The Akedah in Late Antique Synagogues:

The Function of Figurative Art in the Expression of Localized Jewish Identity

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Abstract

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The three late antique Levantine synagogues at Dura-Europos, Sepphoris, and Beit Alpha all include within their elaborate decorative schemes a figurative depiction of the Binding of Isaac, or Akedah narrative. Analyzing the narrative depictions in the context of the rest of the synagogue's artistic design, the local and regional visual culture, and known Jewish synagogue practices illuminates artistic variances within each community. These variances open the door for greater speculation on the function of art in late antique Jewish communities and demonstrate the rich, sophisticated visual culture of synagogue decoration throughout the Levant.

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Introduction

The early 20th century saw a wave of archeological excavations which unearthed a plethora of Levantine synagogues in use during Late Antiquity, from about the 2nd to 8th centuries CE. The presence of a rich visual culture within these Jewish structures resulted in scholarship and analysis on the meaning and function of the art, such as Erwin Goodenough's revolutionary but debunked theory of a pervasive esoteric mysticism underscoring the symbolic iconography consistently found in late antique Jewish settings.[1] Modern scholarship on the synagogue imagery is by its nature a multidisciplinary endeavor, combining academic methodologies from various fields of scholarship, including archeology, history, and religious studies. Art historical methods have also been employed in some scholarship in order to examine the aesthetic role of Jewish art and architecture through form, color, composition, and materials. Yet, it is often employed sparingly or as a secondary lens with which to analyze broader cultural and religious trends.[2] Other art historical scholarship may address the visual function of late antique Jewish synagogue art vis-a-vis the composition, technique, materials used, etc., though more often than not specifically in the context of, or as a counterpoint to contemporary Christian art and visual culture.

[1] Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough and Jacob Neusner, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period: (Abridged Edition)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Morton Smith, "Goodenough's Jewish Symbols in Retrospect," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86, no. 1 (1967): 53–68.

[2] In reviewing my bibliography, I realized that the overwhelming majority of scholars I have cited or read for this thesis are not in any official way related to the field of art history. Many of them are trained archeologists, historians, theologians, and Jewish scholars. This is not to say that scholars outside of art history are not capable of art historical research, only that the primary methodologies and approaches to material works in these fields may differ in focus to that of primarily art historical scholarship.

This thesis incorporates art historical methodologies to analyze the form and function of late antique Jewish synagogue artworks as products of a wide range of social, political, regional, and religious factors. It foregrounds the three extant synagogue depictions of the Binding of Isaac, or Akedah, a narrative from Genesis 22 in which Abraham attempts to sacrifice his son Isaac by God's command, but is stopped at the last moment by an angel. The synagogues at Dura-Europos, Sepphoris, and Beit Alpha, from the 3rd, 5th, and 6th centuries CE respectively, are the only known surviving synagogues to include the Akedah within their decorative plans. Consistent visual iconography across all three versions demonstrates a shared knowledge of visual motifs directly associated with the narrative. At the same time, the unique elements within each composition, differing physical locations of the Akedah panel within the decorative layout of each synagogue, and highly localized artistic style reveal distinct interpretive choices in all three Jewish communities.

Few previous scholars have approached this specific subject through an art historical lens. In his essay "Art Leading the Story: The 'Aqedah in Early Synagogue Art," Edward Kessler opened the door to examining the three Akedah depictions as artistic expressions of religious and exegetical engagement in each of the three congregations. However, his approach centered more on connecting the iconography to known rabbinic midrash and in some ways reads more like a text study than an art historical analysis of contemporary methods of visual and artistic engagement.[3] In a similar vein, several works by theologian Robin Jensen focus on the function of the Akedah scenes from all three synagogues as forms

[3] Edward Kessler, "Art Leading the Story: The 'Aqedah in Early Synagogue Art," in *From Dura to Sepphoris: Studies in Jewish Art and Society in Late Antiquity*, Journal of Roman Archaeology. Supplementary Series; No. 40 (Portsmouth, R.I.: Yale University Press, 2012.

of visual exegesis, with art historical methodologies to very effectively further her arguments. Yet, the inclusion of Jewish art in her analysis is used almost exclusively in counterpoint to contemporary Christian works of the same narrative.[4]

I will build on the important foundations laid by Kessler and Jensen, among other scholars, to foreground art historical methodologies and analysis in direct relation to Jewish culture as independent from Christian counterpoint. My analysis will illuminate the artistic variances in the three synagogues and speculate about their intent and significance in late antique Jewish cultures. I seek to highlight compositional and art historical elements of the mosaics not often addressed in modern scholarship independent of comparisons to contemporary Greco-Roman and Christian art and decoration in hopes to invite new speculation in broader scholarship.

Dura-Europos

The synagogue at Dura-Europos, located in Syria, is the earliest known surviving synagogue.[5] Additionally, it contains by far the most extensive and elaborate figurative decoration of any known late antique synagogue or any other contemporary structure in Dura.[6] Though the town was attacked and ultimately abandoned c. 256-257 CE, local efforts to defend Dura fortuitously preserved approximately 60 percent of the synagogue's decoration. Detailed frescoes depicting several biblical narratives and important Jewish

[4] Robin M. Jensen, "Early Christian Visual Art as Biblical Interpretation," *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, May 16, 2019, 315–27.; "The Dura Europas Synagogue, Early-Christian Art, and Religious Life in Dura Europas," in *Jews, Christians and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction during the Greco-Roman Period*, ed. Steven Fine, Baltimore Studies in the History of Judaism (Routledge, 2005).; "The Binding or Sacrifice of Isaac: How Jews and Christians See Differently," *Biblical Archaeology Society* (blog), September 7, 2018, https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/bible-interpretation/binding-sacrifice-isaac/.

[5] A building discovered in Delos, Greece, possibly dating between 150 and 128 BCE, is sometimes claimed as the oldest surviving synagogue, though this is highly disputed as there is no concrete physical or textual evidence to tie the building to the local Jewish/Samaritan population. For further reading on this, see L. Michael White, "The Delos Synagogue Revisited Recent Fieldwork in the Graeco-Roman Diaspora," *The Harvard Theological Review* 80, no. 2 (1987): 133–60.

[6] Carl H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, Augmented ed., vol. 8, Excavations at Dura-Europos; Final Report 8, Pt. 1 (New York: Ktav PubHouse, 1979), 39.

figures covered almost the entirety of all four walls of the main assembly room (Figure 1). Painted clay tiles line the ceiling, depicting various subjects, including flora and fauna, astrological symbols, and personifications of vegetation.[7] Also present are a diverse collection of dedicatory and explanatory inscriptions and graffiti in Aramaic, Greek, Middle Persian, and Parthian, reflecting the eclectic nature of Duran society.

The earliest version of the synagogue was a small converted house, able to service a modest Jewish population (Figure 2.1). The structure discovered by excavators was the second iteration of the building which was greatly expanded c. 244-245 CE to accommodate a significantly larger and more strongly established community. The later synagogue was a spacious complex (Figure 2.2). It included a centrally located open courtyard and the main assembly room. Attached to the courtyard was a structure with nine ancillary chambers and a hallway serving as entrance to the entire complex. Access to the assembly room led from the courtyard through two entrances: the primary doorway centered along the east wall, and an auxiliary doorway on the south side of the same wall. Permanent stone benches lined the perimeter of the space. The bimah, or raised platform, and Torah shrine sat directly opposite the main doors to be easily visible from the courtyard.

The decoration of the assembly room in the later synagogue was completed in two stages. The first stage saw the completion of the ceiling tiles, the Torah shrine, and a few simpler wall frescoes. The second stage, completed after the dedication of the new building, painted over the previous wall frescoes with the elaborate figurative and narrative scenes surviving today.

[7] Kraeling, 41-2. It is unclear who is meant to be represented on the ceiling tiles. Some scholars have identified the figures as Demeter-Persephone, though this identification is disputed.

Little remains of the east wall's decorative scheme. A much greater proportion of frescoes survived on the north and south walls, and the frescoes surrounding the Torah shrine on the west wall were fortunately found largely unscathed. Tanakhic figures and narratives, such as the triumph of Mordecai and Esther, Moses and the Burning Bush, and the Consecration of the Temple with Aaron adorn the large space surrounding the Torah shrine. However, arguably the most intriguing frescoed scene is found not on the walls, but directly on the Torah shrine (Figures 3.1 and 3.2).

From right to left,[8] the panel on the arch of the shrine depicts the Akedah's climactic scene in which divine intervention stops Abraham from killing his son at the last moment; an architectural façade generally identified as the Jerusalem Temple;[9] and Jewish symbols directly associated with Temple praxis, specifically, the menorah and the lulav and etrog, a closed palm frond and Levantine citron respectively.[10] The façade and symbols were largely well-known iconography customarily seen in Jewish spaces by Late Antiquity. Similarly, figurative and iconographic representations of the Akedah have been found on small objects, burial sites and catacombs, and several Christian buildings in addition to the three synagogues (Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3). No single iconographic element is universally found

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[8] Kessler, in his essay, somewhat quixotically claims a left-to-right reading of the full panel, stating, "the eye moves from left to right, focusing first on the menorah, the palm branch (*lulav*) and citron (*etrog*)." (p. 76) While this directional reading may have some precedent in the presence of Greek inscriptions, it is far more likely that the panel was intended to be visually read from right to left, as was the case for both Aramaic and Hebrew. Moreover, I argue that, compositionally speaking, the busier and more eye-catching point of the panel is the thicket on the lower right, which would place the Akedah as experienced first, followed then by the façade and symbols, a visual journey also seen at both Sepphoris and Beit Alpha, as will be later discussed. I believe Kessler's viewing order may reflect visual sequencing resulting from a modern English cultural lens and a learned left-to-right directionality rather than the visual, linguistic, and cultural context of the Duran work itself.

[9] The architectural façade is a pervasive visual motif in Jewish settings. There is some academic debate, particularly on ambiguous examples, as to what structure is being depicted. Two main structure types are proposed: the First or Second Temple or a future Third Temple; and an iconographic representation of the Torah shrine. However, the Torah shrine in itself is meant to emulate the Tabernacle, a temporary proto-Temple structure used in the desert as mentioned in Torah. Therefore, regardless of the literal structure represented in a given façade motif, the iconographic purpose of the depiction is to represent a holy structure meant to house the Ark of the Covenant which held the words of Torah.

[10] The lulav and etrog, along with myrtle and willow are four seasonal plants still used today in rituals associated with the Jewish holiday of Sukkot.

in all iterations of the biblical narrative. Rather, the included elements largely depend on the intended practical and symbolic purpose of the depiction as well as the values of its originating culture. For instance, the narrative as portrayed on a late antique Samaritan lamp replaces the figures of Isaac and Abraham with non-figurative geometric shapes rather than depict the human form. Several late antique churches found in Madaba depict a lamb tied to a tree, distilling the Genesis narrative to its base typological symbolism, equating the attempted sacrifice of Isaac and actual sacrifice of the ram/lamb to the sacrifice of Christ.

Akedah

The Akedah is depicted somewhat awkwardly, fitting all necessary iconographic elements into a cramped, oddly-shaped space. In the center of the scene is Abraham, his back toward the viewer, large knife raised to strike. Above him and to the left is Isaac on the flaming stone altar. The Hand of God hovers outstretched above Isaac's head as if gesturing towards him. To their right is a structure commonly identified as a tent, with a figure standing in the entrance. Below Abraham is the ram tied to a tree. Several different characters have been argued as the identity of this unidentified figure, including one of Abraham's servants, Ishmael (Abraham's oldest son whose descendants become the Arab nation), Abraham himself, Isaac's wife Rebecca, or Isaac himself. However, the most widely accepted interpretation is that the figure is Sarah, Abraham's wife and Isaac's mother. This interpretation is based on a midrash, or rabbinic commentary in which Sarah is informed of the events of the Akedah, and in her grief dies suddenly.[11]

The configuration of the scene is unusual both as a biblical visual narrative and as a Duran figurative fresco. It was not unusual for artists to adjust the narrative composition of

[11] Samuel A. Berman, Midrash *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu: An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus from the Printed Version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu with an Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Pub, 1995), 147.

the Akedah to best fit limited or oddly shaped spaces (very well exemplified on the Samaritan lamp, for instance). However, versions of the entire narrative scene in other religious spaces tended to depict the events of the story along a horizontal plane (Figures 5.1 and 5.2). Though it is very possible, even probable, that the vertical configuration of the Duran composition was a result of physical limitations of the compositional space, it is undoubtedly a unique and creative solution to this issue.

Artistic Style and Figurative Posteriality

While the vertical composition of the Akedah narrative may have some precedent in an odd use of space, in no other contemporary version of the narrative are the figures depicted facing away from the viewer. This figurative 'posteriality'[12] was not only unusual for the subject, but it was also uncharacteristic of the artistic style found in the other frescoes within the Duran synagogue space as well as surrounding religious buildings. The town of Dura-Europos as a whole shared a visual style that traversed the ethnic and religious borders of the many different communities residing there. Likely one pivotal factor was the shared use of a single artist or workshop. The Mithraeum (Figure 6.1), the Temple of Bel (Figure 6.2), and the Synagogue (Figure 6.3) were all renovated and redecorated within five or so years of each other. Comparing the figurative frescoes at all three locations reveals a near identical style, if not subject matter. I would therefore posit that the three communities used not only the same workshop, but also the same workers and craftsmen.

Additionally, Dura straddled the border of several large empires from its position along the middle Euphrates. Artistic influence from Rome to the west and Parthia and

[12] I am using the term '*posteriality'* in opposition to figurative frontality for lack of a better descriptor of a figure facing directly away from the viewer.

Persia to the east coalesced into a visual style unique to the settlements of the area.[13] One feature of this singular style was a positional frontality in which the torso is rendered straight on and the face is visible regardless of the figure's spatial orientation within the scene. Such positional frontality is found throughout Dura in sculpture and fresco alike (Figures 7.1 and 7.2). In addition to the lack of visual precedent of figurative posteriality in visual Akedah narratives, there are to my knowledge no correlating exegetical texts that establish direct precedent to this visual motif. Furthermore, a character's positional orientation is defined by a fixed viewpoint in a static, two-dimensional scene; Abraham is facing away from the viewer only because the viewer cannot witness the scene from a different angle.[14] It is therefore noteworthy that the figures within the Akedah scene are depicted in such an antithetical manner, and thus probable that this visual element was a deliberate design choice, though whose choice it was remains unclear.[15] However, I propose three potential interpretations behind the compositional choice:

Dramatic Storytelling Device

One possibility is that Abraham is not facing away from the viewer per se, but rather facing toward Isaac on the altar, the Hand of God, the figure in the corner structure, or any combination of all three as an element of two-dimensional visual storytelling. Further, Edward Kessler argues that the ram's presence at the bottom of the composition, below – or as such, behind – Abraham may be a "visual midrash", or form of visual exegetical

[13] Lucinda Dirven, "The Problem with Parthian Art at Dura," in *Religion, Society and Culture at Dura-Europos*, ed. Ted Kaizer, Yale Classical Studies; v. 38 (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 68-88.
[14] An interesting contrast to the character orientation via fixed viewpoint can be seen in the 1978 sculpture *Abraham and Isaac (In Memory of May 4, 1970, Kent State University)* by Jewish artist George Segal, in which Isaac and Abraham are portrayed in the moment before the sacrificial act. The sculpture is meant to be viewed in the round. The dynamic nature of the viewpoint changes the viewer's experience of the two characters and is a good contrast to the static nature of the Dura pane.
[15] Four feasible possibilities come to mind; the artist(s), the administration, the congregation, or the individual donor named in a dedicatory inscription carved in the bottom left corner of the panel.

commentary, to emphasize the ram's importance.[16] He argues that this exegetical emphasis on the ram tied to the tree was counter to Rabbinic interpretation, writing, "…the Rabbis, for the most part, do not emphasize the role of the ram… the prominent location and size of the ram in the synagogue at Dura-Europos emphasizes its importance to the narrative. The Rabbis did not aggrandize the animal's role as they did with Isaac's."[17] However, I am not entirely convinced that the size and placement of the ram was specifically to emphasize its importance in the narrative. Regardless of the symbolic meaning behind the size of the ram, Abraham's position turned away from the animal certainly contributes to the narrative drama of the scene, as his attention is fully focused on the sacrifice of his son and the moment of divine intervention. The viewer, knowing the events of the narrative, anticipates the moment Abraham will turn to see the sacrificial replacement for his son.

Intimacy and Empathy

The figures in the Akedah scene may be turned away from the audience as an invitation into the narrative space, to contemplate the scene as witness to, or in the place of Abraham and Isaac.[18] Rather than depicting facial expressions to declare a particular emotionality meant to be generally understood by the congregation, the faces are turned away, creating a blank canvas on which the viewer can imagine or project some personal emotionality. It is also possible that the invisibility of facial expressions to the viewer was meant to signal extreme emotion, a visual trope known to have been utilized in ancient Greek and Roman painting. Several famous Roman writers and historians, including Cicero, Valerius Maximus, Pliny the Elder, and Quintilian all commented on the painting

[16] Kessler, "Art Leading the Story," 77.
[17] Kessler, 77.
[18] Because the identity of the third figure is unknown and contested, I will only focus on the relationship between the viewer and Abraham and Isaac as the essential figures of the narrative.

The Sacrifice of Iphigenia by 4th century BCE painter Timanthes of Cythnus (Figure 8). In the myth, Agamemnon is forced to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia in order to turn the tides of the Trojan War. To portray the overwhelming grief of Agamemnon, particularly in comparison to his other companions, Timanthes covered his face with a veil, leaving the viewer with the responsibility of inferring Agamemnon's agony.[19]

Moreover, the characters' posteriality and lack of defined emotion opens space for the personal context of the individual. Biblical stories were not experienced in isolation, but rather were the foundation of an extensive culture of theatrical religious and poetic interpretation.[20] A congregation would be exposed not only to the original Tanakhic Hebrew, but also vernacular translation (Targum), homilies and sermons, liturgical prayer, and possibly other poetic compositions, all of which shaped personal understandings and connections to the foundational biblical narratives. It is possible, then, that the near universal visual iconography of the Akedah scene at Dura (i.e. the knife, the altar, the Hand of God, etc.) acted as the visual narrative foundation, and the back-facing orientation of the characters actively encouraged personal and creative interpretation of, and connection to the original story and accompanying literature.

Detachment from the Sacred

Conversely, the decision to face Abraham away from the congregation may have been a point of distinction from the congregation's non-Jewish Duran neighbors. The function and interaction of art and audience in other religious spaces (e.g. Christian churches and Roman temples) sometimes included a spiritual engagement between the

[19] Hérica Valladares, "Painting, Poetry, and the Invention of Tenderness in the Early Roman Empire," Cambridge Core (Cambridge University Press, November 2020), 149-50.
[20] Laura S. Lieber, "Setting the Stage: The Theatricality of Jewish Aramaic Poetry from Late Antiquity," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 104, no. 4 (2014): 537–72.

worshipper and the depicted worshipped figure, if not actively worshipping the image in place of the sacred figure.[21] In some contemporary Christian practices, byzantine icons depicting sacred figures like the Virgin Mary or various saints were seen as intermediaries allowing the viewer to communicate directly with the depicted figures. [22] This practice was rooted in the Roman lararium, a household shrine on which images of ancestors were placed for the purposes of devotion and veneration. While these practices were more often observed in private settings rather than a public religious space, it is possible that some form of these views were known in Dura and may have motivated the creation of a layer of emotional separation from the sacred within the synagogue setting.

Nevertheless, the simple fact that this visual element is out of the norm by its nature speaks to a deliberateness on behalf of some combination of the congregation and the artists. This point is furthered by the room's two-stage decoration. The second stage of decoration, as previously stated, covered simpler wall frescoes with the extensive decoration known today (Figures 9.1 and 9.2). It is significant that the Akedah panel from the first stage of decoration was kept untouched and unaffected by the compelling force behind the redecoration of what was then a still very new building. Given the vast extent of the second stage additions, I suggest that the choice to preserve the Akedah panel was just that: an active choice. The reason behind Abraham's posteriality from the first stage or the universal frontality of the second stage of frescoes, while together interesting and puzzling, does not negate the design element as an extension of the community's identities as simultaneously a

[21] Katherine Marsengill, "Panel Paintings and Early Christian Icons," in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, ed. Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison, 1st ed. (Milton: Routledge, 2018), 191–207.
[22] Classifying this practice as idol worship is fraught even today, as the practice is still present in some forms of Catholicism. It is, in fact, so fraught that it became one of the foundational issues behind the Protestant Reformation and subsequent Catholic Counter-Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries CE.

Jewish community separate from their non-Jewish Duran neighbors, and a part of the wider society of Dura-Europos exclusive to their town alone.

Conclusions

The Jewish community of Dura-Europos was no doubt influenced by both the idiosyncrasies of local life and artistic culture, as well as broader Levantine visual customs and motifs. The extensive use of frescoed narratives and decorations adorning the walls is not seen in any other late antique synagogue, but is consistent with other Duran religious buildings. The consistent depiction of human form across several local buildings, including the majority of the synagogue, implies the shared use of a single artist or workshop, a unique localized visual style, or some combination thereof. Yet, the decision to depict the Akedah characters as facing away from the viewer, and further still to preserve this scene in the face of major changes to the room's artistic program indicates a deliberate non-conformity to both local artistic style and broader visual motifs in Akedah narrative scenes.

Sepphoris

A prominent center of both Jewish and Roman cultures, the city of Sepphoris housed a variety of independent Jewish communities. Though eighteen separate synagogues are mentioned in the written record, only one has been fully excavated and preserved.[23] In the early 20th century, another synagogue was discovered in the greater area of Sepphoris. It was partially excavated, but ultimately abandoned and seemingly forgotten by researchers. To date, extraordinarily little has been written, or at least published on this early find. Additionally, mosaic fragments, generally identified as the floor of a synagogue, were

[23] Zeev Weiss, *The Sepphoris Synagogue: Deciphering an Ancient Message through Its Archaeological and Socio-Historical Contexts* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society: Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2005), 2-3.

discovered scattered on a hill in Sepphoris, unfortunately removed from their geographical context.

The synagogue was built atop existing Roman-period structures, leading to its unusual layout.[24] The building is uncommonly long and narrow (Figure 10). It consists of a narthex and the main assembly room. A single colonnade spans the right side of the room, separating a single side aisle. The synagogue's asymmetrical layout was far from typical, but made good use of its odd space. Rather than the more commonly utilized basilical feature of an apse, the space only contains a bimah in the back corner of the assembly room, where the Torah shrine was located.

Both the narthex (Figure 11.1) and main room (Figure 11.2) featured mosaic carpeting, though only fragments remain of the former. The side aisle features a geometric pattern of intersecting circles. Inside the circles are Aramaic dedicatory inscriptions naming the donor(s) who funded each section. Smaller mosaic carpets span the areas between the columns, also featuring geometric patterning and Aramaic dedicatory inscriptions. By far the most remarkable – and luckily most well-preserved – is the elaborate figurative mosaic spanning the central nave. Divided into seven separate registers, the mosaic features three biblical narratives, the zodiac, and several recognizable Jewish symbols associated with Temple-related religious practice (Figure 12).

Register Seven: Sarah and Abraham

The register closest to the entrance – labeled in Figure 12 as register seven – is heavily damaged (Figure 13). However, from the surviving iconography, it is apparent that the panel depicts the biblical account of Genesis 18:1-16, in which three angels visit

[24] Weiss, 8, 34.

Abraham and Sarah to tell them of Sarah's imminent pregnancy with their son Isaac, sometimes referred to as the Hospitality of Abraham predominantly in Christian settings.[25] At the top of the narrative composition are the remains of a Greek dedicatory inscription.

Register Six: The Akedah

Directly above, in register six is the Akedah scene (Figure 14). The register is segmented into two panels which depict Abraham and Isaac in the climactic narrative moment on the right and two men with an ass on the left, representing the two young servants and ass Abraham took along the journey to Moriah from the original biblical text. Depressingly little survives of the right panel: the ram's head is still intact and tied to a tree on the left of the composition, and in the bottom left corner are two pairs of shoes, one large and one small. From this detail, it is highly probable that Isaac in this depiction was portrayed as a young boy, as is also likely the case at Dura and Beit Alpha. This was a common visual exegetical feature which seemed to counter some rabbinic interpretations of the chapter, which identify Isaac as an adult (37 years is often given as his age) and a consenting party in the narrative.[26] Few remnants of the Greek dedicatory inscription are decipherable, and the names of the donors are lost. The left panel sustained far less damage and also includes a Greek dedicatory inscription naming the donor.

Register Five: The Zodiac

The fifth register is by far the largest in the design, depicting the zodiac and related imagery (Figure 15). The zodiac was a generally common visual motif among communities under the Roman Empire, regardless of religious denomination. Astrological imagery was

[25] Weiss, 156.
[26] Bereshit Rabbah 56:8.

used in Greco-Roman buildings, Christian churches, and Jewish synagogues alike, due in part to the use of shared artist workshops and pattern books available throughout the Empire.[27] Several synagogues displayed elaborate zodiacal calendars following the same general design, including Sepphoris and Beit Alpha, as well as Hammat Tiberias, Huseifa, and Na'aran (Figure 16).

At the center of the panel is the sun god Helios, at Sepphoris represented as a non-figurative sun disk emanating rays of light in a chariot pulled by four horses. Bordering the Helios tondo is a Greek dedicatory inscription. Surrounding Helios are the twelve zodiac signs. Hebrew inscriptions identify the sign along with its corresponding month on the Hebrew calendar. In the corners of the panel are the personified female figures of the four seasons surrounded by related seasonal iconography and labeled with their corresponding solstice or equinox in both Hebrew and Greek.

Registers Four and Three: The Consecration of Aaron and the Daily Sacrifice

The fourth and third registers are frequently grouped together as one connected scene (Figures 17.1 and 17.2). Register three is a single panel which depicts Aaron performing the priestly sacrifices at the Tabernacle from Exodus 29. The composition includes a water basin to the right, followed by a large altar representing the Tabernacle in the center, and finally a lamb, bull, and the surviving outline of the figure of Aaron on the left, identified by his Hebrew name אהרן (*Aharon*). Above the lamb is the phrase את הכבס אחד (*the one lamb*), identifying the animal for ritual sacrifice.[28] The figure of Aaron is almost entirely lost, as is

[27] Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Diaspora*, Handbuch Der Orientalistik. Siebente Abteilung, Kunst Und Archäologie 1 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1998), 445-53.

[28] It is noteworthy that the phrase used to identify the lamb is one found in Torah to describe such a sacrificial animal, though it is not the same phrase used in Exodus 29 which is depicted here. Unlike Beit Alpha, where the biblical quotations are directly linked visually, narratively, and religiously to the scene, the biblical phrase does not seem to carry the same visual narrative weight at Sepphoris. However, more in depth analysis of this element is warranted.

the left side of the Tabernacle and much of the water basin. Spanning the top of the register is a Greek dedicatory inscription, also partially lost.

The left-most panel of register four is a continuation of the Consecration and daily sacrifice scene, depicting a second sacrificial lamb in the upper left, as well as a jar of oil, vessel of flour, and two trumpets, all identified with Hebrew inscriptions. At the top is another dedicatory inscription, though this time in Aramaic rather than Greek. The central and right-side panels depict a showbread table and basket of fruits respectively. Both panels included a Greek dedicatory inscription at the top of the panel, however, the Greek in the center panel was at some point partially removed and replaced with Aramaic.

Registers Two and One: Jewish Symbols, a Wreath, and Lions

The two final registers are both split into three panels (Figures 18.1 and 18.2). The central panel of register two includes the structural façade, as seen at Dura, as well as an incense shovel, a motif often used in similar panels, as will be seen at Beit Alpha. The Greek inscription is almost entirely lost. The quasi-symmetrical side panels each display a menorah, shofar, lulav and etrog,[29] what have been identified as a pair of tongs, and a Greek dedicatory inscription.

The upper part of the final register nearest the bimah is entirely destroyed. Remnants of a wreath encompassing a Greek dedicatory inscription remain in the central panel, flanked by two heraldic lions, each holding a bull's head. The visual motifs of text within a wreath and the flanking heraldic lions were used in several other late antique synagogues such as Tiberias, though the synagogue at Hammat Gader, also a 5th century structure, is the

[29] At Dura-Europos, it appears that only the lulav is depicted, but at Sepphoris, all four species including the myrtle and willow branches are depicted in detail.

only other known example of these two motifs used in conjunction with each other (Figure 19). It is also noteworthy that the dedicatory inscription at Hammat Gader is in Aramaic. Though the tops of the panels are missing, it is possible that, at least in the two side panels, dedicatory inscriptions spanned the tops of the composition.

Artistic Style

The style of decoration in the synagogue is generally consistent with mosaics found in other buildings of the city. The mosaics in the city of Sepphoris were completed over the course of several centuries, and spanned a wide range of technical skill and visual detail (Figures 20.1 and 20.2). The work found in the synagogue was neither particularly excellent nor crude and followed general stylistic patterns found in other Sepphoris buildings of similar quality. The facial features, hair styles, and representations of the body as in the Akedah panel and zodiac symbols are comparable to that found in the Nile House, a 5th century Roman building in Sepphoris (Figure 21.1). Additionally, strikingly similar geometric patterns are found in both structures (Figure 21.2). Similar to Dura-Europos, this may suggest a shared use of artist workshops throughout the large metropolis.

Compositional Arrangement

Though split into seven separate bands and a total of fourteen segmented panels, the Sepphoris mosaic layout has been classified by some scholars as an example of a 'tripartite' scheme, a popular late antique mosaic pavement arrangement found in several Levantine synagogues, including Beit Alpha as will be discussed below.[30] It has been noted that the tripartite design is very rarely seen in Christian church settings, indicating that this may

[30] Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Synagogues-Archaeology and Art: New Discoveries and Current Research*, Handbook of Oriental Studies. Section 1 The Near and Middle East 105 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013), 256-63.; Lee I. Levine, *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 267-8.

have been a design specifically implemented in Jewish settings.[31] The traditional tripartite arrangement consists of three registers, the middle of which portrays the zodiac motif, as seen in register five of the Sepphoris synagogue. The register nearest the bimah and Torah shrine often depicts the architectural façade, menorah, and some combination of other ritual objects and decorative motifs, such as an incense shovel, shofar, hanging lamp,[32] showbread table, and the lulav and etrog seen at Dura, Sepphoris, and Beit Alpha alike. The space closest to the entrance sees by far the most variation in decoration, ranging from geometric tessellations to inscriptions to vine scroll designs to figurative and narrative scenes.

It is reasonably apparent how the mosaic design at Sepphoris visually conforms to the tripartite scheme to a certain degree. The prominence of the zodiac panel visually bisects the registers above it from the ones below, and the traditional symbolic iconography is present, likely indicating an awareness of the tripartite layout as a known artistic trend in similar settings. However, the mosaic's classification as a tripartite scheme in modern scholarship is based more on one proposed thematic interpretation of the imagery rather than its degree of adherence to the three-register template. From Zeev Weiss' symbolic interpretation of the mosaic's iconography, the layout can be grouped into three major themes. He writes:

> … the angels' visit to Abraham and Sarah, and the *'Aqedah*, symbolize the promise, the zodiac expresses God's centrality in the creation, promise, and

[31] Hachlili, 263.
[32] Hachlili, 333. Goodenough identified the motif of a hanging lamp, called nivreshet in Hebrew, as Ner Tamid, or the eternal light, a flame which hangs from the Torah shrine itself. However, not all examples of this motif are depicted on the shrine, but rather hang off a menorah branch, making Goodenough's assertion doubtful.

> redemption; and the architectural façade and other symbols associated with the tabernacle and the Temple represent the future redemption.[33]

The redemption motif in particular is recurrent in the Amidah, the central prayer in Jewish liturgy, and some piyyutim, or liturgical poetry shared aloud to the congregation.[34]

Such thematic interpretations are not without their problems which complicate an easily divisible tripartite layout. Though Weiss' promise-redemption tripartite scheme can be read into the mosaics at Sepphoris and Beit Alpha, the designs of most other synagogue mosaics labeled as 'tripartite' do not follow this thematic movement. In fact, the inclusion of geometric designs and vine scroll patterns lacking any apparent Jewish symbolism or function beyond decoration appear more often than narrative scenes in this layout. Weiss' interpretation, then, becomes more of an exception, rather than the rule. What is more, Weiss himself divides the visual layout of the mosaic into not three but four religious themes. The heraldic lions of register one, he argues, represent God's power and omnipresence, a theme he labels as "verification and validation".[35]

Religious Interpretation

A more commonly recognized thematic interpretation of the Sepphoris mosaic reads visual evidence of priestly influence in the synagogue. Jewish priests, or Kohanim, were understood as direct descendants of Aaron, who in Exodus 29 is consecrated as the first priest along with his sons. The Kohanim performed rituals related to Temple praxis, including daily sacrifices and the priestly benediction. With the rise of Rabbinic Judaism in Late Antiquity, priestly tradition often stood in opposition to rabbinic interpretations of

[33] Weiss, 240.
[34] Weiss, 242-3.
[35] Weiss, 244.

Torah. Regarding the social and artistic culture of the late antique synagogue, much early 20th century scholarship often assumed significant rabbinic influence in both daily life and synagogue decorative practices.[36] However, many scholars have since pointed out discrepancies between written rabbinic thought and the archeological evidence of cultural views on figurative art and the role of the synagogue, which are further complicated by the general gap between written and archeological historical records.[37]

In approaching the visual content of the central mosaic at Sepphoris, Lee Levine, and Michael Swartz, among other scholars, note the connection between the mosaic's imagery and contemporary piyyutim written by liturgical poets, or paytanim, including the earliest known paytan, Yose ben Yose.[38] In Swartz's analysis of the Avodah piyyutim, poems written for Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, he notes the use of the rhetorical "chain of tradition" motif to establish the lineage of the priesthood from Abraham, through Aaron. Given the popularity of piyyutim in synagogues by the height of Late Antiquity, it is safe to assume that this poetry was well known to the Sepphoris community, both local to this synagogue and in the wider city culture.

The mosaic layout itself visually maps this chain of tradition by placing in mirrored parallel the figures of Aaron and Abraham in the midst of ritual sacrifice, implying an almost typological prefiguration of the obligations and influence of the priesthood. Moreover, the fortuitous preservation of the two pairs of boots in the bottom left corner of

[36] Levine, 403.
[37] Levine, 404n5. He interestingly notes a discrepancy in historical vs art historical views on the roles of rabbis in Jewish art, stating, "While many historians and other have been inclined of late to assign the rabbis a more limited role within Jewish society of Late Antiquity, art historians have generally assumed the more "traditional" approach, i.e., a close connection between the rabbinic text and the interpretation of artistic remains… A similar tension exists among scholars of Christian art as well." This type of discrepancy is what I hope my research addresses.
[38] Michael D. Swartz, "Chains of Tradition from Avot to the 'Avodah Piyutim," in *Jews, Christians, and the Roman Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 189–208.

the Akedah sacrifice panel are likely an iconographic reference to the priestly practice of removing shoes before performing certain rituals, including the priestly benediction, further linking the sacrifice in the Akedah to the sacrificial duties of the Kohanim.

It is not unusual to see the Consecration of Aaron and the Tabernacle narrative in synagogues and other Jewish settings (it is found at Dura-Europos, as previously mentioned). However, its contextual placement in relation to Abraham and the sheer amount of visual space it is allotted is unique to Sepphoris. The narrative scene and functional duties of Aaron as the first priest are explored in at the very minimum more than a full register, whereas the Akedah narrative is given what is ultimately a half register of space for narrative storytelling. I do wonder if Abraham's servants and the animal in the left-side panel were included for some purpose other than adding this narrative addition. The fact that the servants are entirely missing from Dura-Europos, and that that one of the extra figures at Beit Alpha is theoretically not a servant, but Sarah herself may point to some underlying purpose of depicting two detailed, well-dressed figures, one of whom is gesturing what looks like an apotropaic sign, in their own separate panel. I have not looked deeply into this question for this thesis, but believe exploring this idea could shed even more light on the function of the art at Sepphoris and the values of its community. By nature of priestly involvement in Temple praxis, the ritual objects in registers two and four directly relate to the role of Kohanim. Levine specifically notes the inclusion of tongs among the Temple-related symbols of register two as "unusually priestly".[39] It is unfortunate that the figures of Abraham, Isaac, and Aaron are all missing, but it is possible their poses and figurative

[39] Levine, 270.

positionality could have more greatly informed this successive line of priesthood, though this will remain completely speculative.

Given the Sepphoris mosaic's seven-registered, fourteen-paneled layout, the rarity of the promise-redemption tripartite scheme and its basis more on religious theming than compositional structure, and the strong alternative thematic interpretations of the imagery, it is not necessarily given that the mosaic should be defined as 'tripartite'. Rather, I argue that the layout of the Sepphoris mosaic is an aesthetic design unique to its synagogue and may indicate a deliberate non-conformity to known synagogue mosaic decorative practices, though as with Dura, the guiding motivations behind such decisions are up to interpretation. I offer two possible explanations for the design choice:

Use of Space

As previously mentioned, the odd architectural layout of the synagogue was likely a product of structural limitations resulting from building atop preexisting structures. It is plausible, then, that the unprecedented seven-register layout of the synagogue's central mosaic was at its base a solution to the awkwardly elongated length of the nave. Other synagogues featuring a long central nave and tripartite scheme, such as that found in Na'aran (Figure 22), stay closer to the archetypical description of the layout, extending one element to cover a larger swath of ground. On top of the design's potential liturgical implications, the addition of more diverse visual material at Sepphoris may then have been a creative method of adding decorative variety to the building's ornamentation, a functional example of extending a design or a way to include all desired elements.

Donation and Recognition

Every individual panel in not only the central mosaic but also on the side aisle and between the columns includes a dedicatory inscription recognizing the acts of donation by individual community members or families. While donor recognition inscriptions are not uncommon in late antique synagogue settings, Sepphoris contains a notably high number of them. Additionally, the dedicatory inscriptions in the central nave are very prominently included within the biblical narrative compositions which operate as a visual design element on its own, something not seen in contemporary synagogues.[40] It is worthy to note that the Dura-Europos Akedah panel does in fact include a carved Aramaic dedicatory inscription within the panel (Figure 23), though the text's placement is far less prominent and removed from the figurative and iconographic imagery.[41] It is unclear based on the excavation report if the Duran inscriptions were more prominent when first completed and rapidly faded once exposed to air upon its discovery, a common occurrence during the excavation process. Nevertheless, the inscription is isolated to the bottom left corner, framed into its own space by the menorah's base and compositionally detached from the panel's visual elements, particularly in comparison to the prominence of the Sepphoris inscriptions. Thus, it is possible that the prominent placement of the Sepphoris inscriptions within the compositional frame was a unique design choice meant to call attention to a communal importance placed on the act of donation, the public recognition and acknowledgement of such act, or a combination thereof.

[40] Hachlili, Ancient Synagogues-Archeology and Art, 534.
[41] This dedicatory inscription is completely unidentifiable in visual documentation of the Duran Torah shrine panel available online. Nor has this inscription been explored in scholarship. The only mention of this inscription I am aware of is a brief physical description and textual translation in Kraeling's final excavation report, p. 269.

What is more, the decision to further subdivide some registers into multiple panels could have been an intentional effort to create more donation opportunities or to accommodate different values of donation. For instance, according to the inscription surrounding the Helios depiction in register five, the donor funded the entirety of the zodiac register, a considerably large and detailed panel in relation to the rest of the synagogue's decoration. Compared to the relative simplicity of the register four right-hand panel depicting the fruit basket, it is possible this reflected a range in the size of synagogue donations.

Conclusions

The decorative layout and thematic imagery of the synagogue at Sepphoris tell the story of one established Jewish community within a cosmopolitan metropolis of other Jewish and non-Jewish communities alike. The artistic style is generally consistent with surrounding extant mosaics, if somewhat less polished or detailed, and the iconographic imagery on its own is common in other Jewish settings. Yet, the unusual seven-registered organization, likely priestly thematic intent, and inclusion of dedicatory inscriptions so prominently within the compositional frame are all evidence of the community's artistic independence still informed and influenced by their cultural and religious environment.

Beit Alpha

The most recent of the three synagogues, Beit Alpha was built sometime in the early to mid-6th century CE. The basilical layout of the building was popular throughout the Roman Empire (Figure 24), though little of the original structure survives today. The synagogue amounted to an open courtyard separated from the narthex of the building by a colonnade, and a main assembly room with a central nave and two side aisles also delineated by colonnades. It is likely that a split upper gallery existed above the two side

aisles, as other contemporary synagogues with two inner colonnades often included this feature, though little physical evidence remains.[42] At the back of the room was the bimah and an apse which held the Torah shrine. Stone benches carved into the walls ringed both the assembly room and the narthex.

The entirety of the synagogue's floor was fully decorated with mosaic carpets. Much of the imagery in the central nave and right side-aisle remain intact (Figure 24). In the narthex, the courtyard, and along the two side aisles, remnants of simple geometric patterns adorn the pavement. The simplicity of these carpets is contrasted by the elaborate figurative design in the center of the room. The central mosaic consists of three main registers depicting the Akedah, the zodiac, and the common Jewish symbols (Figure 25.1). They are bordered by geometric and vine scroll designs, within which are depicted various plants and animals, as well as a human figure, not entirely dissimilar to the ceiling tiles at Dura (Figure 25.2). The layout of the Beit Alpha mosaic conforms to both the compositional standard and Weiss's thematic classification of a traditional tripartite scheme. Such conformity of theme and arrangement found at Beit Alpha indicates the artists' cosmopolitan understanding of popular artistic motifs specifically used in other synagogues.

At the entrance of the nave are two dedicatory inscriptions flanked by a lion on the west side of the entryway and a bull on the east side (Figure 26). The first inscription is a communal dedication of the synagogue written in vernacular Aramaic. Given the distinguishing nature of the many individual dedicatory inscriptions from both Dura-Europos and Sepphoris, it is noteworthy that not only is the dedication at Beit Alpha

[42] Eleazar L. Sukenik, The Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha; an Account of the Excavations Conducted on Behalf of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, (Jerusalem, London: The University Press; Oxford University Press, 1932), 16-19.; Hachlili, Ancient Synagogues-Archeology and Art, 152.

confined to two inscriptions, but also that the congregation recognized contributions from the entire community. On the inscription, Sukenik writes:

> …it is obvious that donations were given by all the members of the community, with no details as to names, and a special gift by one man (or the sons of one man) named Rabbi A… It may be assumed that the people of this congregation, workers on the land, contributed from their land-produce what which provided victuals for the craftsmen, who were certainly strangers.[43]

Such a broad recognition suggests a more inward-facing, communitarian society than the previously examined communities, further underscored by the relative geographic isolation of the rural Beit Alpha community compared to the well-traveled and cosmopolitan cities of Dura-Europos and Sepphoris.

The second mosaic inscription is a recognition of the two artists written in Greek, likely the artists' native language. We are fortunate to have the names of the craftsmen included on the mosaic pavement. The Greek dedicatory inscription reads, "In honored memory of the artists who made this work well, Marianos and his son Aninas."[44] A similar Greek mosaic inscription naming these two artists was discovered in the nearby Beit She'an Synagogue, which also featured a tripartite arrangement. It is interesting that the equivalent panel to Beit Alpha's Akedah at Beit She'an was decorated with a geometric design rather than a figurative narrative scene, possibly reflecting visual trends of a Samaritan synagogue (Figure 27).[45] It is generally accepted that Marianos and Aninas were Greek-speaking Jewish craftsmen local to this general area of the Galilee.[46] They likely trained in a non-

[43] Sukenik, 46.
[44] Hachlili, 476.
[45] Hachlili, 261.
[46] Hachlili, 496.

Jewish setting and were exposed to the designs and pattern books popular at the time, bringing this knowledge with them to the smaller Galilean Jewish communities.

Akedah

The first register, closest to the assembly room's entrance, depicts the Akedah narrative (Figure 28), the visual iconography of which is largely consistent with the previous two synagogues. Though not explicitly delineated, the register generally segments into two distinct parts, somewhat similar to the Sepphoris version. To the right is the dynamic, dramatic climax of the narrative, with Abraham's attention drawn by the voice of God which in the process of placing (or flinging) a young Isaac onto the burning altar.[47] The left side is far more stagnant, portraying the two young servants and the ass Abraham took with them on the journey. As mentioned earlier, it is possible that the second figure from the left, holding the reins of the ass, is not a servant, but Sarah herself. Hannah Wortzman calls attention to the artists' use of two lines leading from the neck to the center of the chest denoting breasts in the images of Virgo and Winter, a motif which was also employed for the figure in the Akedah (Figure 29). [48] As with Dura, there is midrashic precedent for Sarah's presence during the sacrifice. Though outside the current scope of this thesis, further research into the identity and function of this ambiguous character may reveal interesting implications for the role of women in this late antique synagogue and community.

Along the top center of the Akedah panel is the Hand of God, followed below by the ram tied to a tree. The ram is unusually vertically oriented; this may have been a creative

[47] Kessler again argues that the depicted narrative moves from left to right ("…from the donkey to the ram to Isaac, from the accompanying youths to Abraham." P. 78). As with Dura, this reading simply does not track with the known linguistic, visual, and narrative culture of the community at Beit Alpha whose lingua franca was a vernacular Aramaic. This Akedah version even has Hebrew text included, by its nature drawing the eye from right to left.
[48] Hannah Wortzman, "Jewish Women in Ancient Synagogues: Archeological Reality vs. Rabbinical Legislation," *Women in Judaism* 5, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 1–17.

use of limited space or a deliberate choice by the artists to draw attention to that specific aspect of the scene.[49] Either way, the ram and tree visually bisect the panel and divide the four human figures into two separate groups. There is very little indication of setting beyond the white background, a few strewn branches, and a row of palm trees at the top of the register, separated from the rest of the panel with a thin black line.

Also included in the composition are the Hebrew names יצחק (*Yitzchak*) and אברהם (*Avraham*), identifying each character accordingly, and two direct Hebrew quotations from verses 12 and 13 of the biblical chapter, which read על תשלח (*al tishlach;* do not raise up [your hand]), spoken by an angel of God, and והנה עייל (*v'hineh ayil;* and here is a ram), which are located below the Hand of God and next to the head of the ram respectively.

Zodiac

The second register follows the same zodiac pattern seen at several other synagogues, including Sepphoris (Figure 30). At the center is the sun god Helios, represented here in full figurative form and in his chariot pulled by four horses. Surrounding Helios are the twelve zodiac signs with their names labeled in Hebrew. The signs are bordered with a braided pattern popular in Roman circles at the time, also seen at Sepphoris. The four seasons fill the remainder of the panel space in the corners, represented here as winged women surrounded by symbols of their season and labeled in Hebrew with their associated solstice or equinox.

[49] Kessler, 77-9. In this analysis of the Dura-Europos Akedah, Kessler reads the size of the ram as deliberate visual exegesis on the narrative. I am not convinced of his argument, but if there is merit, I wonder if this depiction of the ram might also express the same commentary.

Jewish Symbols

The final register contains the same Jewish symbolic imagery as the previous two synagogues (Figure 31). At the center of the composition is the architectural façade, symmetrically flanked on either side by instruments of Temple practice, including the menorah, shofar, lulav and etrog, and incense shovels. Also present are the two heraldic lions and two birds flanking the façade. On the left and right edges of the panel are highly stylized cloth hangings tied back as if opening on the panel imagery. It is possible this element was meant to mimic the opening of the Torah shrine, which often featured a cloth hanging to cover the Torah scrolls until they were brought out for use. It is noteworthy that some other depictions of the Torah shrine façade explicitly include this feature (Figure 32), though the placement of the curtains at the edges of the whole panel as if to reveal the entire scene rather than simply the scrolls is unusual.

Biblical Quotations

There is no record of the extent to which the Beit Alpha community, or at least the leaders organizing the project, contributed to the mosaic's final design. As we have seen, the majority of the central mosaic's layout and iconography conform with contemporary synagogue decorative practices, as opposed to the atypical layouts of the Dura-Europos and Sepphoris synagogue art. It is for this reason that the visual elements exclusively found at the Beit Alpha are key to understanding the idiosyncrasies which distinguish this group's identity as a Jewish community from other late antique Jewish populations throughout the Levant. The unconventional artistic style previously noted is certainly an important factor. Further still is the inclusion of direct biblical quotations within the Akedah narrative's composition.

It is not unusual to see direct quotations from Tanakh in synagogue inscriptions, nor to see Hebrew words within a figurative picture plane, as seen in the Aaron panels a Sepphoris. However, Beit Alpha is to my knowledge the only known instance in which direct narrative text is present not only within the figurative composition, but also physically arranged within the visual narrative to correspond to its textual placement in the story's sequence of events. The first quotation is arranged such that the Hand of God is gesturing toward the words spoken by the angel in the text. The second quotation is situated to the left of the ram's head, its function seemingly twofold: in keeping with the arrangement of Isaac's and Abraham's names, the quotation acts as an identifier, similar to the use of the biblical phrase *the one lamb* to identify the sacrificial animals in registers four and three of the mosaic at Sepphoris. Yet, it also visually furthers the sequential narrative, drawing attention and moving the eye to the next event in the narrative, specifically Abraham noticing the sacrificial replacement for his son.

Invitation of Engagement

There are a number of possible explanations for the presence of direct biblical text. In a similar vein to the earlier proposed intimacy as a result of the figures facing away from the viewer at Dura-Europos, Sean Leatherbury suggests in his book *Inscribing Faith in Late Antiquity* that the presence of quotations, particularly of the intervening angel, were meant to prompt viewer engagement with the religious and cultural significance of the narrative. He says:

> The dramatic placement of the inscribed speech of God invites anyone gazing upon the mosaic to read the text aloud, allowing him or her to perform a role in the retelling of a story that defines the relationship between Abraham (and thus

> the Jewish people) and God, inhabiting the tension-filled moment as a witness to the event.[50]

Such a prospect of active, empathic interaction with the synagogue imagery is undeniably compelling. Certainly, in contemporary Roman and Christian Mediterranean settings the synthesis of text and image was commonplace, as Leatherbury explains. Long inscriptions and poetry would be paired with complementary imagery, inviting the viewer to interact with the two in parallel. However, while the recitation of poetry and other liturgical works was certainly a common practice in Jewish settings, there is no known precedent for this type of visual-textual engagement in synagogues in late antique Levantine Jewish tradition, and thus, must be viewed with a skeptical eye.

Layered Explanatory Function

Alternatively, the inclusion of text in the composition may have a far more literal function in the visual narrative. The names of Isaac and Abraham float just above and to the left of their heads, as does the quotation ultimately identifying the ram. The inscription of divine speech is somewhat awkwardly placed in the space between the Hand of God above and the tree anchoring the ram below. The exclamation, in this context, may serve a simple function of identifying the Voice of God as a major character in the scene, as seen with Isaac, Abraham, and the ram. On a deeper level, the placement of the four inscriptions call attention to the four most important figures of the narrative, and thus may have also acted as a mnemonic, reminding the viewer of known textual and cultural context behind the surface reading of the Akedah as a biblical story.

[50] Sean V. Leatherbury, *Inscribing Faith in Late Antiquity: Between Reading and Seeing*, 1st ed. (Milton: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 209-10.

Conclusions

Like the other synagogues, the imagery at Beit Alpha juxtaposes widely used visual motifs and decorative practices greatly influenced by pervasive Greco-Roman visual culture and broader Levantine forms of synagogue art. Yet the artistic style itself, fortunately traceable to a single family of local artists, and the communitarian values inferable from the single Aramaic dedicatory inscription reflect a rural Jewish community less affected by both Jewish and non-Jewish surrounding cultural influence like what can be seen at Dura-Europos and Sepphoris. The unique incorporation of biblical quotations within the visual Akedah narrative may indicate a combined engagement of visual and textual storytelling to encourage some level of viewer participation within the narrative.

Summary

In this thesis, I have sought to elucidate the idiosyncratic features within the decorative layouts and biblical narrative panels from the synagogues at Dura-Europos, Sepphoris, and Beit Alpha. While exceptional compared to other late antique synagogues, the decoration at Dura-Europos is for the most part consistent with local Duran artistic trends. Likewise, the choice of religious and biblical imagery generally conforms to later trends of Levantine Jewish artistic practices within the synagogue setting. The Akedah scene is a visually and thematically centralizing point, using the narrative's dramatic climax to focus the synagogue's decorative scheme on the ark of the Torah. The panel's placement and its endurance through major decorative changes indicates the narrative's importance, and the local community's reverence for it. Yet, the undoubtedly deliberate decision to portray the characters in the Akedah scene as facing away from the viewer is vexing.

So too does the Sepphoris synagogue decoration correspond to both local artistic practices and broader Jewish visual trends of the surrounding cosmopolitan city, while also featuring design choices unique to the synagogue, which may reflect local views on the role of the priestly class in synagogue settings and specific engagement with popular piyyutim. The Akedah's underemphasized, diminutive position compared to the other narratives suggests the narrative itself is less important than the broader scheme of the mosaic design. Moreover, if it is true that the mosaic registers were broken up in a way to allow for more donor opportunities, then the fact that the actual narrative theme was given such little visual real estate reinforces the idea that the Akedah narrative itself was not given high precedence. Even still, where the story itself is not emphasized, its thematic importance undoubtedly is, indicating a sophisticated interplay of visual importance vs. thematic importance in the synagogue's decoration.

The content of the decoration at the Beit Alpha synagogue conforms most traditionally to known Jewish synagogue iconography. However, it is noteworthy that the Akedah is the only narrative portrayed in the mosaic, as opposed the other two synagogues (and other non-Jewish depictions) which juxtapose the story with other narratives and biblical imagery. The inclusion of direct biblical quotations within the Akedah narrative suggests a unique engagement of textual and visual storytelling elements. The use of these inscriptions within the narrative space, the story's visual singularity, and its positional and spatial emphasis within the design, indicates that the narrative was central to, and held reverence for the community. Additionally, the synagogue's imagery reflects a comparatively more narrow artistic style that can really only be attributed to the named artists, Marianos and Aninas, rather than conforming to wider regional visual aesthetics.

It is the nature of scholarly analysis of these synagogues that much will remain speculation. Here is what can be said with certainty: while artistic trends and motifs were known and transmitted throughout the Levant in Late Antiquity, visual culture of the synagogue on a micro level reflected the regional artistic traditions and localized needs and values of the immediate Jewish community as a social and religious unit. The decorative schemes of these three synagogues were sophisticated designs, utilizing the physical space and specific medium of choice to express a blended visual identity of Jewish and local traditions. What is seen in these designs are active choices. The elements of nonconformity were not flukes. Regardless of reasoning, the posteriality of Dura, the seven inscribed registers of Sepphoris, and the unprecedented artistic style and biblical quotations of Beit Alpha demonstrate an awareness of late antique Levantine artistic trends and an intentional expression of unique Jewish identity through the art of the local synagogue.

The scope of this thesis is such that I was not able to delve in much depth into several factors I identified as potentially influential to my conclusions. Deeper research into literacy trends, public accessibility to biblical and poetic recitation and translation, and the use of multilingual inscriptions in all three synagogues, some as an element of the artistic composition and others as independent of the original decorative scheme may give much greater clarity to the interplay of visual and verbal culture in localized Jewish communities of Late Antiquity. Moreover, it is also worthwhile to analyze the visual narrative structures of these late antique Levantine biblical scenes in relation to earlier and contemporary Greco-Roman trends, as this may shed more light on both how the visual narratives were meant to be experienced and interpreted by the local viewer, and how broader visual trends influenced local Jewish visual culture. Scholarship on the functions and structures of

narrative as a communication device in itself, and its use in ancient art, such as works by Roland Barthes and Jocelyn Penny Small, can introduce new facets to the study of these late antique Jewish narrative scenes.[51]

It is my hope that the work presented here may serve as a stepping stone to further, deeper art historical research into the ways in which synagogue art reflects the nuanced existence of the local Jewish community as not simply an extension of broad artistic tradition or in counterpoint to the larger culture of Christian art and art history, but as an independent entity shaped by the needs and traditions of its people. I seek, if nothing else, to open the floor for greater scholarship and dialogue on the notion of premodern consciousness of artistic style as a fundamental cultural value in late antique Jewish communities.

[51] Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. S. Heath (New York, 1977), 79–124.; Jocelyn Penny Small, "Time *in* Space: Narrative in Classical Art," *ArtB* 81 (1999), 562–575.

Image Appendix

Figure 1. Wall frescoes and the Torah shrine in the synagogue's main assembly room at Dura-Europos, reconstructed in the National Museum of Damascus, Syria.

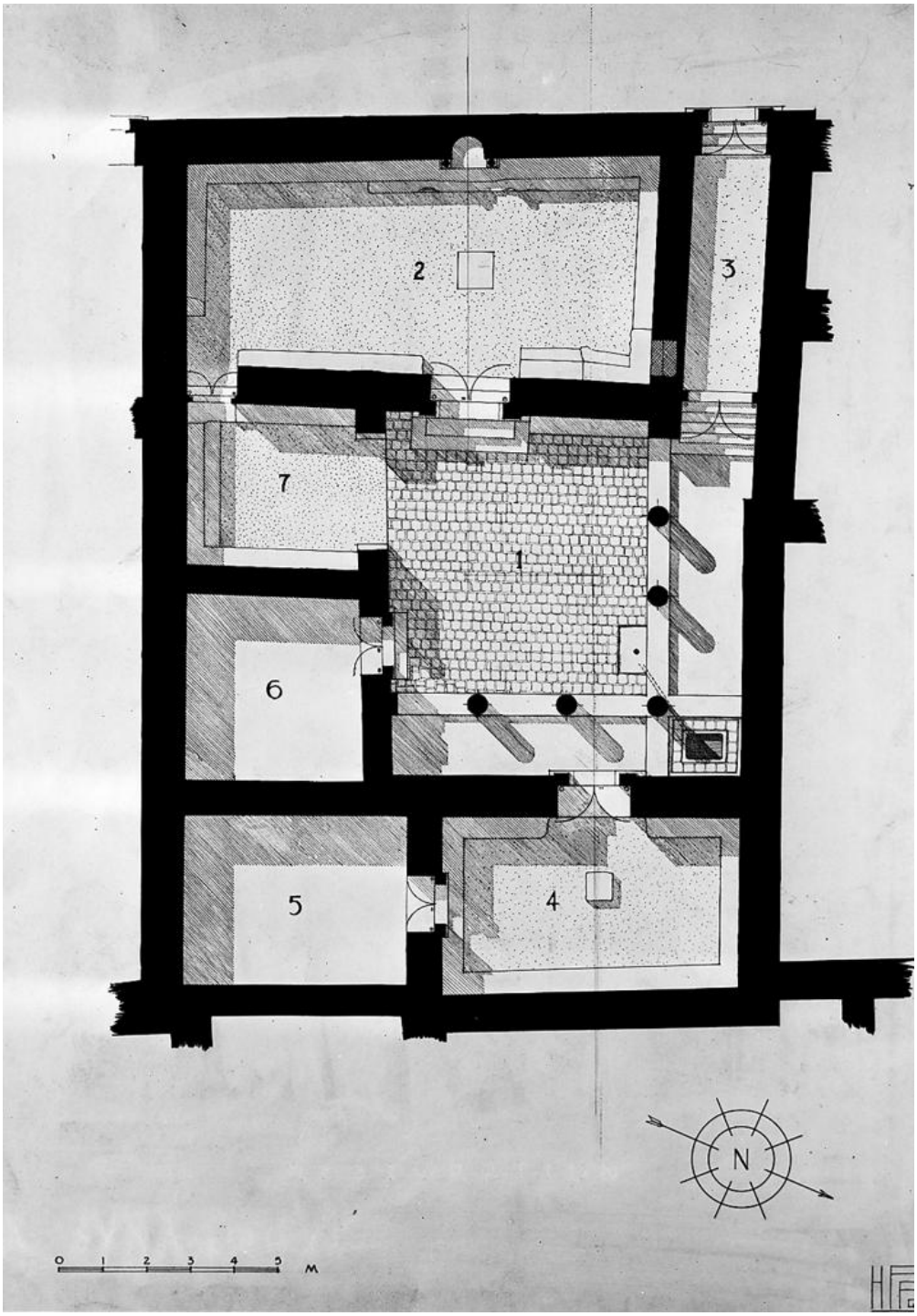


Figure 2.1. Building layout of the early synagogue at Dura-Europos, c. 150 CE.

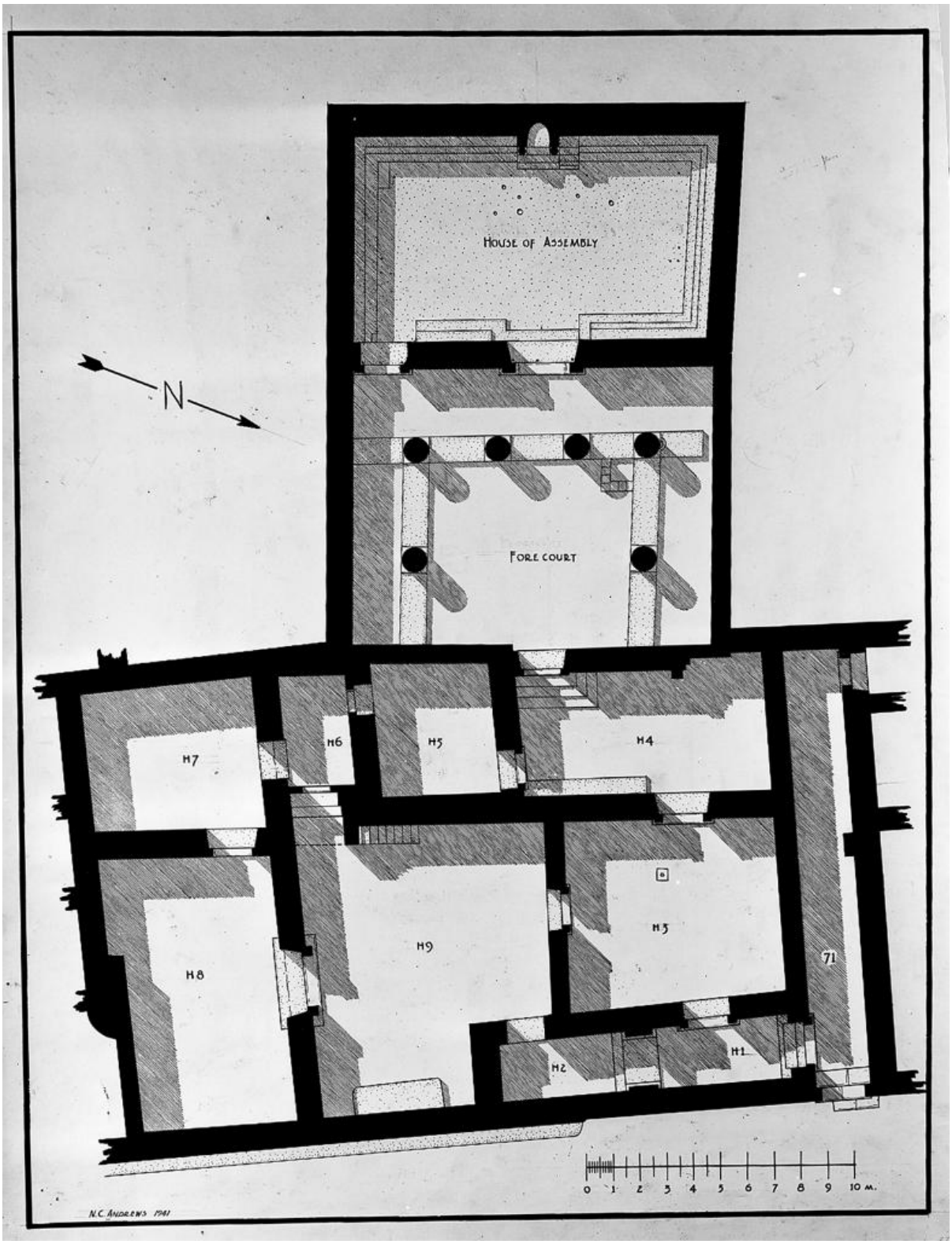


Figure 2.2. Building layout of the later synagogue at Dura-Europos, c. 244-245 CE.

Figure 3.1. Torah shrine on the western wall of Dura-Europos.

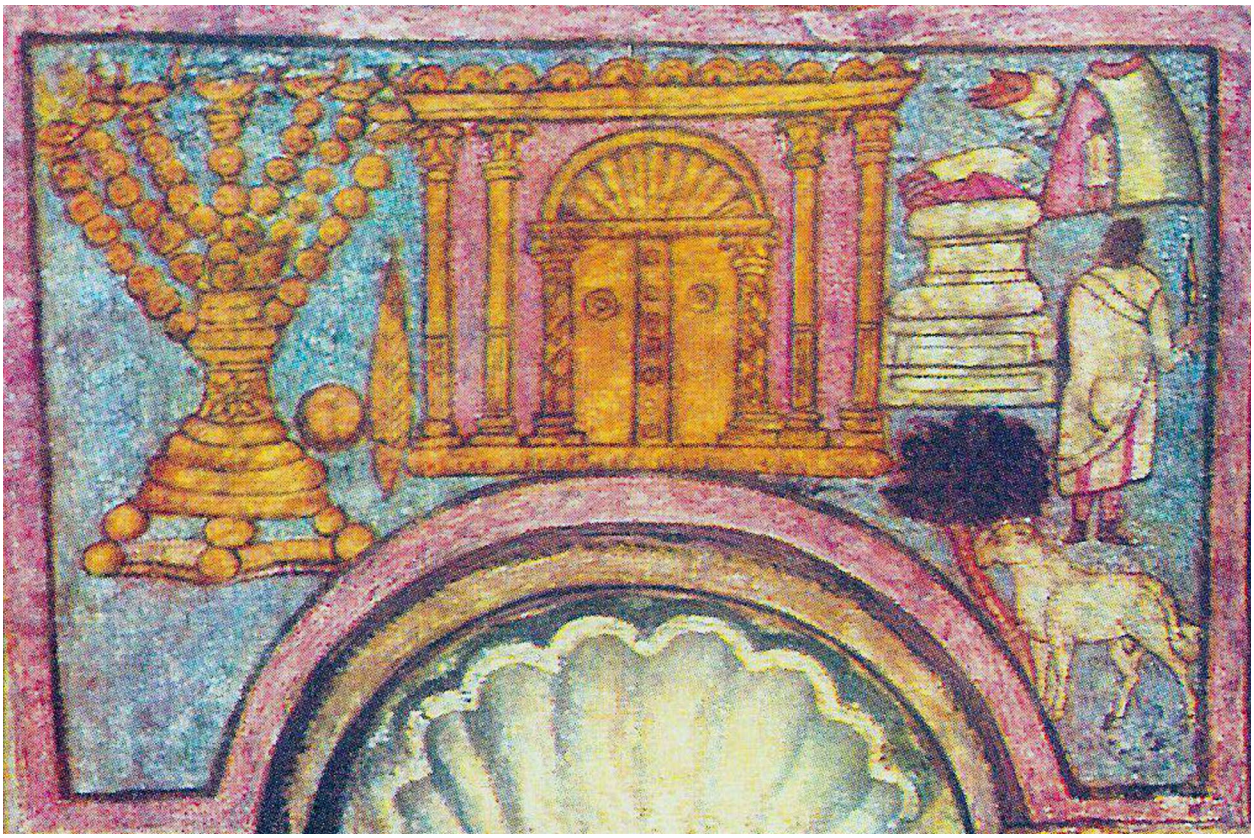


Figure 3.2. Detail of the fresco panel at the top of the Torah shrine.

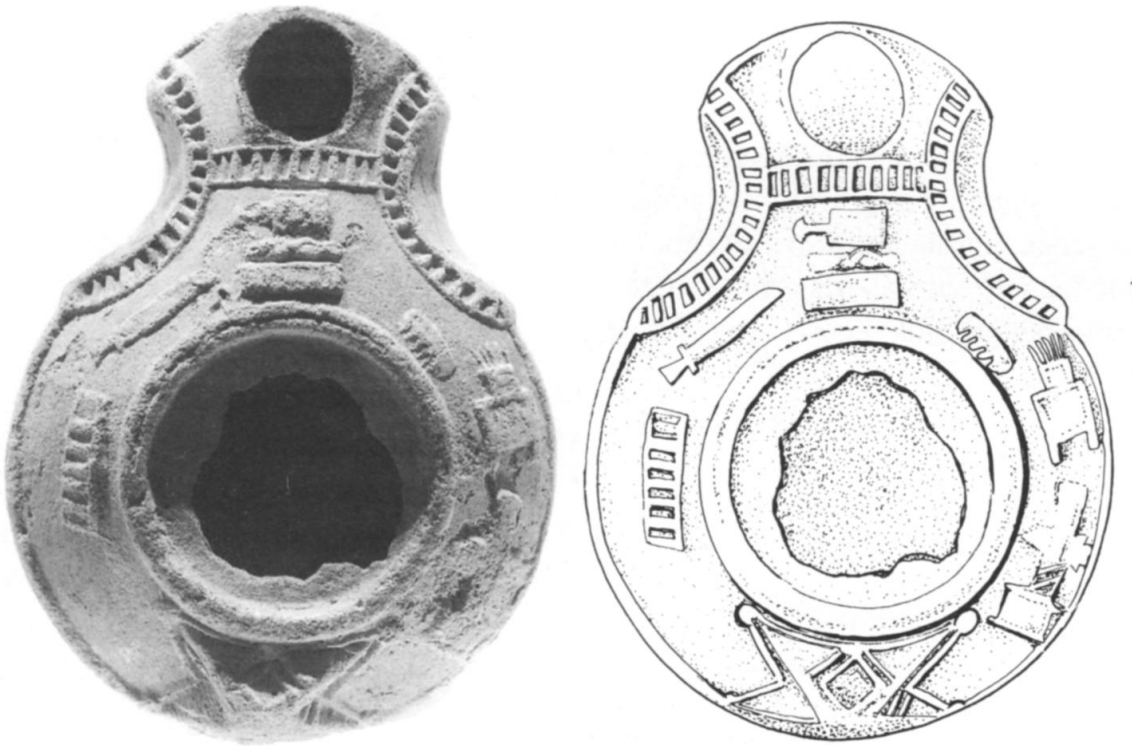


Figure 4.1. Samaritan lamp depicting the Akedah, *c.* 4th century CE.

Figure 4.2. Early Byzantine gem depicting the Akedah.

Figure 4.3. The Akedah narrative depicted in the tomb chapel of the Coptic Christian cemetery in El-Bagawat, Egypt, c. 3rd-7th centuries CE

Figure 4.4 The Binding of Isaac story simplified to the lamb tied to a tree representing the symbolic role of Isaac and the ram/lamb as a typological prefiguration of the sacrifice of Christ. Chapel of the Twal family, Madaba (left); Church of Massuh (right)

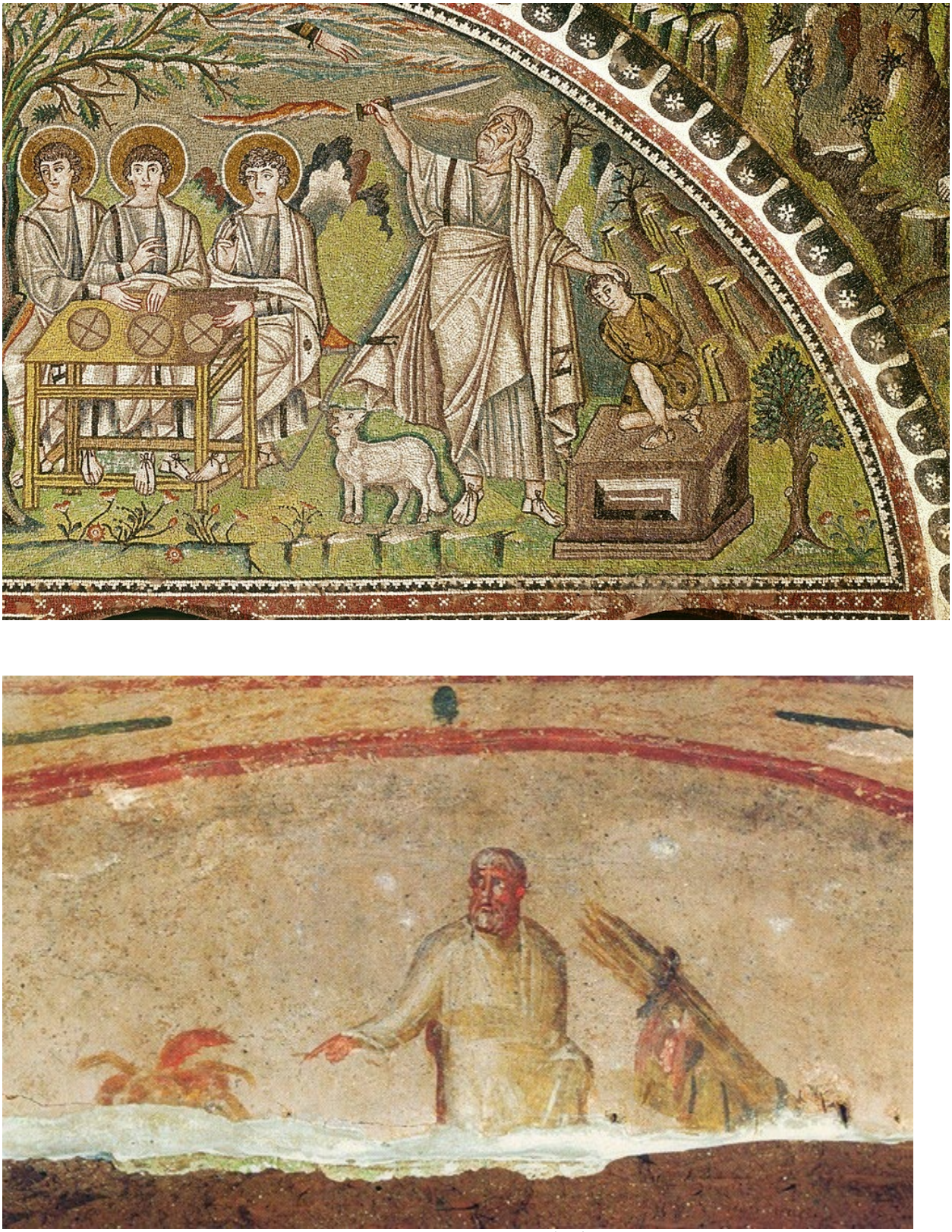


Figure 5.2. Akedah fresco, Catacomb of Pricilla, c. 2nd-4th century, Rome Italy

Figure 6.1. Frescoes on the shrine to the god Mithras in the Mithraeum at Dura-Europos, c. 240 CE, reconstructed at the Yale University Art Gallery.

Figure 6.2. Julius Terentius Performing a Sacrifice, Temple of Bel, Dura-Europos, c. 239 CE

Figure 6.3 Samuel anointing David, the synagogue at Dura-Europos

Figure 7.1. Relief from the Temple of Zeus Kyrios, Dura-Europos, c. 2nd century CE

Figure 9.1 Stage 1 wall panel design above the Torah shrine in the later synagogue, Dura-Europos.

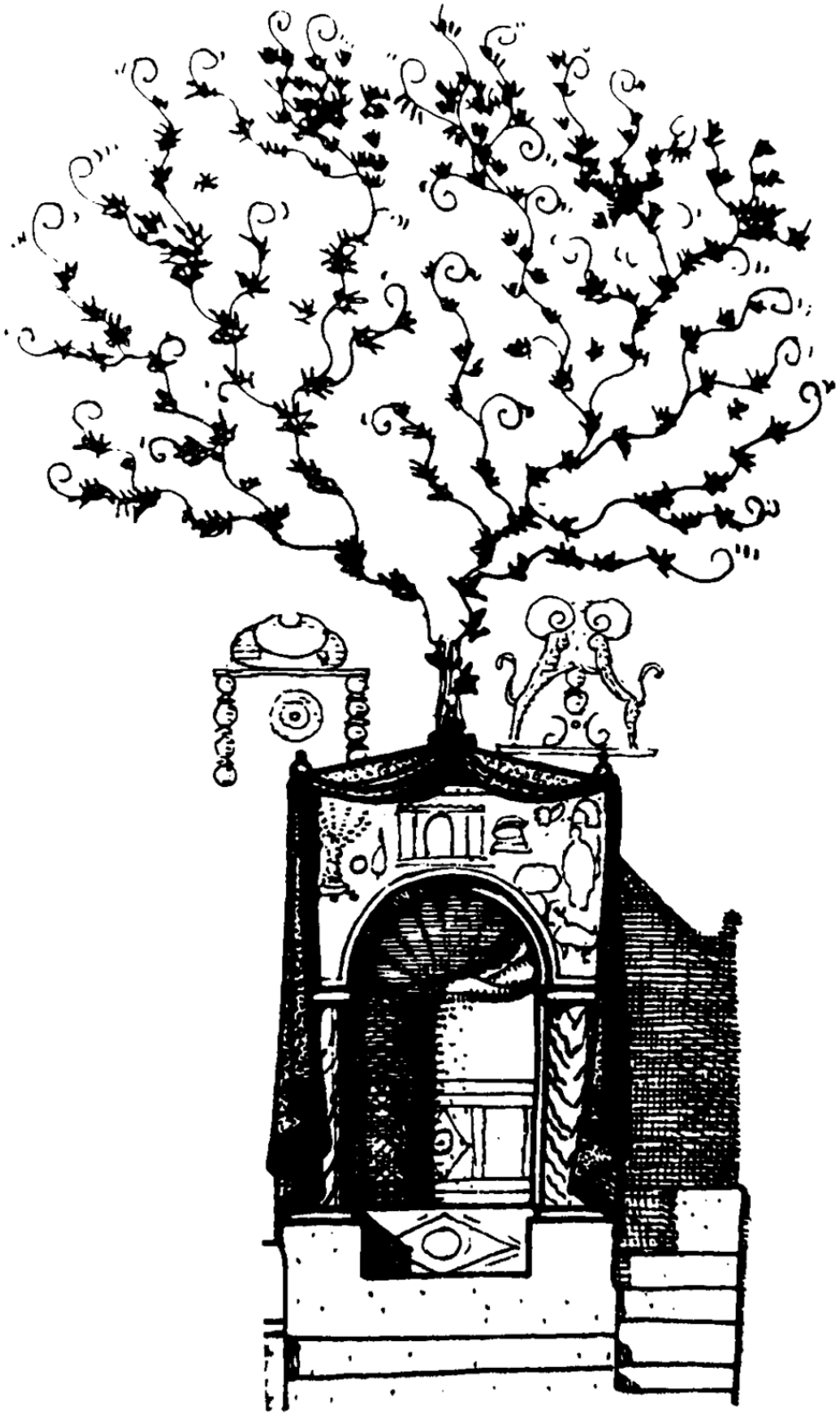


Figure 9.2. Stage 1 wall panel in relation to the Torah shrine.

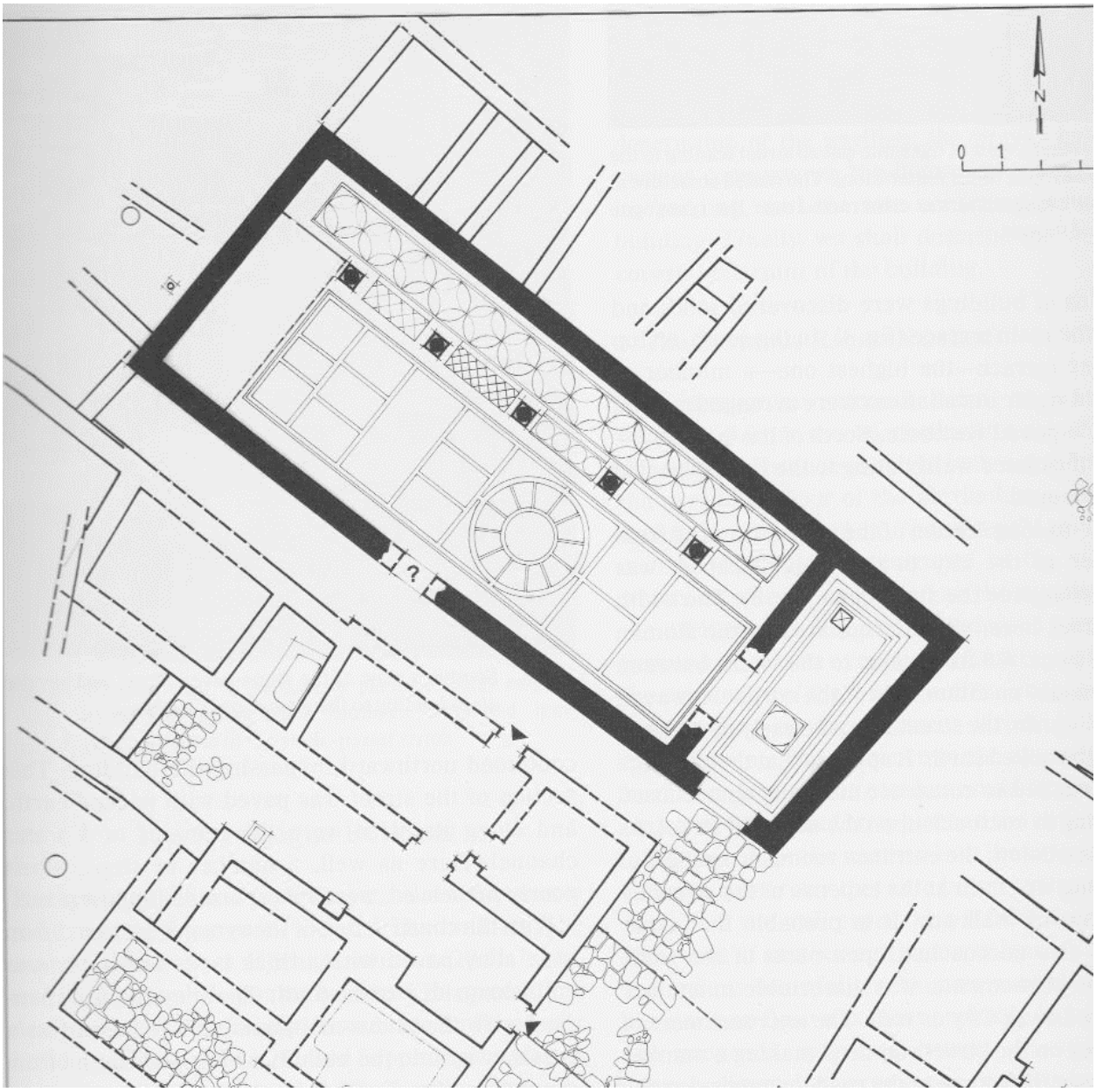


Figure 10. Layout of Sepphoris synagogue

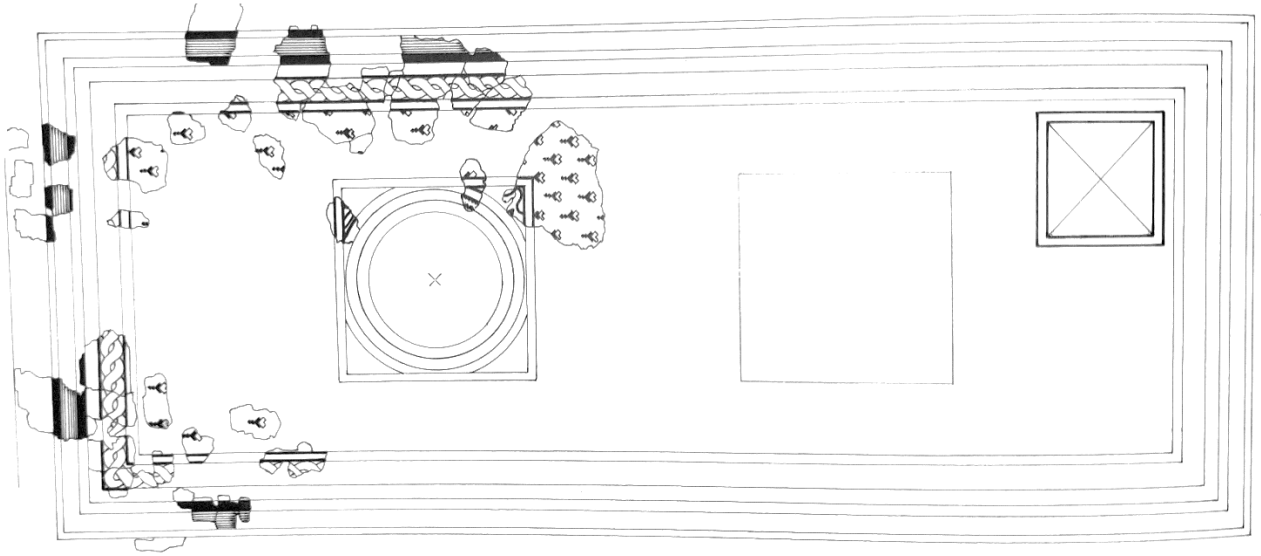


Figure 11.1. Proposed reconstruction of the Sepphoris narthex mosaic

Figure 11.2. Side aisle featuring geometric design and Aramaic dedicatory inscriptions

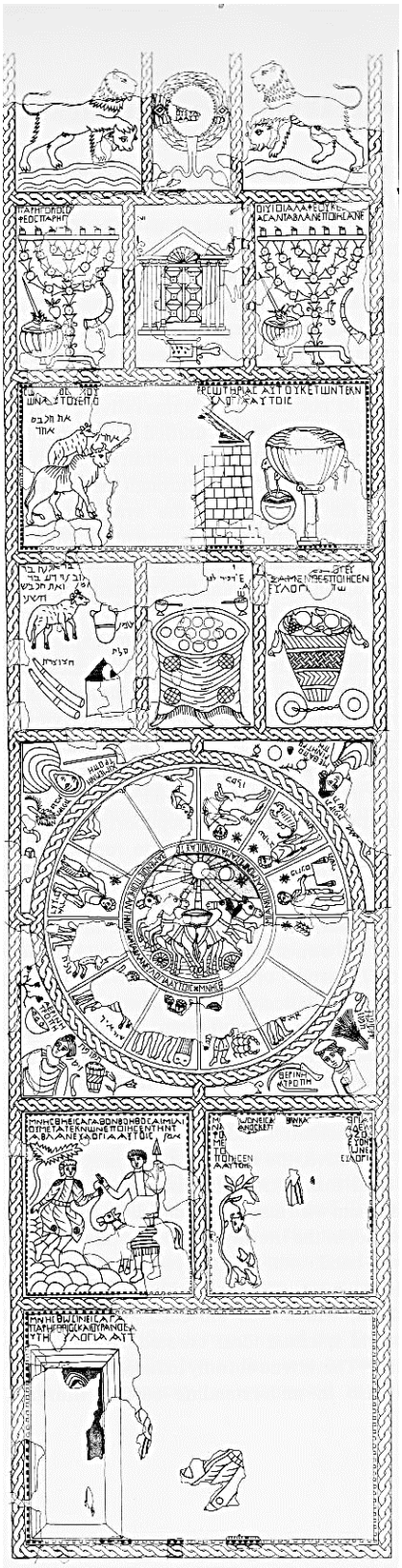


Figure 12. Sepphoris central mosaic

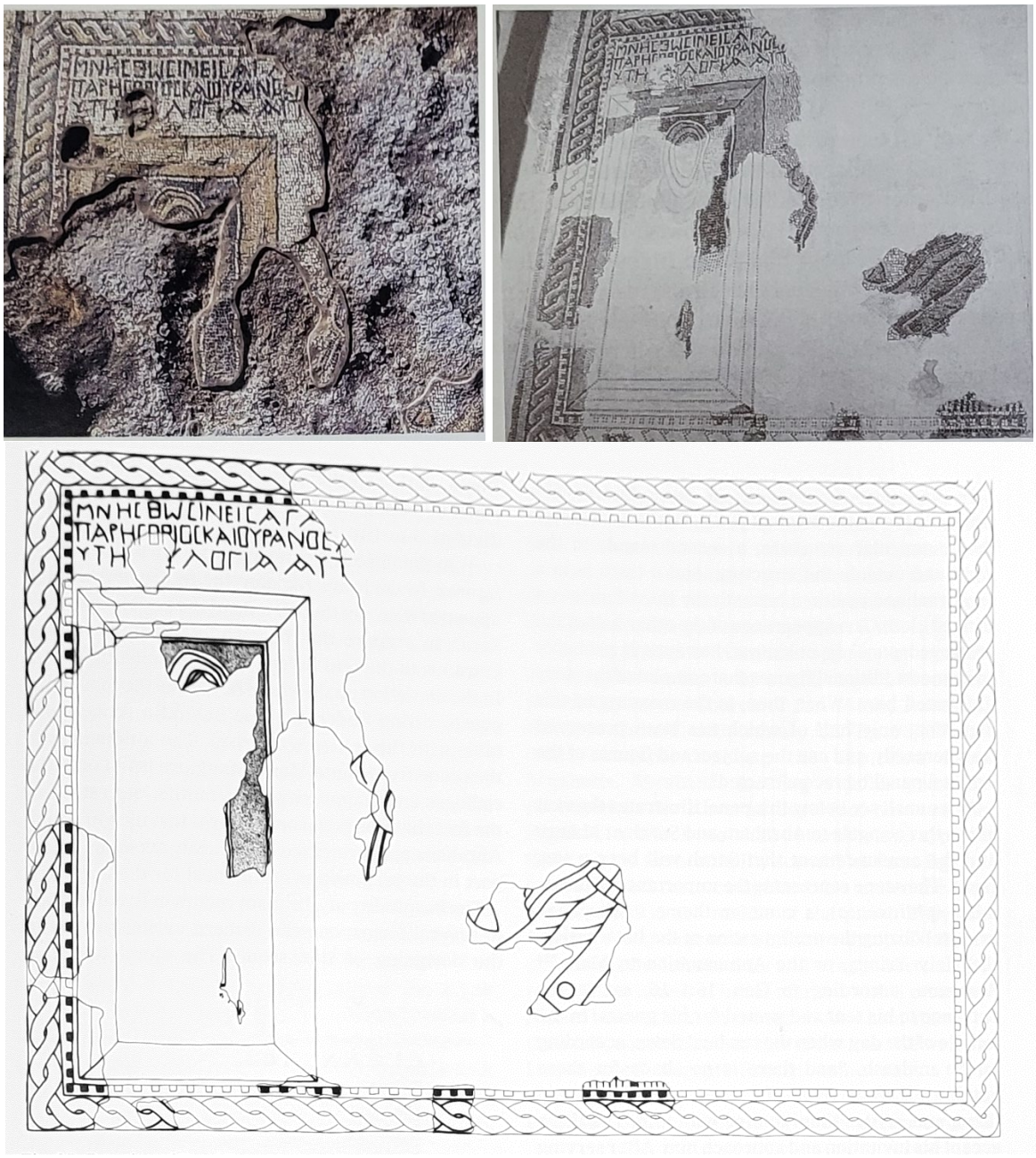


Figure 13. Register seven: three angels visiting Sarah and Abraham

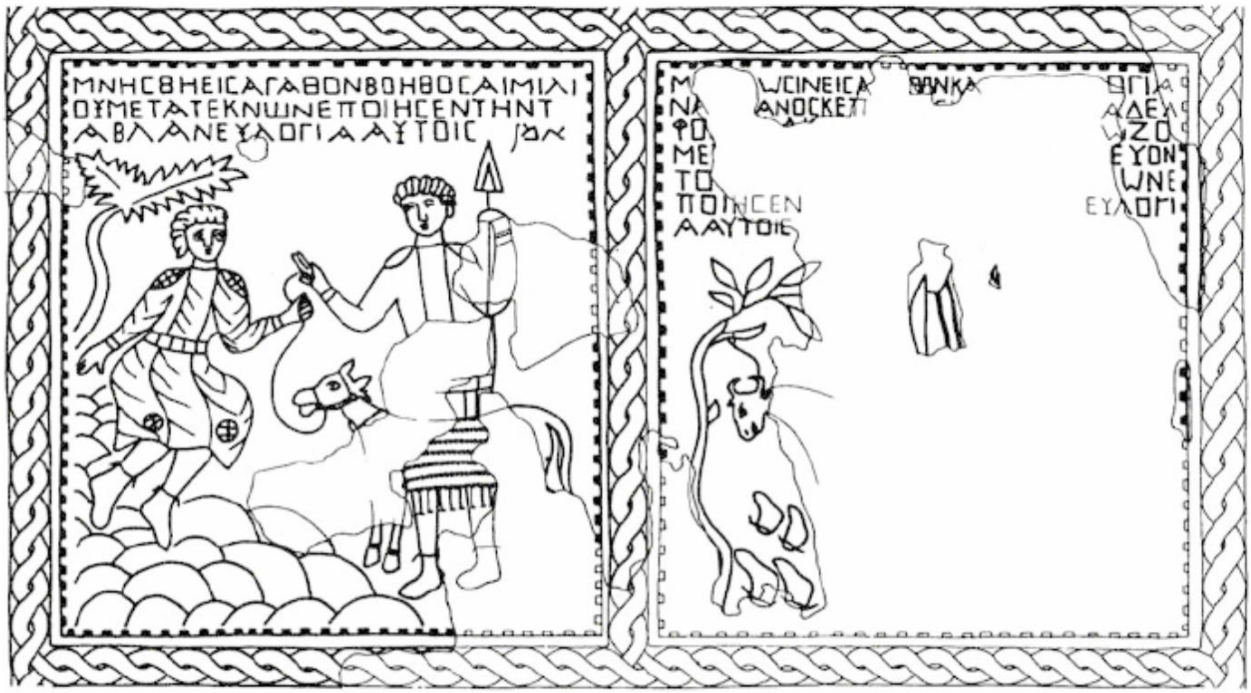
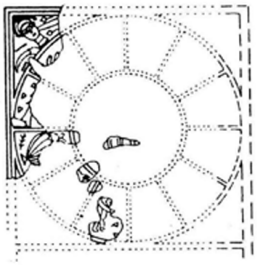

ΜΝΗCΘΗΕΙCΑΓΑΒΟΝΒΟΗΘΟCΑΙΜΙΛΙ
ΟΥΜΕΤΑΤΕΚΝΩΝΕΠΟΙΗCΕΝΤΗΝΤ
ΑΒΛΑΝΕΥΛΟΓΙΑΑΥΤΟΙC
ΑΔΕΛ
ΖΟ
ΕΥΟΝ
ΩΝΕ
ΕΥΛΟΓΙ
ΑΑΥΤΟΙC

Figure 15. Register five: the zodiac and four seastons

a

b



c

d

e

Figure 17.1. Register four: objects associated with daily sacrifice, showbread table, basket of fruit

Figure 17.2. Register three: The Consecration of Aaron at the Tabernacle

Figure 18.1. Register two: Architectural façade and Temple related ritual objects

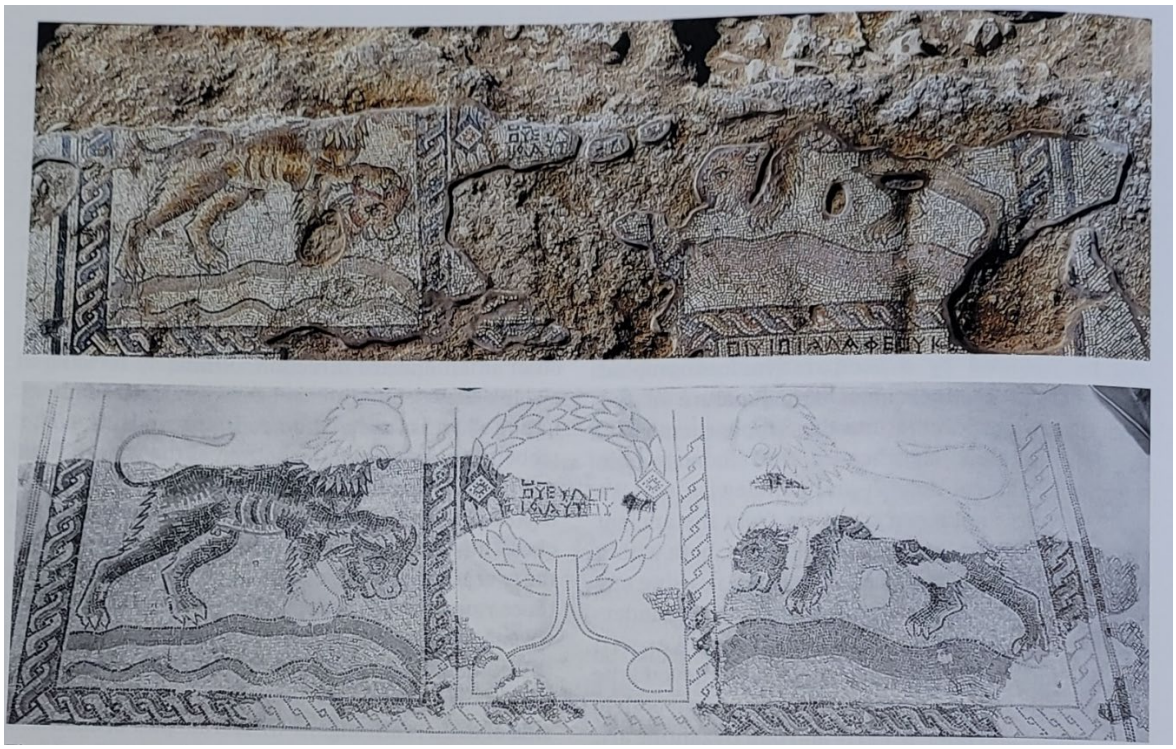
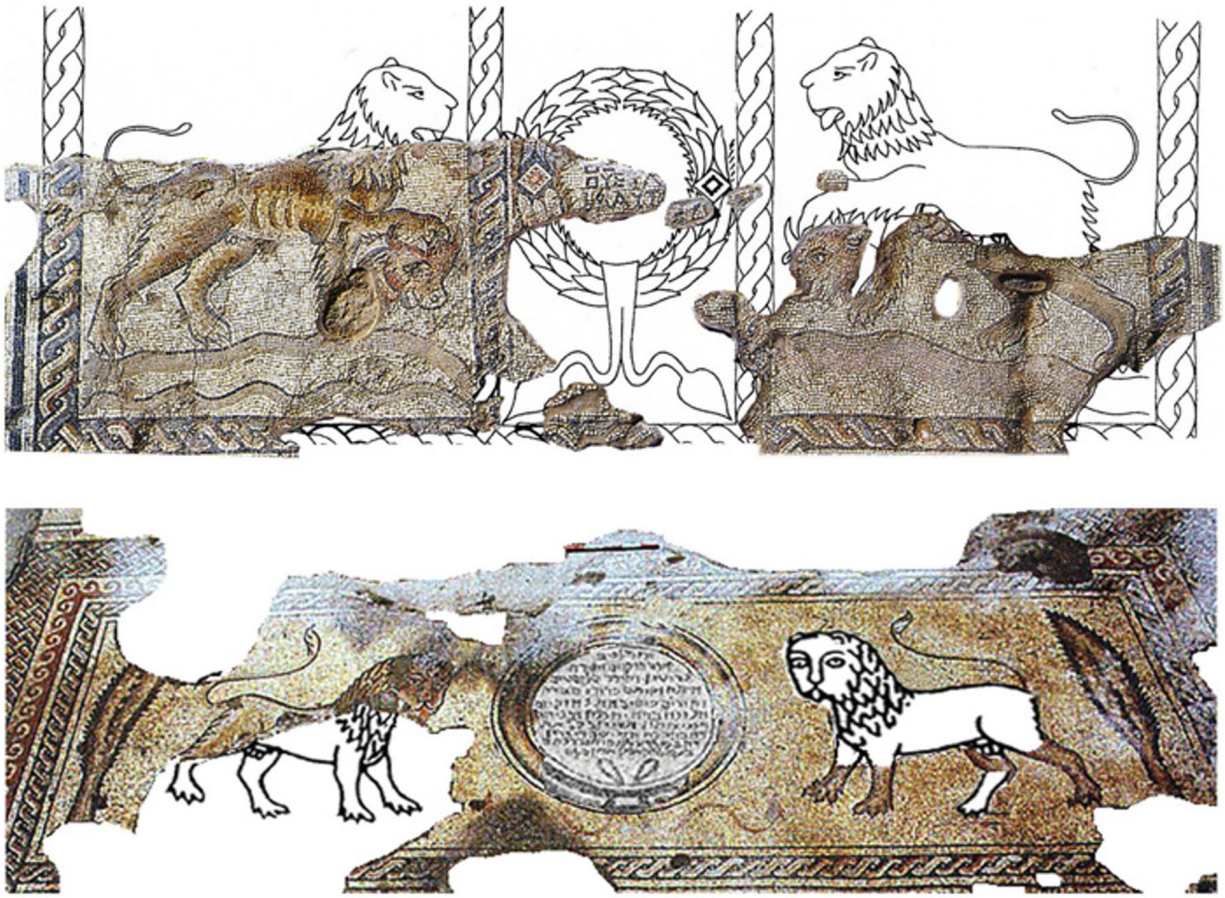


Figure 18.2. Register one: wreath and heraldic lions



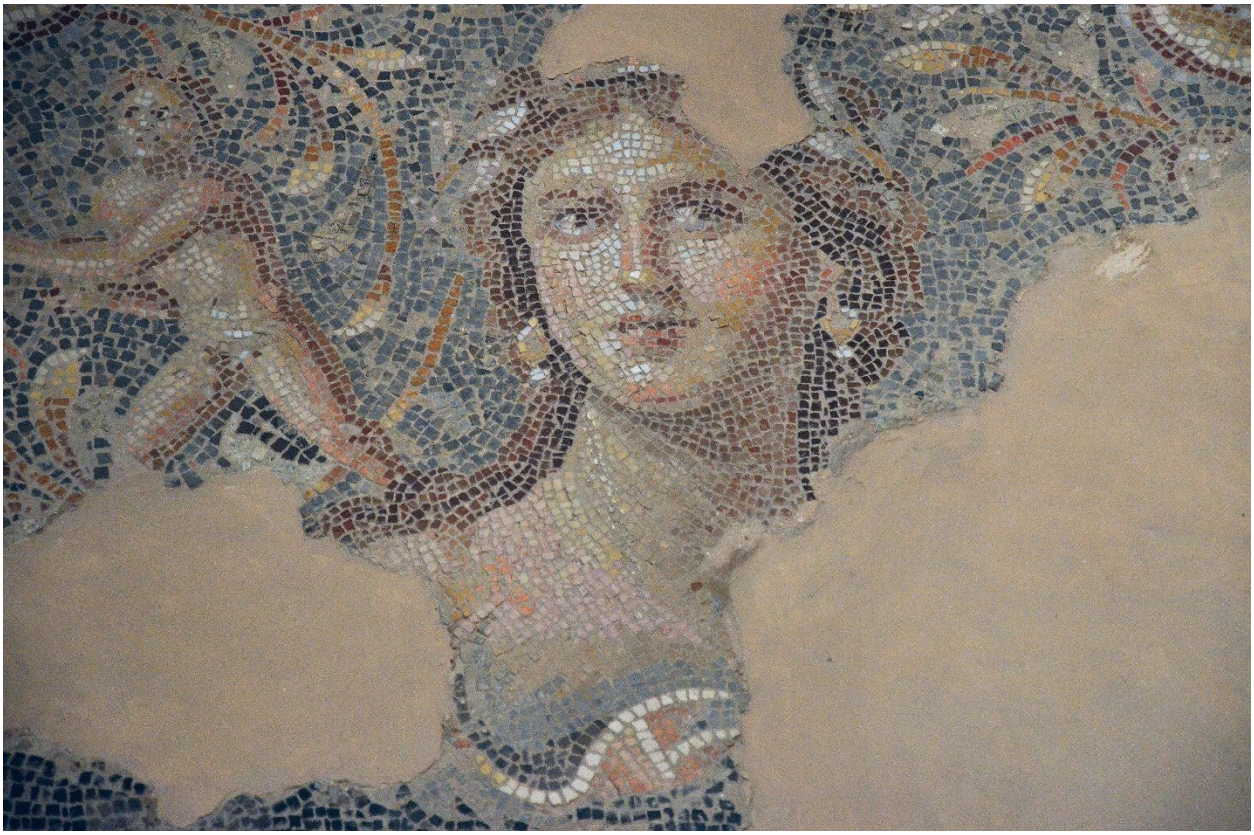


Figure 20.1. Venus depicted in the House of Dionysus, Sepphoris, c. 4th century CE, also called "the Mona Lisa of the Galilee"

Figure 20.2. Mosaic panel from the House of Orpheus, Sepphoris, c. late 3rd – early 4th century CE

Figure 21.1. Figure from the Nile Festival House, Sepphoris (top); Figure from leftside Akedah panel, Sepphoris (bottom)

Figure 21.2. Geometric designs and patterns on the mosaic floor of the Nile Festival House, similar to the side aisle and narthex mosaics from the Sepphoris synagogue

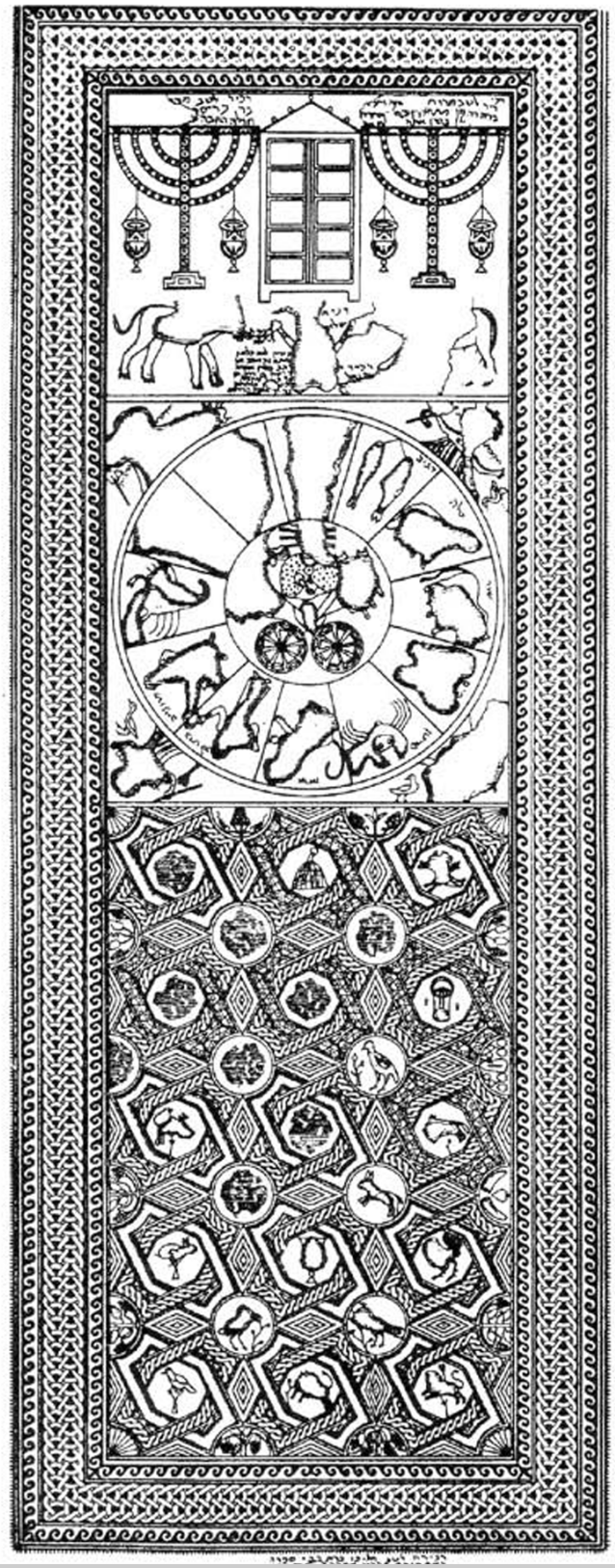


Figure 22. Tripartite mosaic floor, Na'aran

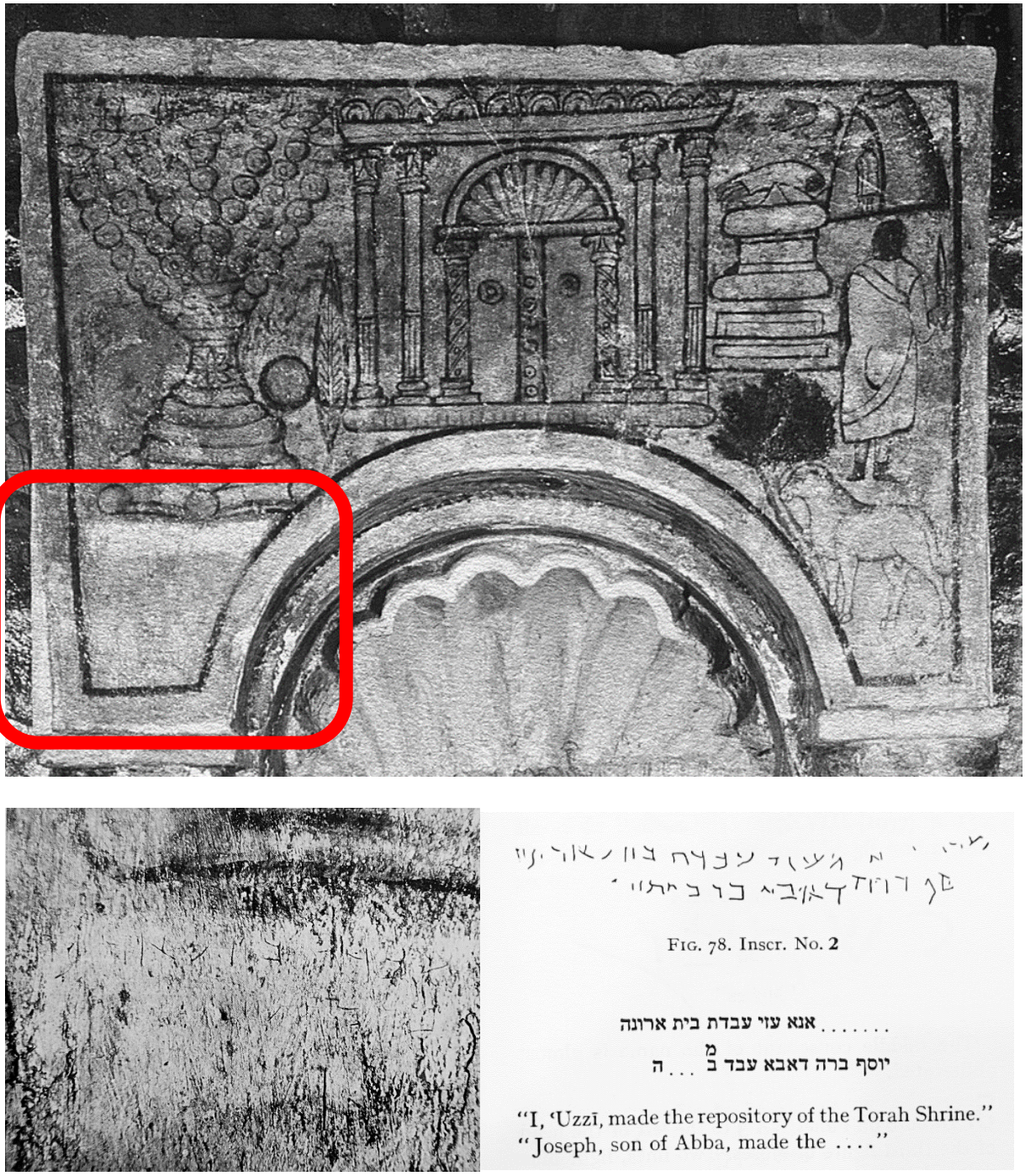


FIG. 78. Inscr. No. 2

אנא עזי עבדת בית ארונה . . . . . .

יוסף ברה דאבא עבד ב מ . . . ה

"I, 'Uzzī, made the repository of the Torah Shrine."
"Joseph, son of Abba, made the . . . ."

Figure 23. Aramaic dedicatory inscription on the Akedah panel, Dura-Europos

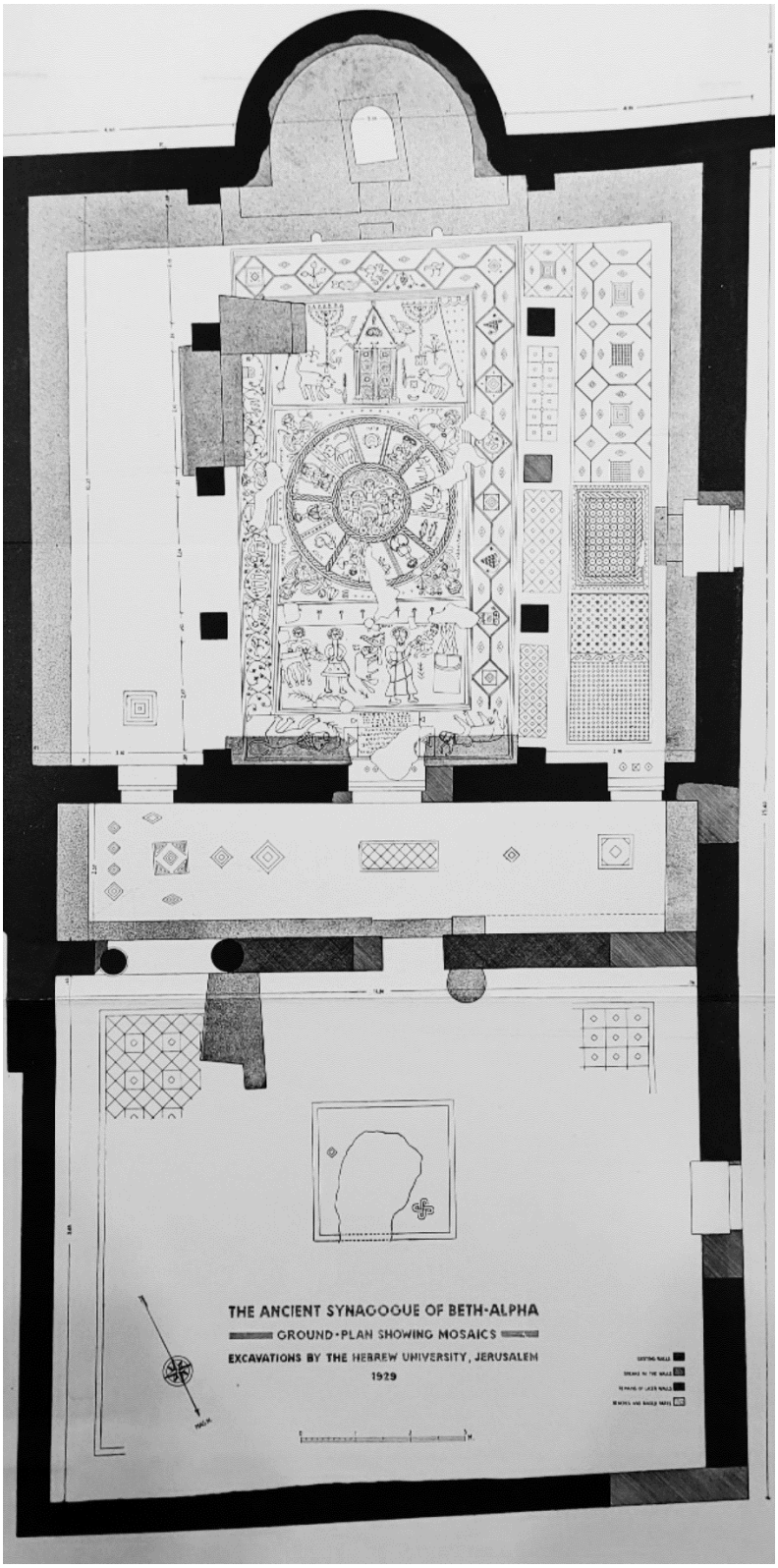


Figure 24. Layout of Beit Alpha synagogue

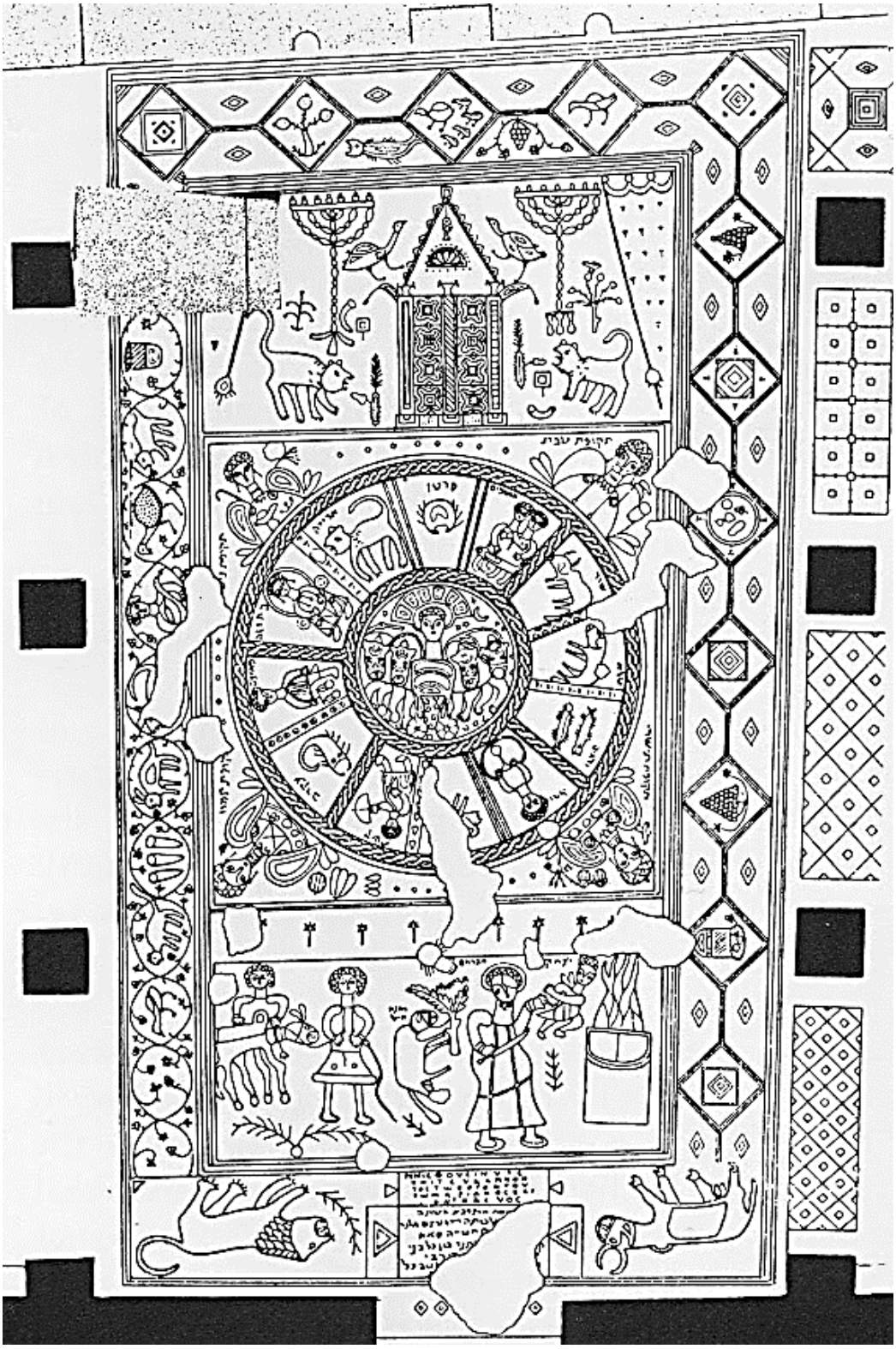
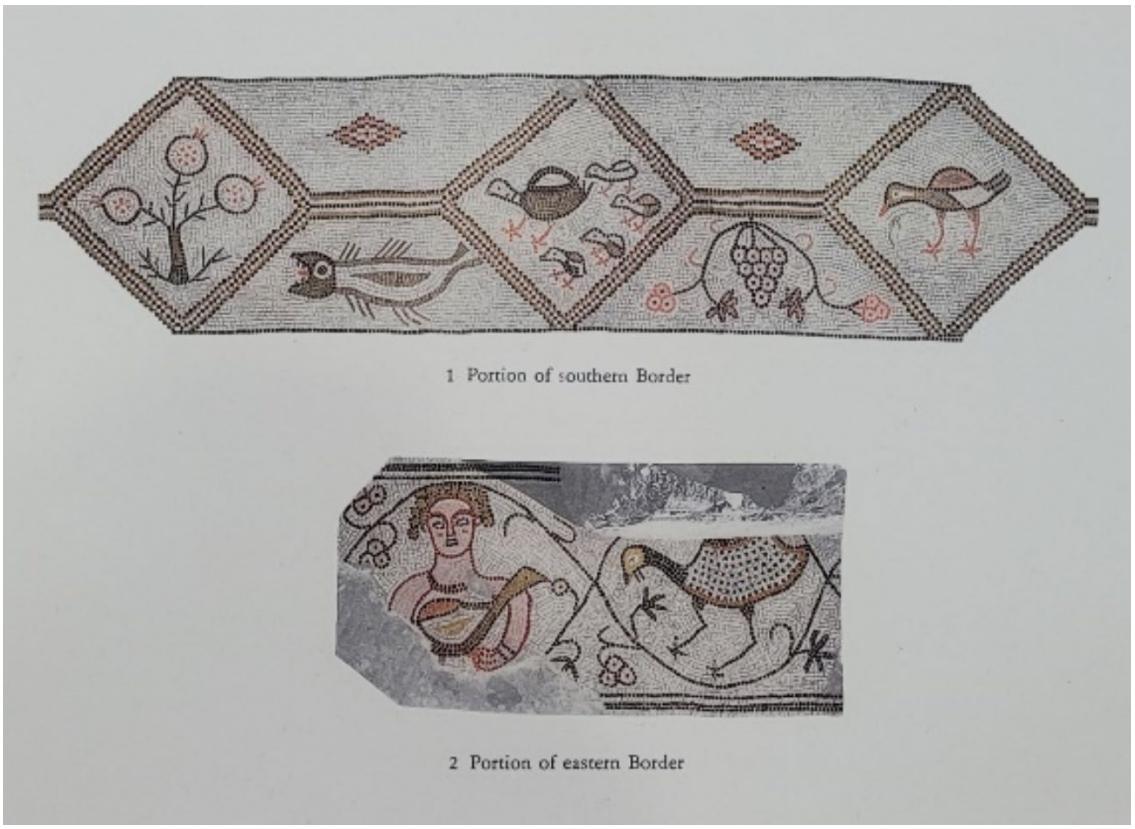


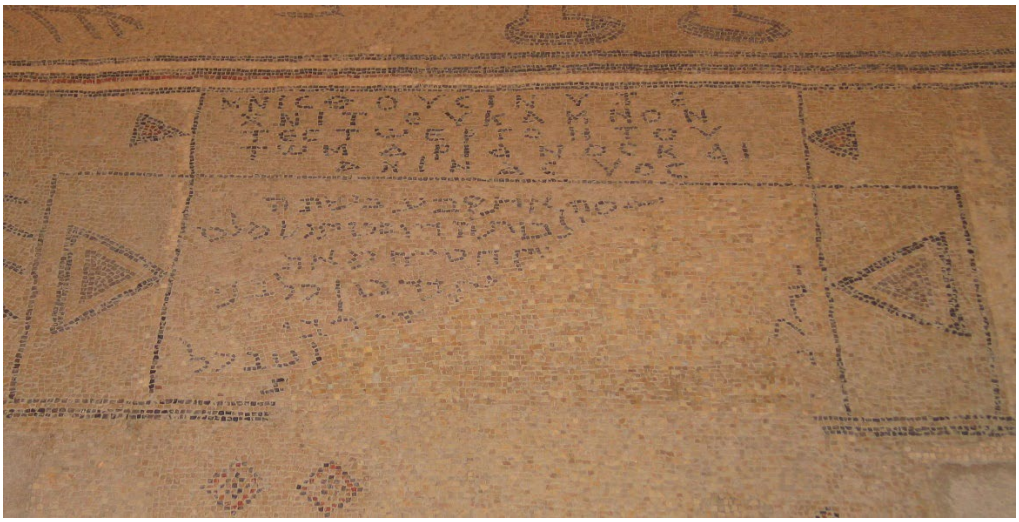
Figure 25.1. Beit Alpha central mosaic

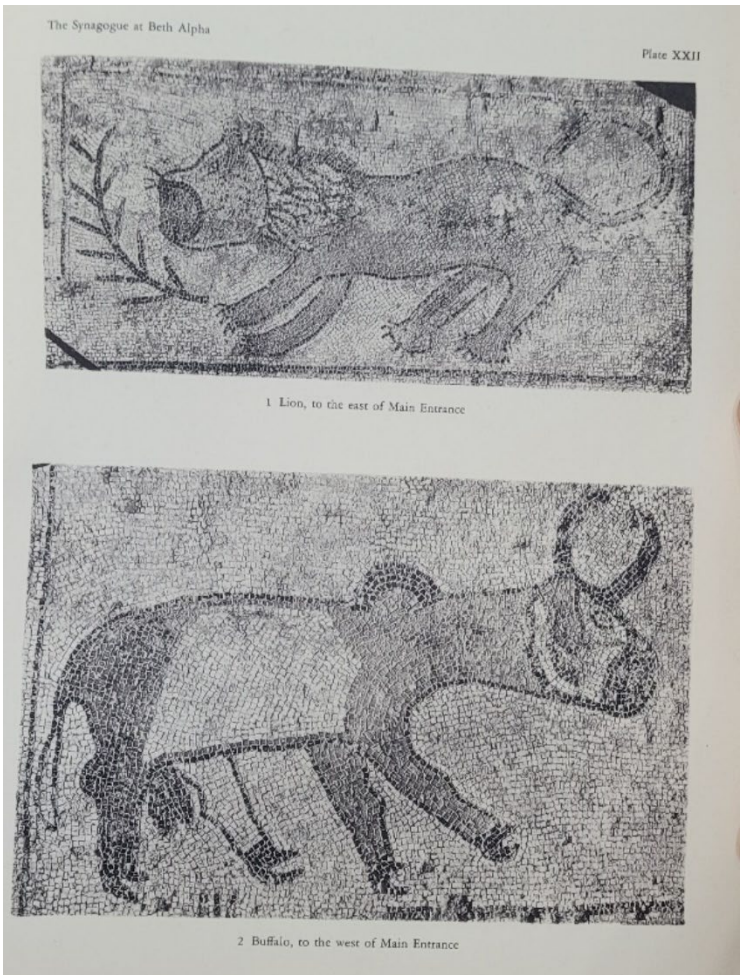


1 Portion of southern Border

2 Portion of eastern Border

Figure 25.2 geometric and scroll designs featuring flora, fauna, and a human figure





The Synagogue at Beth Alpha

Plate XXII

1 Lion, to the east of Main Entrance

2 Buffalo, to the west of Main Entrance

Figure 26. Greek and Aramaic inscriptions at the entrance of the main assembly room; lion and bull flanking the entryway

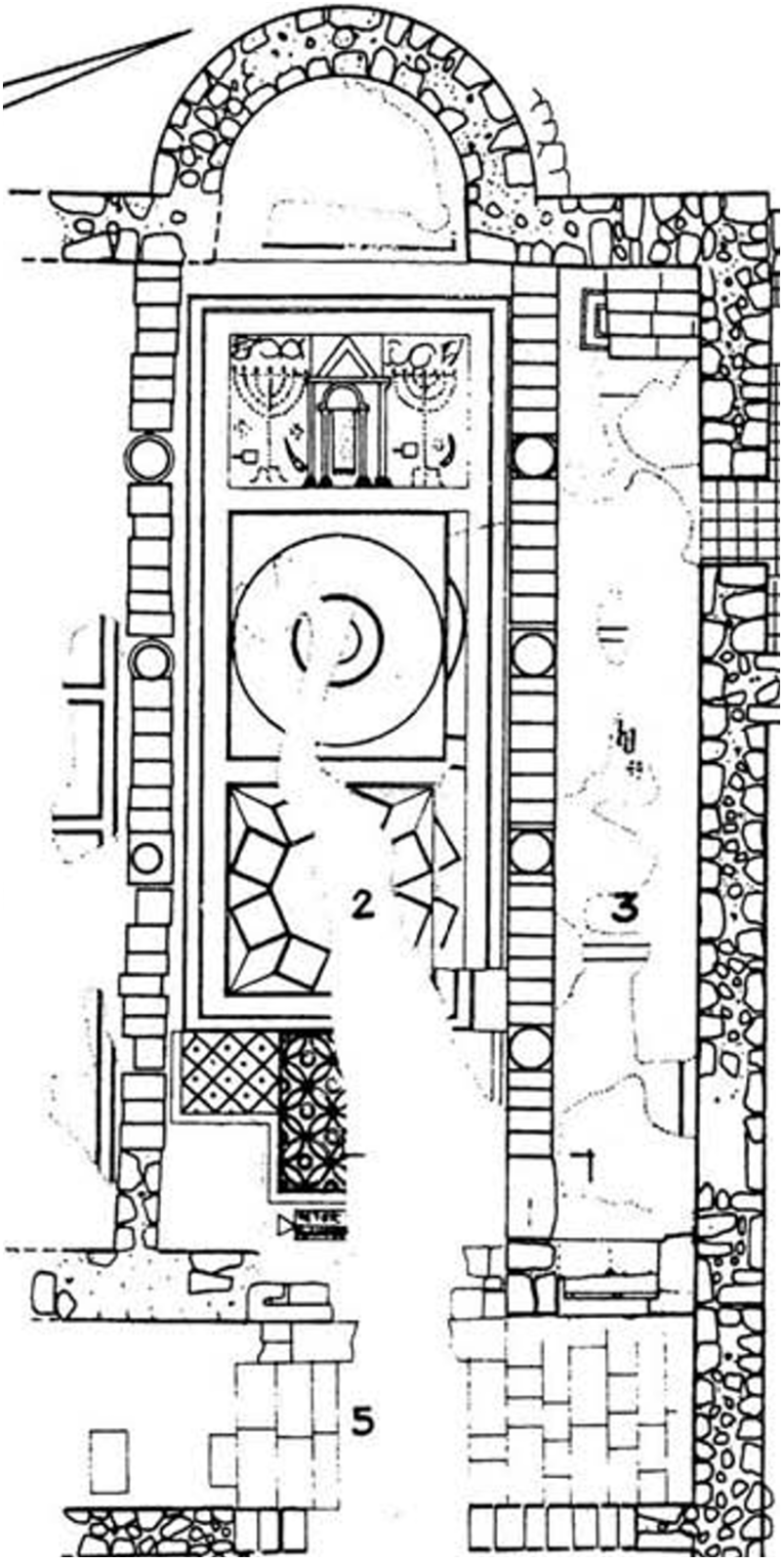


Figure 27. Beit She'an synagogue and central mosaic layout

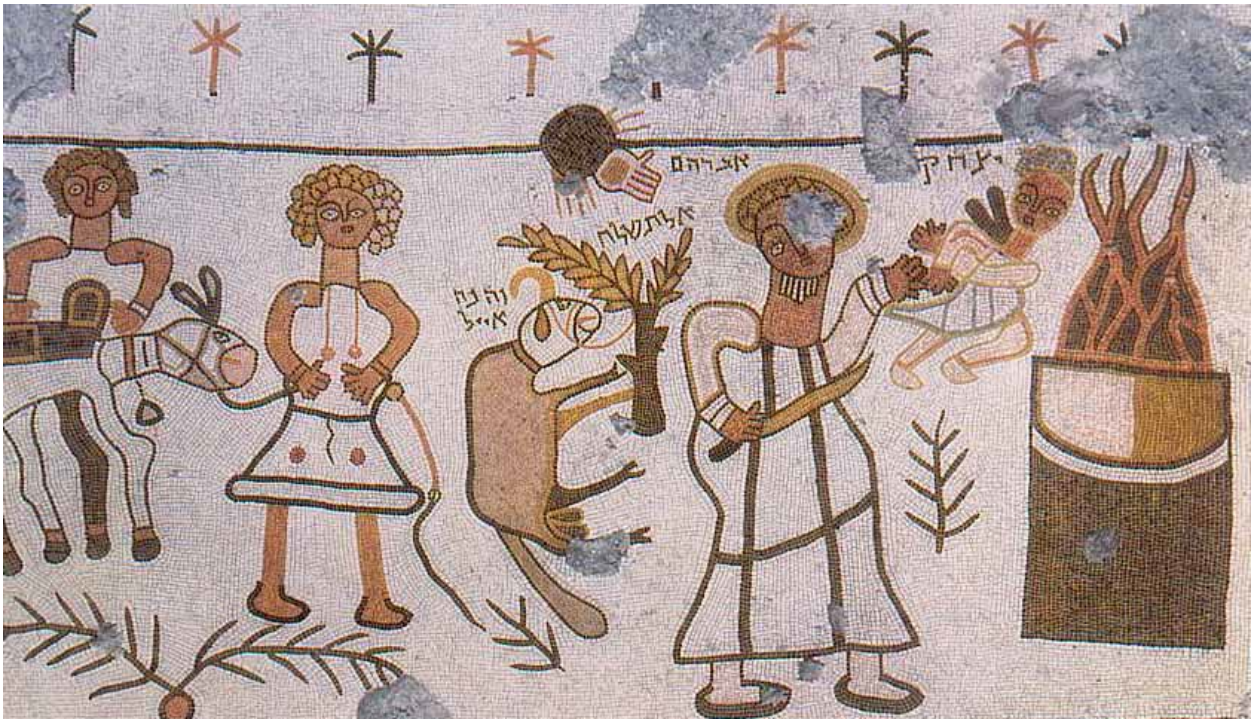


Figure 28. Akedah panel, Beit Alpha

Figure 29. (left) Virgo, (right) Winter, Beit Alpha

Figure 30. Beit Alpha zodiac

Figure 31. Beit Alpha Jewish objects register

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