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SYNAGOGUE ZODIACS IN ROMAN PALESTINE

ForAtt-60: The Beth Alpha Synagogue Mosaic

Under late Roman rule when prohibition of the representation of animals - and even humans - was relaxed for three centuries, just as in earlier times the Jews turned to local Pagan - and even Christian art (the latter itself founded on Hellenistic imagery) - for blueprints to adapt as vehicles for their own messages on mosaic floors. Indeed, so much overlap of imagery is there that at times one might think one was in a church, rather than a synagogue. On entering the Beth Alpha Synagogue, lion and bull (here a zebu) confront each other in time-honoured Syrian stand-off fashion in the first panel, now regaining potency within the Judaic tradition, itself heir to centuries of Mesopotamian history. As Talgam¹ points out, though, the pair is upside down in relation to the other decoration so that it will appear the right way up as the final image only for those *exiting* the synagogue - as farewell sign of protection between worlds. Between them inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic give its date and honour its craftsmen. For those coming in, stepping over that pair they then see a panel showing the sacrifice of Isaac (complete with Hand of God in the



sky, servants looking on and the substitute lamb sacrifice already caught in the thicket²), prelude to the most complete of a handful of full twelve-fold zodiacs placed in synagogues in Roman Palestine c.300- 600 AD - as if to bring the Cosmos into the place of worship (achieved quite differently in Second Temple days³).

The zodiac is topped by a panel common to nearly all early Jewish synagogue floors depicting the Tabernacle in the form of a Classic Greek aedicule (probably to commemorate the now demolished Temple entrance⁴ framed by the two symbolic columns of Jachim and Boaz⁵), pointing to the actual

¹ R Talgam *Mosaics of Faith: Floors of Pagans, Jews, Samaritans, Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land* Jerusalem and Philadelphia 2014

² Sukenik *ibid.pl.6* shows this arrangement was standard in Byzantine iconography of the time – showing exactly this scene from Cosmas Indicopleustes.

³ S Fine . https://www.academia.edu/6699848/Art_and_the_Liturgical_Context_of_the_Sephoris_Synagogue_Mosaic

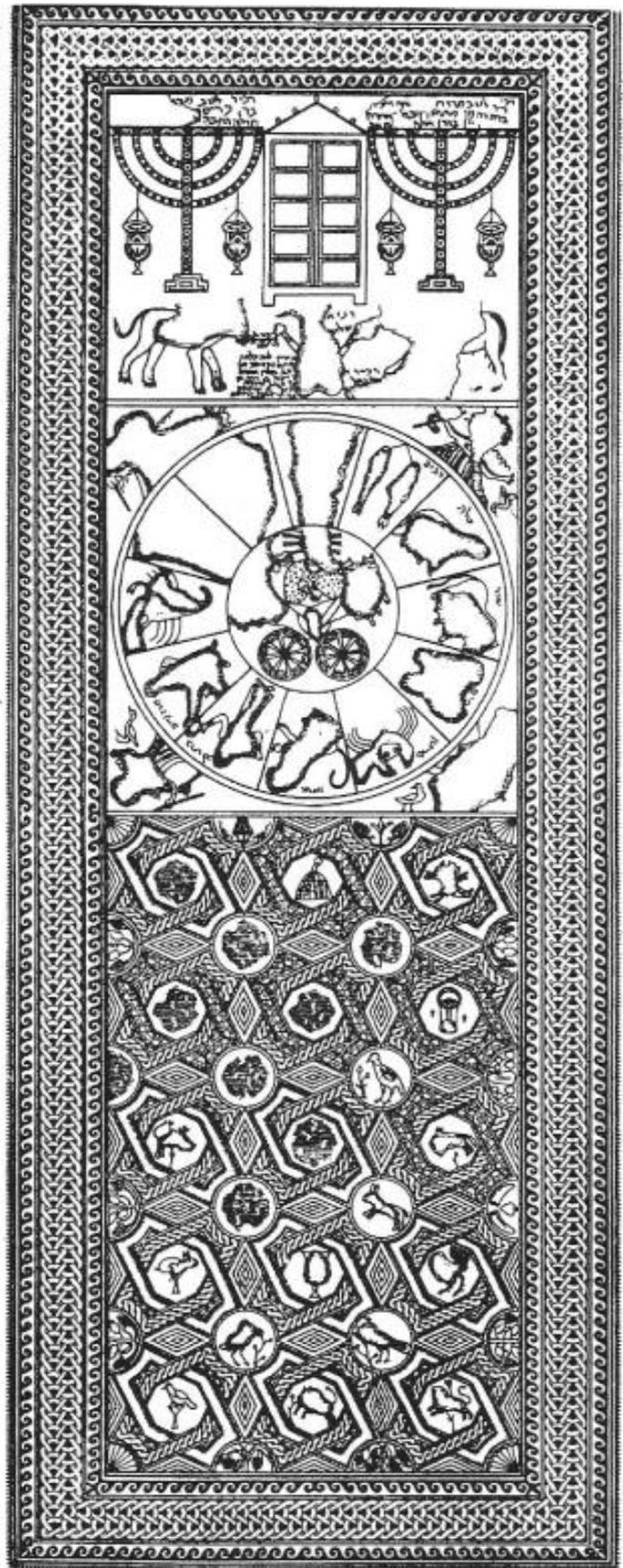
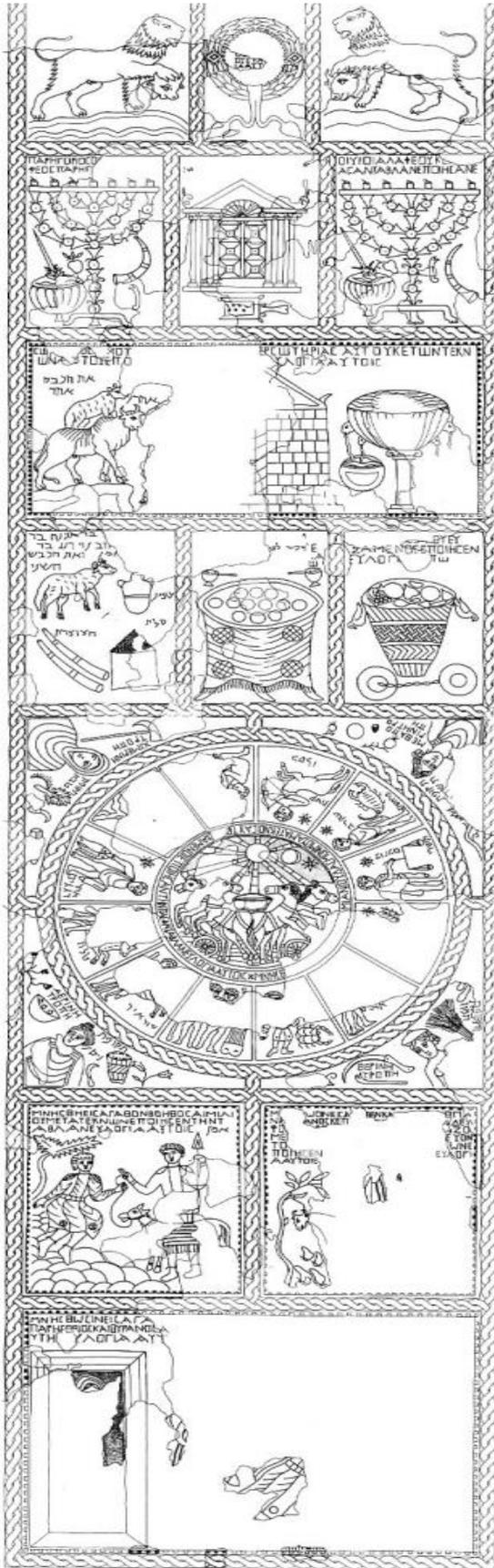
⁴ R Hachlili *Ancient Synagogues-Archaeology and Art: New Discoveries and Current Research* Leiden 2013

Ark cupboard that would have been in the apse behind with the Torah scrolls in it, positioned to face in the direction of Jerusalem. Following Titus' monstrous 70 AD destruction of the Second Temple, adapted out of secular community centres, synagogues were built as local substitutes. Thus in this Tabernacle floor panel in places like Beth Alpha and Sepphoris, to keep its memory alive either side of the Ark are depictions of a selection of the cult utensils formerly used in the Temple Liturgy⁶ such as one or two menorahs; the incense shovel; the shew-bread on its table and first fruits in their basket; a sacrificial lamb; the shofar horn associated with Rosh Hoshshanah/New Year - sometimes also two trumpets - the *lulab* (palm fronds) and *ethrog* (a small citrus fruit) featuring at *Sukkkoth*; sometimes also the *hadas* (myrtle) and *arava* (willow); the containers for oil and flour and sometimes the double-handled flasks for wine drunk at *Kiddush* or *Habdalah*.

As with most, on the Beth Alpha panel the *Aron-ha-Qadesh* itself is simply guarded by two lions, conveying a different message from that of the lion and bull at the other end of the floor between the holy space of the synagogue and the outside world.

⁵ *Jeremiah 52, 17*

⁶ Sukenik usefully quotes j.Taan II, 1: 'Five things from the First Temple were lacking in the Second: Fire and the Ark, the Urim and the Thummim and the Oil of Unction and the Holy Spirit'. The frequent appearance of doves or peacocks on the Ark can refer in general to Peace and/or the presence of the Holy Spirit. The reference to the absence of the original Ark implies that it had already disappeared after the destruction of the First Temple, and that any representations of it would have been memorialisations.



Apart from reading these particular synagogue floors as celebrating the memory of the lost Second Temple (its anniversary celebrated annually on *Tishbah be-Av*) most authors make the case for

showing the link between the mosaic floors and synagogue liturgy - itself based upon significant events in the history of the Jews. To go into the detail is beyond our remit, but Fine *ibid.* makes the general point that these mosaics served as the backdrop - stage-set even - 'on which the priests and the rest of the community were the "actors"', and that the most fruitful approach is to read them 'in terms of the liturgical life of the synagogue community ... enacted upon it, which included prayer, Scripture reading and homiletics'.

With the general rise of iconoclasm in all the monotheistic religions from c.600 after the rise of Islam, the Sepphoris synagogue zodiac (see its position within the layout of other scenes above left) was badly defaced, whereas the Beth Alpha zodiac remained intact, probably remaining untouched due the debris over it caused by an early Byzantine period earthquake. Beth Alpha was comparatively off the beaten track, nestling in a valley with views towards the historic mountains of Gilboa and Gilead, the Hill of Moreh, Mount Tabor and the Jordan Valley, whereas Sepphoris, Hellenistic and Roman capital of Galilee, was prominently sited on a hill-top (around 40 of its buildings boasted fine mosaic decoration).

Mosaic Pavement Layouts: The Old Testament Scenes

Aside from the Tabernacle and its apparatus in the usual panel at one end, common to most floor schemes, flanking the central zodiac on the other side would be one panel or more citing incidents from the Old Testament, carefully chosen to reassure the Jewish people about God's long-term covenants with them despite desperate travails (including their most recent oppression by the Romans). There are close resemblances between the mosaic schemes in the use of Bible scenes emphasizing God's promises and the doctrinally Messianic programme of painted wall decoration devised for the Dura Europos Synagogue of the 3C⁷, where for instance the scene of Aaron before the Tabernacle features as at Sepphoris. Like Beth Alpha, Sepphoris shows the Sacrifice of Isaac - and within the overall damage, the Consecration of Aaron in the service of the Tabernacle and The Angels' visit to Abraham and Sarah can also be picked out. Na'aran, whose floor layout is next to that of Sepphoris above, and whose destroyed zodiac we bring in under our *Iconography Section*, showed Daniel in the Lions' Den (and so probably did Khirbet Susiya) - simply in terms of a man standing between two lions, almost reminiscent of the Gilgamesh group. In mosaics from Gaza and Jerusalem, King David as harpist singing his Psalms is based directly on pagan scenes of Orpheus surrounded by wild beasts - in David's case usually represented by a single lion to partly elide with the story of Daniel.

Synagogue Floor layout and The Jewish Calendar

Apart from a 5C mosaic lion-bull pair either side of a baetyl/tree of life from Daphne near Antioch (below left), other synagogues in the Holy Land with zodiac floors do not differentiate, as Beth Alpha does, between guardian lions and the lion and bull in opposition, though interestingly the motifs are merged on the mosaic floor of the Sepphoris⁸ synagogue (above left) in a pair of confronted lions with one paw over a bull head (top panel). In the *Iconography Section* we reiterate

⁷ R Wischnitzer *The Messianic Theme in the Paintings of the Dura Synagogue* Chicago 1948. See also J Y Chi et al. *Edge of Empires: Pagans, Jews and Christians at Roman Dura-Europos* 2011, and T Kaizer *Religion, Society and Culture at Dura Europos* 2016

⁸ Z Weiss *The Sepphoris Synagogue: Deciphering an Ancient Message Through its Archaeological and Socio-Historical Contexts* Jerusalem 2005. See also Z Weiss with E Netzer *Promise and Redemption: A Synagogue Mosaic from Sepphoris* Israel Museum Jerusalem 1996

the interpretation for them given by Weiss and Talgam, but in the context of the central position taken by the zodiacs they top or tail, it is wise not to forget the basic symbolism of Lion as Sun and Bull as Moon - the two planets still of most significance in the Jewish Calendar in a period when the role of astronomer-priest in the Great Temple had been irreversibly disrupted. As Fine *ibid.* points out, formerly the calculation of the annual Cycle of Feasts was maintained through the attendance - over the 24 'priestly courses' - of a team of priests in rotation for two weeks each over every year, but by 300AD that age-old continuum between Temple liturgy and live astronomical observation was to all intents and purposes defunct. This underlines the importance of the zodiacs in these synagogues as reminders of the continuing machinery of God's Calendar - its planets and stars run by the Invisible One.

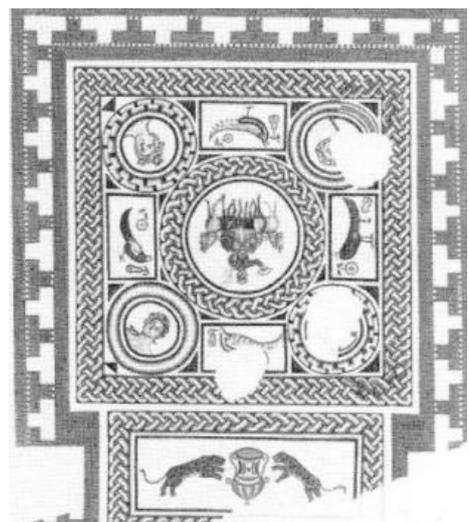


In fact, the synagogue mosaic zodiacs are amongst the earliest depictions of the 12-Sign zodiac anywhere, knowledge of it originally filtering into the Levant through updated astronomical knowledge brought in from Babylon by the Seleucids, probably via Alexandria and Palmyra. An early prototype is to be seen in the ceiling of a side bay inside the Temple of Bel at Palmyra (dedicated in 32 AD) showing the Sky Eagle surrounded by stars on the lintel arching before it (below is a photo taken before its destruction by Daesh in 2016). We are more than ever grateful to Robert Wood⁹ who in the 18C on his travels in the Middle East made a detailed engraving of the Temple of Bel zodiac (above right): in the central hub the Seven Planets are depicted - personified as busts of human types - with Baal-Jupiter at the centre surrounded by the other six planets of Sun (Yarhibol), Moon (Aglibol), Mercury, Venus, Mars, and Saturn, in turn encircled by the zodiac on the rim (here not strongly emphasized).

⁹ Robert Wood, *The Ruins of Palmyra, otherwise Tedmor, in the Desert* London, 1753.



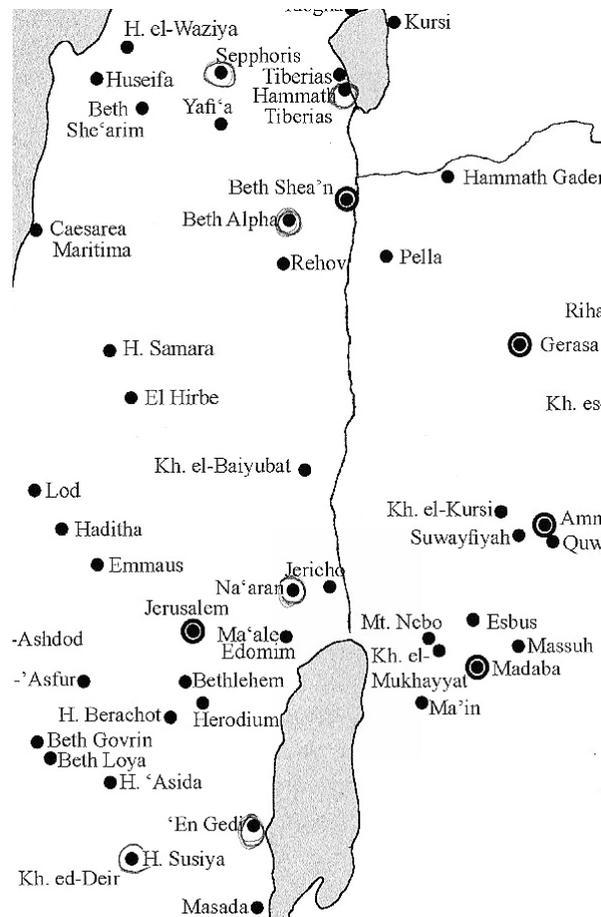
It is worth remembering that the repertoire of design and content on Roman mosaics was to a large extent standardized right across the Roman Empire - for comparison we show below the 'Victorious Charioteer Mosaic' from the Roman villa at Rudston, near Hull¹⁰, England, again featuring the Four Seasons as women in the four corners (note in the fully drawn version how two lions flank a vase instead of an Ark). In this case the central charioteer is simply a human charioteer, where other mosaics in Britain feature Gods in the central medallion, such as Neptune or Venus. Where at Palmyra we have just noted how the prime position was filled by Jupiter-Baal, for the synagogue zodiacs the Sun God features as the victorious planetary charioteer.



¹⁰ D J Smith *Roman Mosaics at Hull* 2005

In considering the Roman period synagogues Hachlili¹¹ writes: 'The difference between the Jewish and Christian calendar representations is quite striking in design and concept. The Jewish calendars comprise an identical scheme consisting of three sections: the Four Seasons represent the Year; the Months are represented by the Zodiac Signs and the Sun God with its background of a half [crescent] moon and stars represents Day and Night. Together they represent [the] annual liturgical calendar. ... The Christian depiction usually consists of designs of the Labours of the Months or of the Seasons by themselves. The Jews seem to have preferred the combined symbolism of the Seasons, the Zodiac Signs, and the Sun God in one single composition.' This is explored further in the *Iconography Section*.

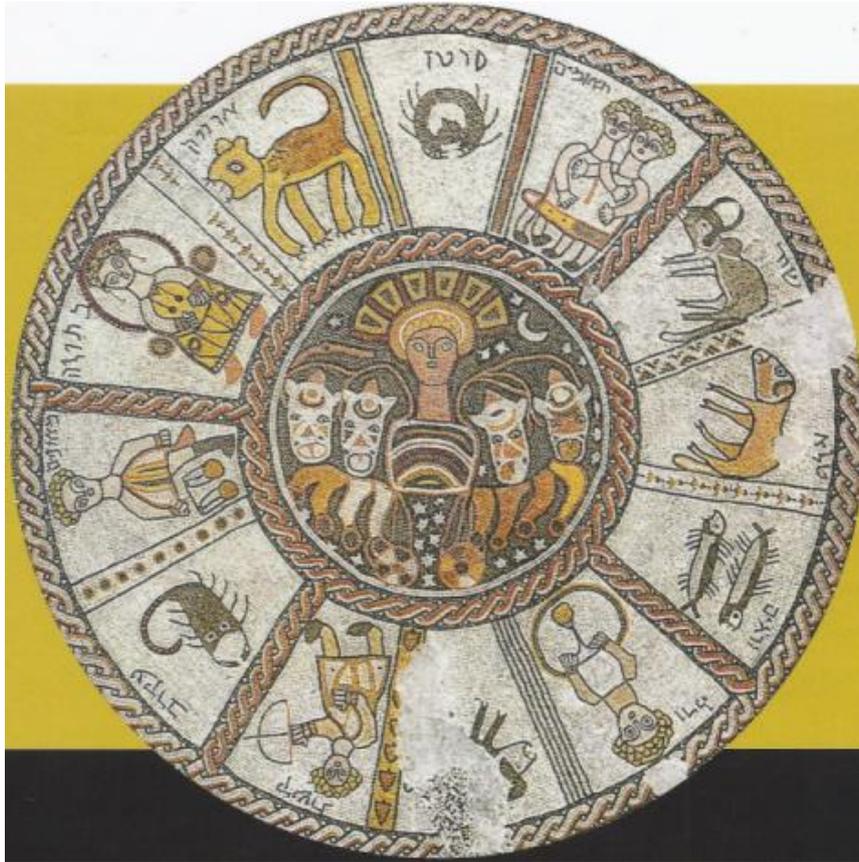
Around eight synagogues with zodiacs dating from the period 3-6C AD are known - see detail of map following taken from Hachlili¹², on which key sites are circled. Most are in a ruinous state and one or two merely vestigial. The Beth Alpha zodiac is



only seriously disfigured on the goat of Capricorn (below). It uses the same naïve provincial style as seen on the Venus Mosaic

¹¹ R Hachlili *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* Leiden 2008

¹² R Hachlili *Ancient Synagogues: -Archaeology and Art : New Discoveries and Current Research* Boston 2013



at Rudston on the other side of the Roman Empire, in Britannia (near Hull, in Yorkshire, cited in our *Chapter 19*), which is the closest Britain got to a zodiac floor - with one or two exceptions we will come to. We cross-refer to mosaics at the opposite side of the Empire simply to show how at this period the Jews of the Levant - for very particular reasons - bought into the adoption of a universal language of Roman cosmic iconography in turn inherited from the Seleucids.



Ness¹³ enumerates the key synagogue mosaics, starting with Na'aran, the first discovered in 1918 war-time conditions (below, bottom right) and ending with Hammath-Tiberias (below left), one of the latest to be discovered and second only to Beth Alpha in its high quality of workmanship and good condition, aside from a disfigurement caused by the former wall built diagonally across it. Adding in Sepphoris, it is the Sun Chariot at the centre of these four zodiacs that highlights diagnostic comparisons:

- The Beth Alpha Sun God and his four horses we might categorise as in the 'naïve Byzantine style', though there are niceties of detail, not only of the God's Seven-rayed halo, scattered stars and crescent moon, but also the rainbow across the front of the chariot is a reminder of God's atmospheric Covenant to Noah;
- The Hammath-Tiberias Sun-God (below left), on the other hand, is personified in the anthropomorphic convention of the pagan world, also with rayed head, but holding the sphere of the Sun separately in one hand;
- The two wheels of the Na'aran chariot - almost all that remains of its Sun God representation (below bottom right) are shown as simple hexagonal geometric exercises, perhaps referring to the Six Days of Creation as well as to the other six of the Seven Planets (the head of the Sun God, similar to the Hammath-Tiberias rendition) is obliterated, but the rays surrounding it remain, whilst
- The Sepphoris Sun and its rays is shown aniconically as a disc positioned in its chariot, next to crescent moon and a star, and the rearing horses are more skillfully rendered than those pulling the Beth Alpha Sun-chariot (below top right - but see also the clearer line-drawing in the calendrical paragraph at the end of this discussion).

Ness also lists Husifa, Susiya, Yafia, Ein Gedi and Gerasa but apart from Gerasa (which brings in Noah and the animals of the Ark) these three are sufficient to take as foils in discussing the iconography of the Beth Alpha zodiac (the only one of the four to include a *Forward Attack*). The zodiac, of course, implies consideration of the nature of the Jewish Calendar, which in fact has

¹³ L. Ness *Written in the Stars: Ancient Zodiac Mosaics* Pennsylvania 1999

deep roots in Sumerian and Babylonian history¹⁴. This can only be done briefly here, through comparison of the Beth Alpha and



Sepphoris zodiacs - and strictly only in relation to the meaning of *Forward Attack*! So as a first step we should finish dealing with the Noah's Ark story, as initially evoked by the rainbow on the front of the Sun-God's chariot on the Beth-Alpha zodiac.

FORWARD ATTACKS AND THE NOAH'S ARK THEME

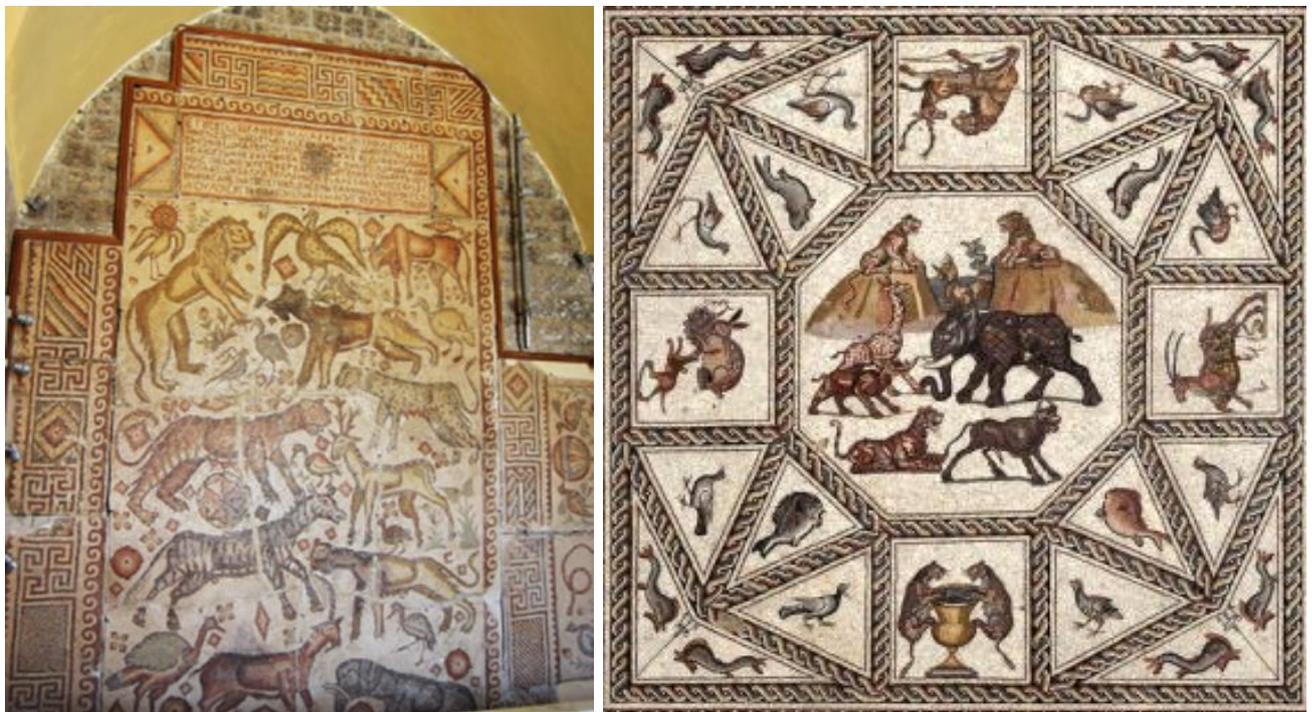
Another building in Sepphoris known as the *Nile Festival Building*¹⁵ includes a mosaic showing vigorous lion-prey and other animal groups all over it (one being a high-quality *Forward Attack* - detail below left). The floor calls to mind a simpler nave



¹⁴ Sacha Stern *Calendar and Community : A History of the Jewish Calendar, 2nd Century BCE to 10th Century CE* 2001

¹⁵ Z Weiss and R Talgam 'The Nile Festival Building and its Mosaics: Mythological Representations in Early Byzantine Sepphoris' in J H Humphrey (ed.) *The Roman and Byzantine Near East III* 2002 54-90

mosaic at St George's Church at Houad in Syria (below left). It is the *Forward Attack* mosaic from a side-aisle there that is the second item in our *ForAtt-60* entry, showing how the lion-prey group at this time had relevance for all bodies of belief (in a footnote later we shortly also note two other church examples). Although not strictly a zodiac mosaic, taken alongside the repeated pairs of animal confrontations on the St George floor (compare with the rows of pairs of animals - many of them lion-prey groups - on the Dog Palette under *ForAtt-4*), for the sake of completeness, we can set them not only against the floor of the Jerasa synagogue with its animal processions that represent the narrative of Noah's Ark as its signature Bible story, but also against the Lod floor (below right, already considered under *Ratt-61*) with its more formalized medley - almost zodiacal in its arrangement - of animals and lion attacks within a geometric framework¹⁶. It is from a short framing strip detail on the latter that we illustrate (above centre) the only *Forward Attack* on the Lod floor, while next to it is a less-known *Forward Attack* from the Emmaus synagogue - from Talgam *ibid.*).



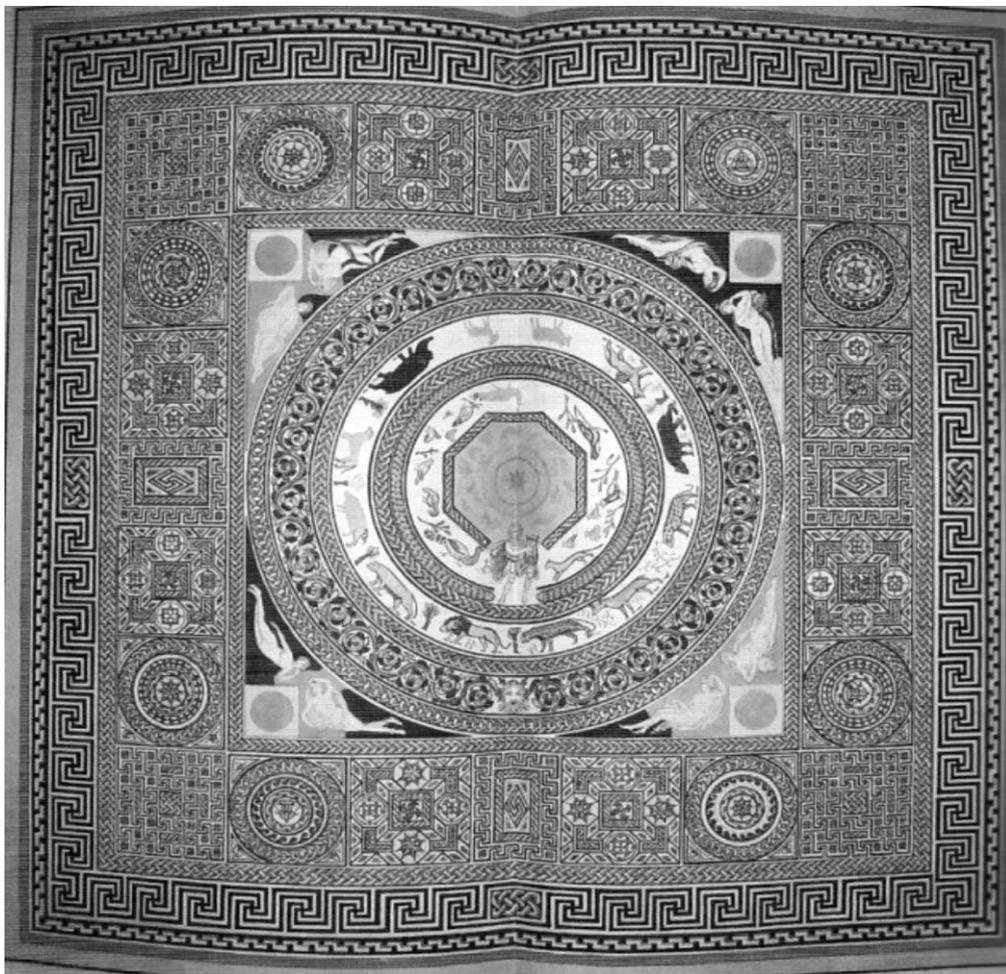
Looking at all these animal-only floors we have to ask whether these were sometimes intended as unofficial zodiacs along less idolatrous lines (we are reminded from *Chapter 19* that the earliest zodiacs began literally as zo(o)diacs, using only animal representatives for each sign (apart from Aquarius, originally represented by a pot, only later by a man pouring water from it)).

Here the art historian interpreting Jewish art can draw on the huge body of supporting texts from the Old Testament, and there are several alternative scriptural interpretations. In the case of Jerasa we know the animal display refers to the story of Noah's Ark, yet at the same time the depiction of unusual animals (such as the giraffe on the Lod mosaic) might also simply reflect current curiosity about exotic animals brought in from Africa by the Romans for their circuses (it is interesting that monkeys rarely feature). The depiction in particular of peacocks, tigers and

¹⁶ Israel Antiquities Authority *The Lod Mosaic* New York 2015 (with an essay on the Late Roman Mosaic by Rina Talgam)

leopards betrays the age-long connection of the Levant to India and has Dionysiac overtones, given Dionysos was described as bringing his cult from India. These aside, floors in a sacred context showing a profusion of wild animals point either to an evocation of Eden at the start of Creation - or at the End of Days to the longed-for restoration of the Garden of Paradise with all animals at peace with each other. It is in this context that Talgam and Weiss take the lions with paw on a bull-head at Sepphoris¹⁷ as representations of one of God's last promises to the Jewish people - that at the End of Days the lion (often identified with Judah itself) would sit down with the lamb, meaning these animal scenes are certainly often eschatological in nature and not simply decorative¹⁸.

Again looking further afield for comparison across the Roman Empire to another example - again from Britain - the roughly contemporary Woodchester Great Pavement¹⁹ (the largest Roman mosaic in Britain) though damaged, was restored and also duplicated at Wotton²⁰, showing the importation as far as Britain of the theme of Orpheus surrounded by a circles of small animals and birds and a circle of 12 Animals looking like a seasonal procession of creatures that could be read as a Zodiac:



¹⁷ On the Paradise Mosaic at Madaba lion and bull also confront each other - but taken to be in friendship - as also on the floor of the presbytery of the Church of the Deacon Thomas in the ʿUyun Musa Valley.

¹⁸ Many other convincing possibilities are discussed in the papers given in L Levine et al. (eds) *From Dura to Sepphoris* Portsmouth Rhode Island 2000

¹⁹ D J Smith *The Great Pavement and Roman Villa at Woodchester, Gloucestershire* 1973

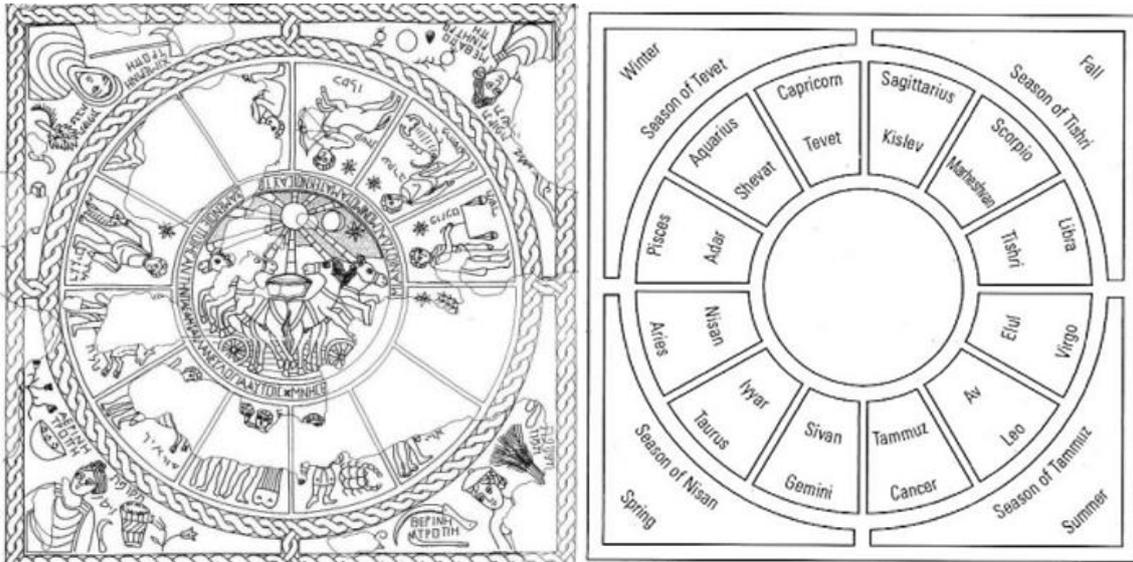
²⁰ R Cull et al. *The Wotton Mosaic: An Illustrated Guide* 1980



All this means we should bear in mind the overall Calendrical context of the pavements we are considering here. Going back to the Beth Alpha and Sepphoris zodiacs let us consider the Jewish Calendar in itself, especially bearing in mind our Catalogues so often see the lion-prey group as a New Year symbol - which means there is no reason, on the synagogue floors, that it should not stand for Rosh Hoshanah.

THE SYNAGOGUE ZODIACS AND THE JEWISH CALENDAR

In the *Art History Section* we mentioned Hachlili's comment that synagogues appear to have preferred using the Zodiac, rather than representing the labours of the months as churches of the territory tended to do. This means - as Weiss and Netzer (*ibid.*) point out - direct equivalences were made between each month in the Jewish Calendar and its corresponding zodiac sign (see their drawing of the zodiac below, and next to it the diagram of correspondences it covers), while the zodiac in turn is aligned with the Four Seasons personified as female figures in the corners (they are similarly present on the Woodchester Great Pavement, above). The Beth Alpha zodiac also has representations of The Seasons as four female types of varying maturity, but the craftsmen unfortunately wrongly synchronized them to the zodiac (Sukenik also blames them for their clumsy Hebrew lettering - they were clearly not Jewish!). The Sepphoris zodiac itself is unfortunately badly defaced (it is unusual to see, of



those Signs remaining, that each one has additional humans accompanying even the animal symbols). So for the perfect synagogue zodiac we still go back to Beth Alpha, even if its Seasons in the corners are misaligned. This is fitting, given the



Lion-Bull opposition preceding it could well refer, at the calendrical level, to Rosh Hoshanah - New Year 's Day.