues. Borrowing of the Daniel story for its visual representation in the Na'aran pavement but reflects the troubles of the time, namely the instability and the precarious position of the Jewish community in the Byzantine Empire. The Jews' refusal to submit to royal decrees mirrors Daniel's resistance to the king's will, and thus a certain degree of symbolism may be distinguished in the choice of Daniel in the Lions' Den for the Na'aran mosaic.

A purely pagan motif appearing on mosaic floors is the zodiac wheel with Helios in the centre³⁸ and personifications of the four seasons in the corners³⁹ (Beth Alpha, Na'aran, Hammath Tiberias, Hosefa or Husifah and apparently Kh. Susiyah as well). Karl Lehmann sees in some cases the reflection of domed ceilings on mosaic floors⁴⁰. Perhaps this was still perceived as the mirror reflection of the domed ceiling in those synagogues where the zodiac wheel appears. This despite the saying of the sages that «there is no (planetary) luck (or fate) in Israel»⁴¹. There are indications of personification of the sun in midrashic literature. Thus, for example, *Numbers Rabbah* XII 4 interprets «the chariot of it (was) purple» in *Song of Songs* 3:10: «The chariot of it purple —argaman. 'Chariot' signifies the sun, which is set on high and rides on a chariot, lighting up the world. This accords with the text, the sun, which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, etc.» (*Psalms* 19:6-7)⁴². A similar indication is found in *Pirquei de Rabbi Eliezer* VI: «The sun is riding on a chariot and rises with a crown as a bridegroom... and he is as a bridegroom coming out of his canopy»⁴³. The significance of the zodiac wheel as it is depicted on mosaic pavements of

³⁷ A. Ovadiah, «Ancient Synagogues in Asia Minor», *Proceedings of the Xth International Congress of Classical Archaeology*, Ankara 1978, 864-866, Pls. 279 (fig. 18), 280.

³⁸ Cf. M. Dothan, «The Figure of Sol Invictus in the Mosaic of Hammath-Tiberias», in: Hirschberg (ed.), *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 1), 130-134.

³⁹ The Seasons also appear by themselves in the Villa at Beth Govrin; they are depicted within round medallions which are arranged in a vertical row.

⁴⁰ Cf. K. Lehmann, «The Dome of Heaven», *Art Bulletin*, 27 (1945), 1-27.

⁴¹ *Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath* 156a-156b.

⁴² English Translation: J.J. Slotki, *Midrash Rabbah - Numbers I, V*, London (Soncino Press) 1939, 458.

⁴³ The dating of *Pirquei de Rabbi Eliezer* has recently been subjected to question; this may be a work of considerably later date than hitherto believed.

ancient synagogues is still obscure in the absence of literary or archaeological evidence as to its function. Attempts to view the wheel of the zodiac as calendar⁴⁴ (an acceptable explanation) or as fraught with cosmic symbolism⁴⁵ (somewhat less likely) are still tentative. However, an additional possibility exists, that of an astrological interpretation. The discovery of magic texts inscribed on bits of metals in the apse of the Ma'on synagogue, some of which have lately been opened, read and deciphered, together with additional amulets from Eretz-Israel (and oath-taking bowls from Babylonia) indicates that the border between orthodox Judaism and magical and astrological practices was somewhat blurred⁴⁶. It is of interest to note that the zodiac wheel has not been found in churches or Christian complexes in Eretz-Israel of the early Byzantine period and at this moment must be regarded as exclusive to synagogues.

The Ark of the Law flanked by two seven-branched *menorahs* also forms a common motif in synagogue mosaic pavements (Beth Alpha, Na'aran, Beth Shean, Hammath Tiberias and Kh. Susiyah; the mosaic from Jericho synagogue shows the Torah Ark without its flanking *menorahs*). The Ark of the Law appears on mosaic floors in a form similar to that carved in stone, i.e. generally as a decorated chest with a double leaved door topped with a gable (as at Na'aran), a conch (Beth Shean) or a gable enclosing a conch (as at Beth Alpha, Hammath Tiberias and Kh. Susiyah). A *parochet* (Torah Ark curtain), often rendered very realistically with various decorative motifs, is depicted at either side of the Ark or in front of it. At Beth Alpha two lions, possibly symbolising guardian beasts, also flank the Holy Ark.

An important detail of synagogue mosaic is the *menorah*⁴⁷. All synagogue *menorahs*, be they carved in stone or depicted on mosaic floors, take a single form. The *menorah* rests on three legs which join to form a central shaft terminating in a central branch. Six branches emerge from the central shaft to support six lamps, as in the description in the book of *Exodus*⁴⁸. While the stone-carved *menorah* is generally rendered schematically, in

⁴⁴ Cf. M. Avi-Yonah, «The Caesarea Inscription of the Twenty-Four Priestly Courses», *apud: The Teacher's Yoke: Studies in Memory of Henry Trentham*, Waco 1964, 45-57; *idem*, «La mosaïque juive dans ses relations avec la mosaïque classique», *La Mosaïque Gréco-Romaine* (Paris, 29 août-3 septembre 1963), I, Paris 1965, 325-330; *idem*, *Art in Ancient Palestine*, Jerusalem 1981, 396-397.

⁴⁵ G. Guidoni Guidi, «Considerazioni sulla simbologia cosmica nell'arte giudaica - lo zodiaco», *Felix Ravenna*, CXVII (1979), 131-154; Goodenough, *op. cit.*, VIII (*supra*, n. 1), New York 1958, 215-217.

⁴⁶ I am grateful to Professor Joseph Naveh of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem who most kindly communicated verbally this important information and the suggestion of linking the zodiac wheel in ancient synagogues with astrological concepts of the same period. See also: M. Smith, «Helios in Palestine», *Eretz Israel* (Harry M. Orlinsky Volume), XVI (1982), 199-214 (Non-Hebrew Section).

⁴⁷ Regarding the *menorah* see: H. Strauss, «The Fate and Form of the *Menorah* of the Maccabees», *Eretz Israel* (Mordecai Narkiss Memorial Volume), VI (1960), 122-129; A. Negev, «The Chronology of the Seven-Branded *Menorah*», *Eretz Israel* (E.L. Sukenik Memorial Volume), VIII (1967), 193-210.

⁴⁸ *Exodus* 25: 31-39; 37: 17-24.

mosaics an attempt is made to depict «its flowers, its knops and its cups» in more detail. Additionally, the flames of the seven lamps are portrayed with the central flame burning vertically, while in certain cases the flames of the six flanking lamps are drawn to the central flame. This convention follows the tradition of *Exodus* 25:37: «And thou shalt make the lamps thereof, seven; and they shall light the lamps thereof, to give light over against it»⁴⁹. Successfully-drawn *menorahs* which reveal the artist's attempt to convey details are to be found in Beth Shean and Hammath Tiberias. The Samaritan synagogue of the Vth century C.E. at Sha'albim has a mosaic pavement depicting a hummock (apparently Gerizim, the mountain sacred to the Samaritans) flanked by two seven-branched *menorahs* larger in size than the mountain proper. A number of mosaics portray one *menorah* only (Beth Shean, Jericho, Ma'on, Ma'oz Hayim, Gerasa, etc.). At times two *menorahs* are symmetrically depicted flanking the Torah Ark as at Beth Alpha, Na'aran, Beth Shean, Hammath Tiberias, etc. It is worth noting that the Ma'on *menorah* is of exaggerated size and flanked by two lions. The location of the *menorah* within the mosaic floor is not fixed: in some cases it will occur near the wall facing Jerusalem (Beth Alpha, Na'aran, Hammath Tiberias, Kh. Susiyah and Ma'on), generally placed at either side of the Torah Ark, with some examples appearing elsewhere on the floor (Beth Shean, 'Ein Gedi, Hammath Tiberias —later stage, Hosefa or Husifah Jericho, Kefar Qarnaim⁵⁰ and Ma'oz Hayim). The *menorahs* occur in conjunction with typical Jewish motifs such as the *lulav* (palm-branch), *ethrog* (citron), *machta* (incense shovel) and *shofar* (ram's horn).

Over and above the main decorative subjects described above, synagogue mosaic pavements, or the borders thereof, were embellished with various motifs. A few examples: the mosaic pavements at Gaza Maiumas and Ma'on show animals, vegetal forms and still life within medallions consisting of intertwining vine-trellises emerging from an amphora; geometric patterns also occur on these floors. The border of the Beth Alpha mosaic displays birds, animals, fish, bread-baskets, cornucopiae, bunches of grapes, bowls of food and blossoms. The northern mosaic floor panel of the nave of the Na'aran synagogue depicts animals and various birds, including a caged one. There are additional motifs, such as the lion and the bull at the entrance to the Beth Alpha synagogue, the two lions flanking the main inscription in the Hammath Gader mosaic⁵¹, the same beasts flanking the Ma on *menorah* and the Greek inscriptions at the entrance to the Hammath synagogue. The standard of workmanship varies from one pavement to the next.

⁴⁹ See: Rashi on *Exodus* 25: 37.

⁵⁰ S. Goldschmidt, «Synagogues Remains at the Mound of Kefar Qarnaim», *Eretz Israel* (I. Dunayevsky Memorial Volume), XI (1973), 39-40, Pl. VIII; M. Avi-Yonah, «Places of Worship in the Roman and Byzantine Periods», *Antiquity and Survival*, II, Nos. 2-3 (1957), 262-272, Fig. 14.

⁵¹ E.L. Sukenik, «The Ancient Synagogue of el-Hammeh», *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, 15 (1935), 125-128.

The artistic merit of composition and drawing of the mosaic pavements is not uniform. The arrangement of the mosaic surface is not complex, and planning is generally simple. Most of the mosaics exhibit a simple and popular craftsmanship, creative, powerful and dynamic, usually based on Oriental elements. This art is fairly close to the contemporaneous official Byzantine-Christian mode in its aesthetic conception, composition, style and decorative repertoire.

In the nave of the Hammath Tiberias synagogue, a division into three panels makes its first appearance. The panel closest to the location of the actual Torah Ark shows a symmetrical composition with a central Torah Ark flanked by two *menorahs* and the Four Species. The central panel displays the wheel of the zodiac, and only the biblical scene is lacking. On the third panel appear Greek inscriptions with the names of donors, set between two confronted lions rendered with a good measure of naturalism. This pavement is unique not only by reason of the innovative tripartite composition and the primary importance of the depictions, but also for its Classical conception and technical and artistic excellence. The mosaic is executed in a broad spectrum of shades. The gradual colour transitions create areas of light and shadow, and the general impression is one of delicacy with a certain depth in the depicted figures. The naturalistic rendering and proportions of the individualistic figures are well thought out. All these elements are evidence of a skill, hitherto, unknown in Eretz-Israel. It is interesting to note that the figures stand separately with no base line or background, as was common in the IVth century. In seeking parallels for the human and animal forms here depicted, we must of necessity have recourse to Antioch⁵². A mosaic artist or artists may have been brought from Antioch to Hammath Tiberias, to be assisted on the spot by local artists. The composition at Hammath Tiberias forms an earlier stage and less mature in comparison with that of Beth Alpha, which constitutes the zenith in area division and adaptation of themes.

Of the synagogue mosaic floors discovered in Israel, the floor from 'Ein Gedi is unique in its artistic design and religious conception. Its artistic uniqueness lies in the *emblematic* composition of the mosaic. While it may seem uncomplicated (a large polychrome carpet form), the central design commands the entire hall, making of it one single unit and drawing the eye to its central motif of four birds within a round medallion. The stance of the birds seems to draw the eye to the bema and to the rectangular niche for the Torah Ark let into the north wall of the building. Not only is a comprehensive plan of this sort not found in other synagogues; we have not encountered its like in mosaic pavements provening from buildings of other types in Eretz-Israel.

The various inscriptions from the west aisle of the synagogue lend to the 'Ein Gedi mosaic its specific religious flavour, mirroring as they do the religious notions of the local Jewish community it served. Unlike in other

⁵² Cf. D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, I-II, Princeton 1947, *passim*.

synagogues, these inscriptions not only mention donors to the synagogue but also list the fathers of mankind according to *I Chron.* 1:1-4, and provide a verbal description of the twelve signs of the zodiac. The description is undoubtedly tendentious and hints at the religious zealotry of the Jewish community at 'Ein Gedi, its conservative outlook and its strict attitude towards certain figurative depictions. This stood in direct contrast to the moderate attitude of contemporary Jewish communities in Eretz-Israel, which permitted the portrayal of the wheel of the zodiac at times in daring nudity like that in the synagogue at Hammath Tiberias. The names of the months, appearing as they do following the names of the constellations, seem to hint that the signs of the zodiac are to be perceived as directly connected with the months of the year, and the Hebrew calendar should be adapted to the solar year, so that Jewish holidays can be celebrated in their proper season, e.g. Passover in the spring and Tabernacles in the autumn⁵³. It seems, then, that the verbal representation of the zodiac instead of the figurative one, was created in order not to violate the religious commandment.

The figurative synagogue mosaics are devoid of any element that could offend the religious sensibilities of the worshippers, even when purely pagan figures or motifs, like the signs of the zodiac and Helios, are considered. The figures are not depicted freely as in the case of three-dimensional sculpture, and thus are distorted and partial⁵⁴. During that period pagan motifs lost their original significance and were no longer revered or worshipped⁵⁵.

The *halakha* exhibits a rather tolerant traditional approach to art, albeit with certain reservations. Figurative representation in relief or mosaic is permissible; prohibition applies to free-standing sculpture especially when the statue incorporates a personal attribute of the figured portrayed, such as a staff, a bird, or a sphere, etc.⁵⁶. The encouragement of the moderate aspect of the *halakhic* approach —itself so firmly anchored in tradition— gave rise to a tolerant attitude towards painting and sculpture, reflected by R. Johanan and R. Abun. This sharp turn in attitude towards art but serves as indirect evidence for the contemporary disapproval of sculpture and drawing, echoing the disputes between teachers of *halakha* on matters of aesthetic-pictorial value and mirroring their substantive differences in general outlook and pragmatic and philosophical modes of thought.

Urbach, rejecting Goodenough's thesis that synagogue art was totally foreign to the spirit of normative-traditional Judaism, sides with Sukenik's view that synagogue ornamentation in no way hints at the existence of a «liberal-reform» Judaism⁵⁷. It appears that normative-traditional Judaism had no fear of decorative aesthetic representations either overtly expressed or

⁵³ Cf. *supra*, n. 44.

⁵⁴ Cf. *Babylonian Talmud*, 'Abodah Zarah 43b.

⁵⁵ Cf. Urbach, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 33), 236.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Mishnah*, 'Abodah Zarah III 1.

⁵⁷ Urbach, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 33), 151 and n. 5; Goodenough, *op. cit.*, I (*supra*, n. 1), 180; Sukenik, *op. cit.* (*supra*, n. 3), 3.

indirectly indicated. By way of example, one of the Jewish dirges recited on the eve of the Ninth of Av, includes an allegorical description of the heavenly host weeping over the destruction of Jerusalem and of the First and Second Temples, with additional mention of the zodiac and its twelve signs, most truly of pagan character: «...and the heavenly host lamented... even the constellations shed tears»⁵⁸. Then as now the image of the zodiac occupied a place in Jewish tradition. One may conclude that Jewish tradition displays a moderate and tolerant approach to art —be it relief or mosaic. Judaism has always recognised the aesthetic yearnings of mankind and has sought to harness them in the service of God. Only when aesthetics diverge into idolatrous worship are they prohibited. It is quite conceivable that the disputes among the sages resulted additionally in creating differing attitudes with regard to art and artistic values. The attitude taken by the sages towards art differs from generation to generation, fluctuating according to their *Weltanschauung* and mode of thought from moderate and tolerant to orthodox and stringent. The approach of teachers of religion in the mishnaic and talmudic period to art in general and to the three-dimensional figurative in particular was also subject to variation⁵⁹.

An interesting phenomenon encountered in the Na'aran synagogue's mosaic pavement is the defacing of the figures. This was apparently carried out deliberately in the middle of the VIIth century C.E., and seems to be the work of a strict local iconoclastic movement prompted by ideological religious motives as was a similar movement operating in Galilee. If indeed this defacing was carried out by some radical religious sect, objecting on *halakhic* grounds to figurative representations, the non-figurative ornamentation of the synagogue in near-by Jericho attributed to the VIIth century is a response to the defacing of the Na'aran figures. This response takes the form of a mosaic pavement of simple design consisting only of a coloured carpet of geometric patterns and stylised organic motifs. In the centre appears the Torah Ark represented in a flat and stylised manner and a round medallion framing a *menorah*, *shofar* and *lulav* above a Hebrew inscription «Peace upon Israel».

Some scholars reject the existence of a Jewish iconoclastic movement inspired by *halakhic* prohibitions⁶⁰. Indeed, in spite of the tendency to ascribe the defacing of the Na'aran figures to a local Jewish iconoclastic movement, it is also possible that the figures were defaced by Moslems zealots⁶¹. The phenomenon of Moslems defacing figures may be noted in the case of the mosaic pavement of the Kursi church⁶² on the north-east bank of the Lake of

⁵⁸ While the date and author of this *piyyut* (hymn) are not known, its metre dates it to mediaeval times or perhaps even earlier.

⁵⁹ Cf. E.L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece*, London 1934, 64.

⁶⁰ S. Klein, *Toldot ha-Yishuv ha-Yehudi be-Eretz-Israel (=The History of the Jewish Settlement in Eretz-Israel)*, Tel Aviv 1950, 36-37 (Hebrew).

⁶¹ Cf. *idem*, *ibid.*, n. 94 (on p. 37).

⁶² V. Tzaferis and D. Urman, «Excavations at Kursi», *Qadmoniot*, VI, No. 2 (22), 1973, 62-64 (Hebrew).

Galilee. Was this the result of its Christian surroundings? A number of the Church Fathers are known to have been as strict as some of the mishnaic and talmudic sages, at times even surpassing them in their severity and zealous tenacity in condemnation of pagan motifs or human and animal forms. Thus Tertullian of Carthage (160?-220?) and Eusebius of Caesarea (260-339) were sworn enemies of figurative representation; Clement of Alexandria (150-215) prohibited the wearing of signet rings with a human or animal form on the bezel; Epiphanius (born in Beth Zadok near Beth Govrin=Eleutheropolis, 320-403) with his own hands tore into shreds a hanging in a church in the Holy Land which was decorated with forms, i.e. human figures⁶³. The 36th Canon of the Church Council of Elvira in Spain in c. 306 C.E. prohibited the use of human figures in churches⁶⁴.

A portion of the figurative representations in synagogues listed above are instructive in intent, a purpose achieved by the visual portrayal of some of the most famous biblical stories. In this graphic form worshippers could be taught selected episodes from the Bible⁶⁵. We feel that to the extent that symbolism is to be found in the biblical scenes or in other motifs decorating synagogue mosaics, this symbolism must equally be distinctly expressed and clearly reflected in Jewish literary sources. Should there be no such correlation between the written material and the visual representation, it is rather the educational aspect of the mosaic picture, with the notion they are meant to convey, that should be studied. If, however, the symbol can be perceived as expressing an abstract idea, the biblical scenes appearing in synagogues may to a certain extent be regarded as symbolising the ways of the Divine Providence —forgiveness and redemption. Like, for example, the *shofar* (ram's horn) that symbolises forgiveness and redemption while recalling the Binding of Isaac⁶⁶. Should this symbolism actually be implied, it must of necessity be viewed within the relevant historical context with all its political and social realities, as well as being interpreted in its historical aspects with their primary task of bringing to mind and permanently recording⁶⁷. It is

⁶³ See: E. J. Martin, *A History of the Iconoclastic Controversy*, London 1930, 134.

⁶⁴ On this matter see: C. J. Hefele, *Histoire des Conciles*, I (1), Paris 1907, 212-264; E. Bevan, *Holy Images*, London 1940, 113-116. For the attitude of the Church Fathers to art and its use in churches, see: F. Cabrol et H. Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, VII (1), Paris, 1926, cols. 11-31, s.v. 'Iconographie'; cols. 51-62, s.v. 'Idolatrie'; H. Koch, *Die altchristliche Bilderfrage nach den literarischen Quellen*, Göttingen 1917; W. Elliger, *Die Stellung der alten Christen zu den Bildern in den ersten 4 Jahrhunderten*, 1930; Bevan, *ibid.*, 105ff.

⁶⁵ The instructive value attributed by the Church to the portrayal of episodes from the sacred writings is reflected in the response of Nilos of Mt. Sinai to a query broached by Olympiodoros the Eparch in the early Vth century. Olympiodoros asked whether the lives of the saints to whom he sought to dedicate a church might be portrayed in paintings to be further embellished with animals and plants; Nilos replied that themes from the sacred writings should be painted so that individuals untutored in these religious works could learn of the deeds of the Church Fathers from the paintings. See: J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Graecae*, 79, Paris 1865, col. 577.

⁶⁶ See: *Genesis Rabbah* LVI 9.

⁶⁷ In our opinion the seven-branched *menorah* is not to be considered as symbolic, but rather as an instructive element both recalling and perpetuating the past of the Jewish world and emphasising Jewish identity. Philo of Alexandria and Josephus Flavius attributed symbolic significance to the *menorah*, regarding it as having a cosmic connotation and representing the

universally acknowledged that certain circumstances give rise to specific symbolism in an attempt to derive from them strength and encouragement⁶⁸.

* * *

Over and above the unique character of the Jewish motifs —the Torah Shrine, the *menorah*, the *shofar*, the *machta*, the *lulav* and the *ethrog* occasionally appear on reliefs and mosaic floors— the ornamentation of ancient synagogues draws its inspiration from decorative, iconographic and stylistic sources of the non-Jewish Greek-Roman world and the Orient. The logical conclusion is that in discussing the embellishment of synagogues of the Roman and early Byzantine periods in the Holy Land we are not concerned with Jewish Art. The artwork of the synagogues, as much as the actual synagogue building, is eclectic and indicates a merging of different artistic elements borrowed from other sources. It is difficult to speak of the originality of the depictions in the synagogues or about an original composition which affects and influences the surroundings. It would appear that the art of the synagogues is introverted, is influenced without being influential, absorbing or borrowing but not contributing or inspiring.

The Jewish creative spirit in ancient times can be seen in religious law (*halakha*), in Midrash and in religious philosophy and not in the plastic arts and aesthetic form.

seven planets. Philo even expands upon this symbolism, stating that the *menorah* represents the heavens which, like itself, bear lights. It must be stressed that reference here is not to the traditional orthodox sources which alone represent the tenets held by the religious establishment. It is to be noted that no hint of cosmic or other symbolism is encountered in the Mishnah and the Talmud. See: Philo, *Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres*, 216-227 (The Loeb Classical Library, IV, London-New York 1932, 390-397); Jos. *Bell.* V, 217 (The Loeb Classical Library, III, London-New York 1928, 266-267).

⁶⁸ Cf. D. Landau, *From Metaphor to Symbol*, Ramat-Gan 1979, 215 (Hebrew).

