

Conservative Approaches in the Ancient Synagogue Mosaic Pavements in Israel: The Cases of 'Ein Gedi and Sepphoris/Zippori

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ABSTRACT

The uniqueness of the 'Ein Gedi synagogue (fifth century CE) is reflected in several mosaic inscriptions, which give a clear idea of the particular religious view of the Jewish community there, especially that of its spiritual leaders. The textual representation of the twelve signs of the zodiac wheel, instead of the figurative one, was tendentious and stood in total opposition to the visual depiction. A similar conservative approach appears in the non-figural (aniconic) representation of Helios/Sol in the zodiac wheel of the synagogue mosaic at Sepphoris/Zippori (fifth century CE). This representation of Helios/Sol, as a rayed sun-disc, emphasizes the intolerant and non-liberal perception of the Jewish sages in Sepphoris/Zippori, following the Biblical Second Commandment and in contrast to other synagogues of the early Byzantine period in Israel.

Key words: 'Ein Gedi synagogue, Sun God, Jewish Sages, Mosaics.

Aproximaciones conservadoras a los mosaicos de sinagogas en Israel: los casos de 'Ein Gedi y Sepphoris/Zippori

RESUMEN

El carácter único de la sinagoga de 'Ein Gedi (siglo V d.C.) se refleja en varias inscripciones en mosaicos, que dan una clara idea de las visiones específicas de la comunidad judía allí establecida, especialmente la de sus líderes espirituales. Una aproximación conservadora similar es la representación no figurativa (anicónica) de Helios/Sol en el mosaico zodiacal en Sepphoris/Zippori (s. V d.C.). Esta representación de Helios/Sol, como un disco solar con rayos, enfatiza la percepción intolerante y antiliberal de los sabios judíos en Sepphoris/Zippori, quienes seguían el segundo mandamiento bíblico y contrastan con otras sinagogas del periodo bizantino temprano en Israel.

Palabras clave: Sinagoga de 'Ein Gedi, divinidad solar, sabios judíos, mosaicos.

The uniqueness of the mosaic pavement in the 'Ein Gedi synagogue, on the western shore of the Dead Sea, dated to the fifth century CE, lies in its artistic design and the religious perspective that it reflects. Its artistic uniqueness is expressed in the *emblematic* composition. Though simple in appearance (large, coloured carpet-like), it dominates the entire area of the hall, unifying it and focusing attention on the centre, on the four birds inside the round medallion. The position of these birds directs the gaze of the observer to the *bema* (pulpit) and the rectangular niche of the Ark of the *Torah*, which is located in the northern wall of the building, facing Jerusalem (Figs. 1-3). Such a comprehensive and sophisticated compositional conception has not yet been found in the mosaic pavements of other synagogues, and more over does not exist in any other mosaic pavement found in Israel.

The religious uniqueness of the 'Ein Gedi synagogue is reflected in several mosaic inscriptions located in the western aisle of the synagogue. The inscriptions provide a clear idea of the particular religious perspective of the Jewish community there, especially that of its spiritual leaders (sages), and offer an extraordinary phenomenon of great interest. These inscriptions name the ancestors of humankind, according to *I Chronicles* 1: 1-4, providing a textual representation of the twelve signs of the zodiac, rather than the figurative representation found in other ancient synagogues in the Land of Israel (Fig. 4). There can be no doubt that this textual approach is tendentious and stands in total opposition to the visual depictions. The textual representation of the zodiac appears to have been created in order not to violate the Second Commandment (*Exodus* 20: 4): "You shall not make unto yourself a graven image, or any likeness". It suggests the religious conservative *Weltanschauung* and strict attitude to certain figurative representations that prevailed among the spiritual leaders of the 'Ein Gedi Jewish community. This is in contrast to the greater moderation of the spiritual leaders of other communities in Late Antiquity, who did permit figural representation of the signs of the zodiac, sometimes quite daringly, with naked human figures, as in the synagogue at Hammath Tiberias (Figs. 5-6). Hence, the illiberal, intolerant and conservative approach reflected in the inscriptions in this mosaic pavement should be attributed solely to the local religious character of the 'Ein Gedi community and the mode of thought of its spiritual leaders and not to the overall Jewish community in the Land of Israel in the early Byzantine period. It is possible that this was a passing phenomenon confined to a single instance and characteristic of one generation in the local settlement, whereas successive generations of spiritual leaders may have been less conservative (however, there is insufficient evidence to substantiate this).¹

A similar phenomenon is reflected in the zodiac wheel of the synagogue mosaic pavement, also dated to the fifth century CE, at Sephhoris/Zippori in Lower Gali-

¹ Ovadiah II, 1984: 311-312.

lee.² Here, however, the representation of the zodiac wheel is figural and not textual as in the 'Ein Gedi synagogue, other than the non-figural (aniconic) representation of Helios/Sol in its inner circle, depicted as a rayed sun-disk (Figs. 7-11). Undoubtedly, the zodiac wheel with Helios/Sol in the centre, as *Sol Invictus*, riding a *quadriga*, is a purely pagan motif³ and its appearance in the synagogue mosaic contradicts the declaration of the sages that “there is no (planetary) luck (or fate) in Israel”.⁴ On the other hand, 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) as follows: “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 the chamber', etc.” (*Psalms* 19: 6-7).⁵ 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 the canopy”.⁶

Although Helios/Sol as a pagan god, especially as *Sol Invictus*, played a significant and dominant role from a religious pagan point of view, the attitudes of the sages varied. On the other hand, mythological figures, the twelve signs in the zodiac wheel and the personifications of the four seasons were not regarded by the sages as cultic pagan figures. Yet, in the mosaic pavement at Sepphoris/Zippori a clear and unequivocal reservation is expressed in the aniconic personification of the sun god (Helios/Sol). If the spiritual leaders (sages) of Sepphoris/Zippori were liberal and tolerant, as is evinced in Hammath Tiberias (Figs. 5-6), Beth Alpha (Figs. 12-13), Na'aran (Fig. 14) and perhaps also in Hosefa/'Isfia⁷ and Kh. Susiyah,⁸ they would have permitted the figurative depiction of Helios/Sol and not a representation of a rayed sun-disk. Moreover, the artist or artists did not act independently, according to their own artistic perceptions and modes of thought, but, rather, they followed the requirements of the patron or patrons: that is, of the spiritual leaders of the Sepphoris/Zippori community. Hence, they omitted the figure of Helios/Sol and displayed only the rayed sun-disk. Therefore, there is reason to believe that the image of this pagan god was perceived in a more negative and restricted way at Seppho-

² Weiss 2005: 104-110.

³ Cf. Ovadiah and Ovadiah 1987: 156.

⁴ *BT, Shabbath* 156a-156b.

⁵ English translation: J.J. Slotki, *Midrash Rabbah – Numbers I, V*, London (Soncino Press) 1939, 458.

⁶ The dating of *Pirquei de Rabbi Eliezer* has been subjected to question; this may be a work of considerably later date than hitherto believed.

⁷ Ovadiah and Ovadiah 1987: 72 (No. 103).

⁸ Ovadiah and Ovadiah 1987: 100-102 (No. 170).

ris/Zippori in comparison with other figures in the zodiac wheel and other parts of the synagogue mosaic, which lacked religious connotation.

Despite the view of some scholars that the non-figural representation of Helios/Sol is not indicative of an anti-pagan attitude of the sages at Sepphoris/Zippori, or of religious zeal of the Jews who worshipped at this synagogue, it seems obvious that the rayed sun-disk does indeed reveal the intolerant and illiberal attitude of the sages in this city. It can be assumed that this orthodox, strict perception follows the Biblical Second Commandment noted above, in contrast with the practice of other Jewish communities of the early Byzantine period in the Land of Israel.

Indeed, during that period paganism was already on the wane⁹ and pagan motifs had lost their original significance and were no longer revered or worshipped. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that conservatism and restriction, anti-paganism and religious zeal still existed locally in some Jewish communities in the Land of Israel, as reflected in the cases of 'Ein Gedi and Sepphoris/Zippori.

One can conclude that Jewish tradition usually displays a moderate and tolerant approach to art – be it in relief or mosaic. Judaism has always recognized the aesthetic yearnings of mankind and has sought to harness them in the service of God. Only when aesthetics diverges into idolatrous worship is it prohibited. It is quite conceivable that the disputes among the sages resulted additionally in differing attitudes with regard to art and artistic values. Indeed, the attitude of the spiritual leaders in the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods towards art in general, and to three-dimensional figurative art in particular, differed from generation to generation and from one community to the other, fluctuating according to their *Weltanschauung*, from the moderate and tolerant to the orthodox and strict.¹⁰

⁹ Cf. Urbach 1959: 236.

¹⁰ Cf. Ovadiah and Ovadiah 1987: 159. The moderate, tolerant and perhaps even sympathetic attitude of the spiritual leaders (sages) to the plastic arts, including figurative motifs, came up at a certain stage against the opposition of zealot circles, who resorted to forceful and violent means to eradicate the sculpture of figures. Their hostile attitude resulted in the defacing – some times to the point of destruction – 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 this iconoclastic movement may have been a local phenomenon arising in a few Jewish 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 (see Ovadiah II, 1995: 308).

A similar phenomenon encountered in the Na'aran synagogue's mosaic pavement, where the figures were defaced. This was apparently carried out deliberately in the middle of the seventh century CE, and seems to be the work of a strict local iconoclastic movement

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prompted by ideological religious motives. 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 nearby Jericho attributed to the seventh century is a response to the defacing of the Na'aran figures. Some scholars reject the existence of a Jewish iconoclastic movement inspired by *halakhic* prohibitions. 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 Muslim zealots (see Ovadiah II, 1995: 316).



Fig. 1: 'Ein Gedi: synagogue – general view, facing north (after Barag, Porat and Netzer 1972: 53 [bottom]).

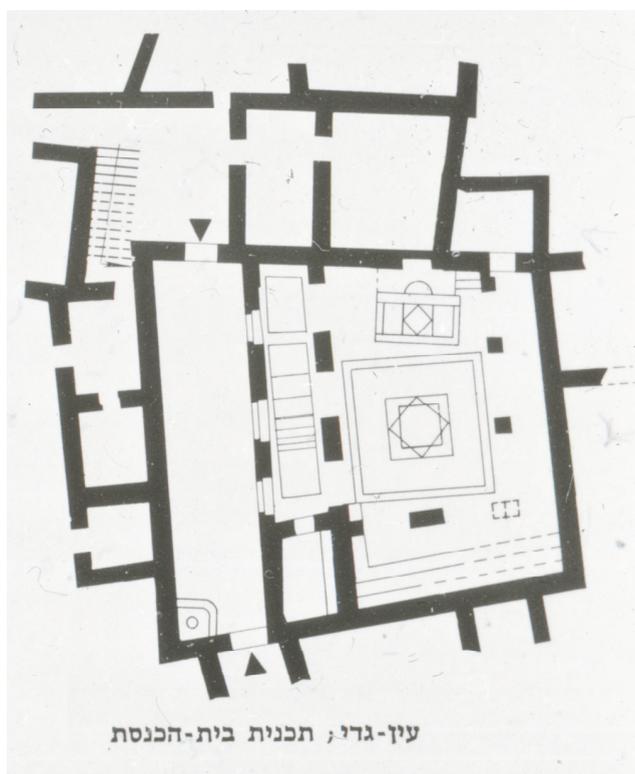


Fig. 2: 'Ein Gedi: synagogue – plan (after Barag, Porat and Netzer 1972: 52 [left]).



Fig. 3: 'Ein Gedi: synagogue – nave, general view of the mosaic carpet, facing north (after Barag, Porat and Netzer 1972: Pl. B).



Fig. 4: 'Ein Gedi: synagogue – the mosaic inscriptions in the western aisle, facing north (after Barag, Porat and Netzer 1972: Pl. C).



Fig. 5: Hammath Tiberias: synagogue – nave, middle panel, the zodiac wheel with *Helios Invictus* in the inner circle, facing south (photo: author).

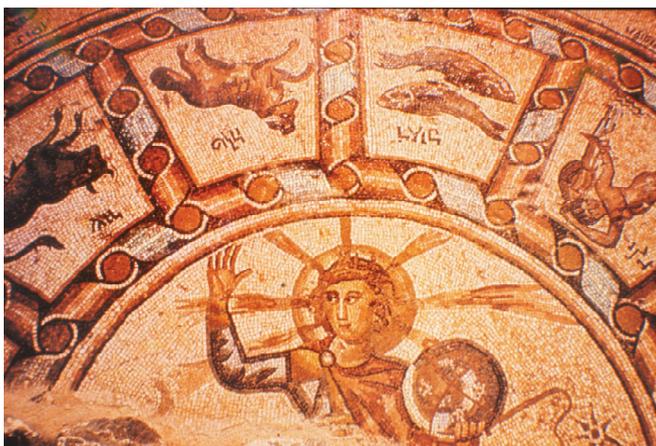
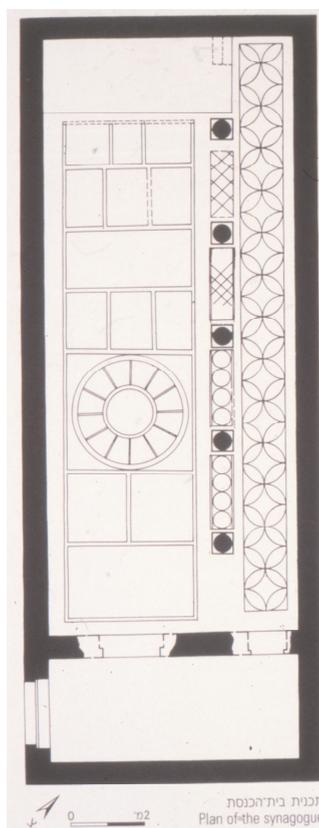


Fig. 6: Hammath Tiberias: synagogue – *Helios Invictus*
(after Ovadiah and Ovadiah 1987: Pl. LXVII [1]).

Fig. 7: Sepphoris/Zippori: synagogue – plan
(after Weiss and Netzer 1996: 12).



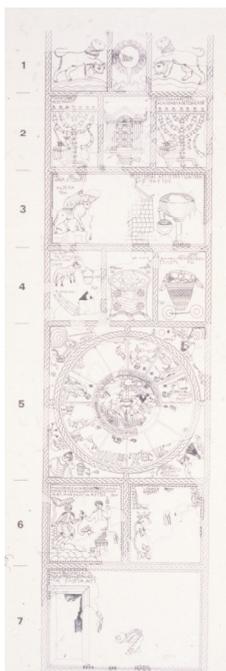


Fig. 8: Sepphoris/Zippori: synagogue – drawing of the mosaic panels in the main hall, facing north-east (after Weiss and Netzer 1996: 14).

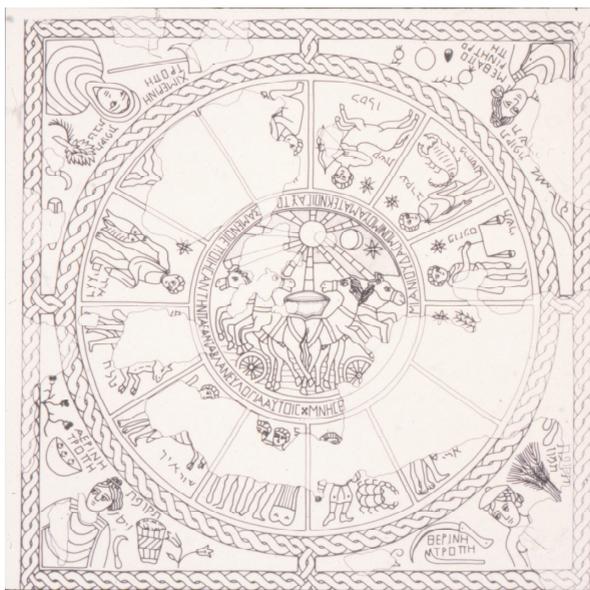


Fig. 9: Sepphoris/Zippori: synagogue – drawing of the zodiac wheel with the representation of Helios/Sol, as a rayed sun-disk, in the inner circle (after Weiss and Netzer 1996: 26).

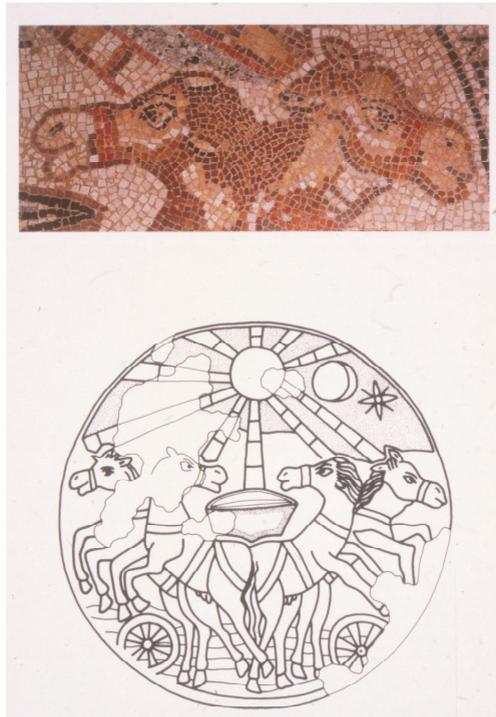


Fig. 10: Sepphoris/Zippori: synagogue – drawing of Helios/Sol as a rayed sun-disk (after Weiss and Netzer 1996: 37).

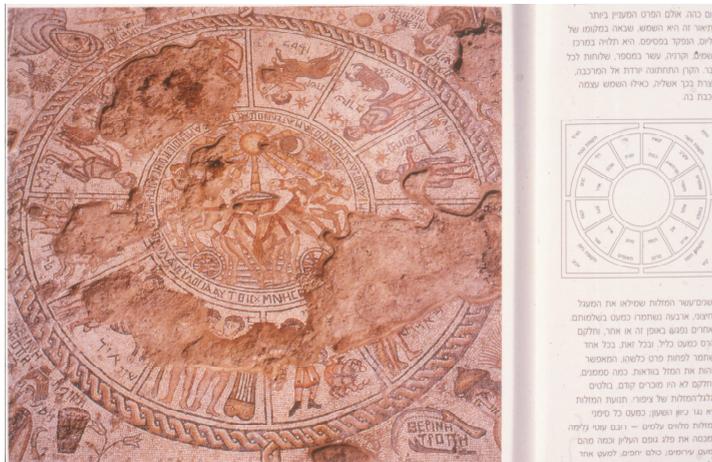


Fig. 11: Sepphoris/Zippori: synagogue – the zodiac wheel with the representation of Helios/Sol, as a rayed sun-disk, in the inner circle (after Weiss and Netzer 1996: 27).



Fig. 12: Beth Alpha: synagogue – nave, the zodiac wheel with *Helios Invictus* in the inner circle, facing south (after *NEAEHL*, 1 [1992], colour plate opposite p. 121).

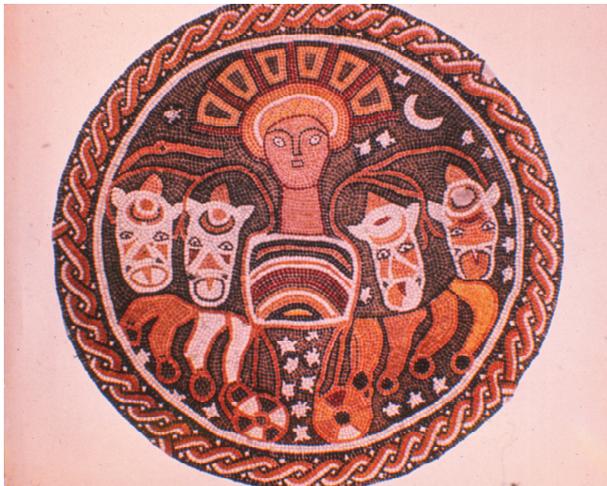


Fig. 13: Beth Alpha: synagogue – representation of *Helios Invictus* (detail of Fig. 12).

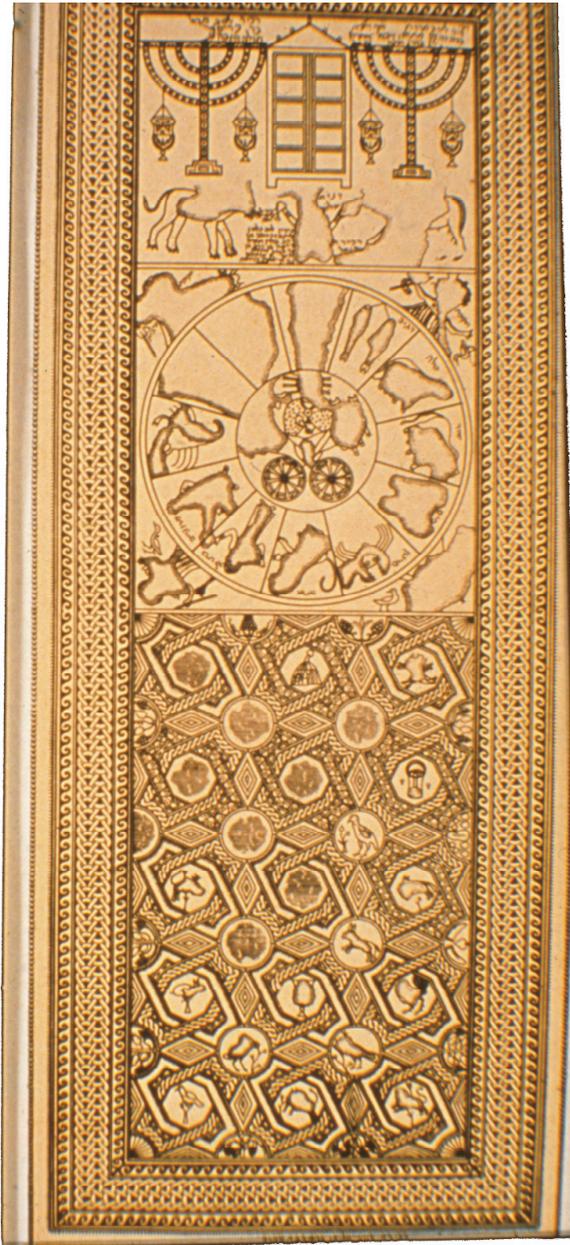


Fig. 14: Na'aran: synagogue – nave, the zodiac wheel with *Helios Invictus* in the inner circle, facing south-west (after *NEAEHL*, 3 [1992], 1079).