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Ancient Synagogues in the Holy Land

- What Synagogues?

By David Landau

1. To believe archaeologists, the history of the Holy Land in the first few centuries of the Christian Era goes like this: After many year of staunch opposition to foreign influence the Jews finally adopted pagan symbols; they decorated their synagogues with naked Greek idols (Hammam Tiberias) or clothed ones (Beth Alpha), carved images of Zeus on their grave (Beth Shearim), depicted Hercules (Chorazin) and added a large swastika turning to the left (En Gedi) to their repertoire, etc. Incredible.

I maintain that the so-called synagogues were actually Roman temples built during the reign of Maximin (the end of the 3rd century and beginning of the 4th) as a desperate means to fight what the roman considered the Christian menace. I base my conclusion on my study of the orientations of these buildings, their decorations and a testimony of the Christian historian Eusebius of Caesaria.

2. In 1928, foundations of an ancient synagogue were discovered near kibbutz Beth Alpha in the eastern Jezreel Valley at the foot of Mt. Gilboa. Eleazar Sukenik, the archaeologist who excavated the site wrote (1932: 11):

Like most of the synagogues north of Jerusalem and west of the Jordan, the building is oriented in an approximately southerly direction. A divergence to the west from this general direction (27 degrees S.W. by compass), which is actually justified in that Jerusalem is S.W. of Beth Alpha, is most probably accidental and due perhaps to the lie of the terrain.

Being curious to know where 27 degrees S.W. (minus 2 degrees due to compass deviation) leads, I used a protractor and a tourist map of Israel to discover that the line runs directly to Mt. Gerizim. I am very sorry but the Beth Alpha building was not at all a Jewish synagogue. By definition it must have been a Samaritan one. However, it could not have been one; the building is decorated with figures of human being and the Samaritans have always been strict observants of the Second Commandment.

3. Realising that an important clue to the nature of the ancient synagogues may be revealed through their orientation, I continued my investigation with the help of the *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavation in the Holy Land* (1975, 1993) and other sources, a tourist map of Israel and a protractor. It seems that there are several grids of directions.

a) The synagogue at Rehov oriented north to Beth Shean. The 'Samaritan' synagogue of Beth Shean oriented west north west which is the direction of Beth Alpha. The line across the synagogue of Na'aran cut the synagogue at Beth Alpha, few dozen kilometres north. The synagogue of Umm el-Amed (Lower Galilee) is directed to Beth Alpha and so are the remains of the monastery of Beth Ha-Shittah just north east of Beth Alpha.

The line across the synagogue at Eshtemoa (the Judean Desert) leads towards the synagogue of En Gedi which faces north; its mosaic oriented towards Mt. Gerizim and the bema towards Na'aran.

In the synagogue of En Gedi an inscription consisting of 18 lines was revealed. It calls down a curse on "anyone causing a controversy between a man and his fellows or who (say) slanders his friends before the gentiles or steal the property of his friends, or anyone revealing the secret of the town to the gentiles..." It was argued that the inscription was designed against those revealing the secrets of the balsam industry, but why was it placed in the synagogue and why did it prohibit revealing the secrets only to the Gentiles? Maybe the building served purposes it was not supposed to serve.

The synagogue of Maon (south-west of Gaza) was directed towards what was identified as a 3th-century Christian basilica at Emmaus (near Latrun). This basilica oriented to the synagogue of En Gedi. The pavement of Maon has an interesting parallel in a church pavement found at nearby Shellal (which is presently preserved in Australia) and in the synagogue of Gaza.

b) The synagogue at Bir'am (Upper Galilee) is oriented directly towards Mt. Gerizim. The same line, if continued, falls on what is nowadays West Jerusalem. Signs of the zodiac were found in the place. According to travellers from previous centuries, there were in Bir'am remnants of another synagogue.

c) The synagogue at Husifah is directed towards the synagogue of Beth Shearim. The latter synagogue, the second synagogue at Beth Shean, the synagogue at Chorazin, the Synagogue at Meiron and the synagogue at Gerasa (which was found beneath a church) are all oriented towards the a point few kilometres south-west of the synagogue at Rehov (south of Beth Shean).

d) The synagogues at Hammath Tiberias, Capernaum, Japhia (near Nazareth), and the unfinished synagogue at Hurvat Sumaqa (Mt. Carmel) are directed towards the synagogue at Hammath Gader. The synagogue of Umm el-Qanatir (east of the Sea of Galilee) is oriented towards Capernaum. The direction of the mosaic of the Hammath Gader synagogue leads to Pella (east of the Jordan river) and the apse towards Machaerus or to Mt. Nebo in the same vicinity (east of the Dead Sea). No remains of synagogues were found at Pella, Machaerus or Mt. Nebo.

The orientation of the synagogue at Japhia is from west to east, certainly not in the direction of Jerusalem. Sukenik argued that this change of orientation could be explained by the fact that Japhia was in Zebulun, presumed to be located on the sea, *i.e.*, west of the Holy City .

The synagogue of Beth Yerah, situated inside a Roman fort, oriented towards Tiberias and so is the synagogue at Maoz Hayyim, east of Beth Shean. The direction of a Crusader church at Sepphoris, where remains of a synagogue were found, also oriented towards this town.

The figures of the zodiac at Hammath-Tiberias, except the virgin, are naked. According to Moshe Dothan (1968: 121), the people who designed the synagogue apparently were not Jewish.

The synagogue of ed-Dikkeh (east of the Jordan river) is directed towards Meiron. The mosaic discovered in a monumental building at Sepphoris oriented also towards Meiron. An ancient church at Beth Shearim was also directed to Meiron.

e) The remains of a Greek-style temple on Tell er-Ras, the northernmost peak of Mt. Gerizim oriented 14 degrees east of north, in the direction of the synagogue of Arbel. The synagogues of Kefar Neburaya (north of Zefat), Gush Halav and a church at Susita (east of En Gev) oriented to Arbel. The synagogue of Arbel oriented towards Gush Halav.

f) The synagogue of Horvat Rimmon, located in the southern Judaeen Shephelah about 1/2 km south of Kibbutz Lahav, oriented towards Mt. Gerizim.

g) The synagogue of Khirbet Shema in Upper Galilee oriented towards Shavei Ziyon on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea where remains of an ancient church were found.

h) The synagogue at Jericho oriented towards Hebron. The bema of the synagogue in Susiya (the Judean Desert) oriented also towards Hebron.

According to ancient sources, there was at Mamre, 3 kilometres north of Hebron, a pagan altar. The Emperor Constantine ordered the altar to be destroyed when he built a church there. This church was one of the first four Constantine built in the Holy Land.

After the Bar Kochba uprising Jewish prisoners were brought there to be sold as slaves. This episode and the existence of a pagan temple are probably the reasons why among Jews the cite has aroused a negative attitude and, actually, the Halacha forbids Jews from visiting the place (*Madrich Israel*).

4. My study on the orientation of these buildings is far from exhaustive. Not only that I do not have data on the directions of the some synagogues, I should also check churches, monasteries and mosques built upon ancient foundations. As the remains of the monastery of Beth Hashittah and the church of Emmaus reveal, some clues may be found also in these structures. Actually, the examination should be extended to areas outside the Holy Land. The walls of the synagogue at Dura Europos feature, among other things, a complete pagan temple, Orpheus wearing a Phrygian cap and playing a harp above the Tora Ark, etc.

The precise nature of the design may indicate the existence of presently unknown cites. It seems to me that all these structures were incorporated into three main grids: one centred in Mt. Gerizim, the second one in Mamre and a third in Mt. Nebo. There seems to be a missing link between the building in the northern part of the Land of Israel and the cite at Mamre. I suggest that there existed a building few kilometres south-west of Tel Rehov (the meeting point of the lines running through the synagogues at Beth Shean, Gerasa, Meiron and Chorazin) and it oriented towards Jericho. The synagogue in Jericho oriented towards Mamre.

Several buildings which oriented to Mt. Gerizim and were defined as 'Samaritan synagogues', the ones at Shaalbim (near Latrun), Khirbet Samara, Zur Natan (Khirbet Mjadal) and Kefar Fahma also belonged to the same grid. A 'Samaritan synagogue' found in Ramat Aviv which faced east (towards Apek?) is, I suggest, another element in the same system. The list may be extended also to the remain of ancient churches in Bardala, Mishmar Ha'emek and Khirbet Jivris which oriented towards Mt. Gerizim (as reported by Zeev Safrai 1977: 102).

5. Examining the various orientations of these buildings leads me to conclude that non of the so-called Jewish synagogues was such. Jews have never built synagogues exactly in the direction of Mt. Gerizim, Mt. Nebo or Mamre nor towards other buildings. The grids are so precise that one should rule out coincidence. Obviously, this does not imply that there were no Jewish synagogues in the Holy Land in antiquity; according to the Talmud, Tiberias boasted of thirteen synagogues. It only indicates that the Jewish inhabitants of the Land of Israel had followed, as expected, the biblical commandments and avoided decorating their synagogues with mosaics depicting Greek gods, human beings, animal, flowers, geometric patterns, etc. Their synagogues were, no doubt, simple and unassuming, not very different from the houses surrounding them. The archaeologist do indeed have difficulties in determining the location of such synagogues.

Actually, among the 'synagogues' I checked only the one south-east of Qazrin in the Golan Heights oriented directly towards Jerusalem. This does not necessarily indicate that this building was a Jewish synagogue. The synagogue on Massada oriented north-west, not exactly towards Jerusalem. I doubt whether there was ever a custom to construct synagogues in the precise direction of Jerusalem.

Neither were these building Samaritan synagogues, as one would not expect rendering of human beings in them. In many of the buildings there were actually two or more layers and the archaeologist would not spoil a magnificent mosaic to see what is hidden under it. One cannot rule out that some of these building served earlier as synagogues.

6. I suggest that the buildings were Roman temples, erected in the beginning of the 4th century for the benefit of a Roman-invented syncretic movement designated to repel the Christian menace. A testimony for the erection of temples in the time of the great persecutions of Christians in the beginning of the 4th century during the reign of Emperor Maximin is given by Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Ecclesiastical History* (Book VIII, chapter 1:8):

Accordingly, he applied himself to the persecution against us with more energy and persistence than those before him, ordering temples to be erected in every city and the sacred groves that had been destroyed through long lapse of time to be restored with all diligence;

The timing of the appearance of the 'synagogues' was an era of crisis in the Roman Empire which was manifested in political anarchy, runaway inflation, famine, plagues, wars, and general instability. Researchers are still puzzled how such edifices have been erected despite the surrounding turmoil. In Eusebius' description of Maximin's actions, among them the erection of the temples, there might be an answer to this puzzle:

...and he appointed idol priests in every locality and city, and over them as high priest of each province one of those engaged in statecraft, who was the most manifestly distinguished in every branch of the public service, with an escort and bodyguard soldiers; and he recklessly bestowed government and the greatest privileges on all charlatans, as if they were pious and dear to gods. Henceforward he vexed and oppressed, not a single city nor even district, but the provinces under him completely and as a whole, by exaction of gold and silver and unspeakably large amount of goods, and by the heaviest assessments and varied fines.

7. I suggest that the so-called ancient synagogues and other buildings mentioned above were actually the temples built by Maximin. My arguments are these:

a) The accuracy and systematic nature of the grids indicate that all these buildings were part of a single master plan. It is plausible that they were erected if not by the Romans' initiative, at least with their consent. The system seemed to have three main focal cites: Mt. Gerizim, Mt. Nebo and Mamre.

One central point appeared to be the massive Greek-style temple that seemed to stand on the northernmost peak of Mt. Gerizim - Tel er-Ras - and which was later completely demolished. Its massive Aswan granite columns were carried away and strewn around the northern base of Mt. Gerizim, as if to erase traces of something to be concealed. The magnitude and technical sophistication of the remains implies Roman hands in the project. Archaeological evidence led the excavator to conclude that the building was the Temple of Zeus built by the Emperor Hadrian (C.E. 117-138). There seemed to be continuously religious centers in Mt. Nebo and Mamre.

b) In some places, like Gush Halav and Bir'am, two ancient synagogues existed. Nahman Avigad wrote that Kefar Bir'am must have been a flourishing Jewish settlement in the third century C.E., since it could afford to build two elaborate synagogues. Following my argumentation, I suggest that the second so-called synagogue was a Roman temple built despite the opposition of some of the inhabitants: the figures of a relief on the lintel depicting two Winged Victories ("Nike") bearing a wreath had been deliberately mutilated. Similar obliteration occurred in Capernaum, Na'aran, Maon, etc.

c) At Hammath Tiberias several superimposed synagogue buildings were found, and beneath them was a public building whose function is not clear. I suggest the possibility that the original building was indeed a Jewish synagogue but the site was later confiscated for other purposes, an act which needed the blessing of the authorities - the Romans. In many other places there were two or more layers of construction.

d) The Dominican father L.J. Vincent, who excavated Na'aran, decided that the mosaic was done about the 3rd century. Sukenik (1932: 53) dismissed this assertion on the ground that it could not be attributed to a period earlier than the 4th century. He argued that it was not until the time of R. Abun (the first half of the 4th century, see below) that it became permissible to make pictures on mosaic pavements. If we agree that this building was not a synagogue, then the 3rd century as the time erecting is plausible.

f) In the Roman Empire it was a great honor for a city to become a neokoros, that is, the privilege of owing an imperial temple. I would imagine that there were enough non-Jewish and non-Samaritans inhabitants of that part of the world who would have been willing, for one reason or another, to please the Romans with constructing these kind of temples. In Na'aran there is an inscription which reads:

Remembered be for good Halifu daughter of Rabbi Safra who contributed [donated] to this holy place, *Amen*.

It means that the Rabbi himself did not donate money towards the construction of this building, and raises the possibility that also some Jews participated in the scheme.

g) When we add up the images and inscriptions in these buildings, defined commonly as 'Jewish synagogues', we get a religious mishmash: figures of human beings, etrogim, shofar, lulav, seven-branched menorahs, hybrid sea horses, eagles holding a garland in their beaks, flora, fauna and geometric motifs, incense shovels, pentagrams (Seal of Solomon), hexagrams (Shield of David) and in En Gedi a large swastika turning to the left. In the mosaic of Hammath Tiberias the goddess of the

season Tishri holds in her right hand a cluster of seven grapes. The 4th century Christian author St. Epiphanius wrote:

And the Pleiades, with the seven stars in it, is known to many. But some call it the cluster because of its resemblance to a cluster (of grapes). (Dean 1935: 81)

Since the people of antiquity, no less than contemporary ones, assigned great importance to symbols, this combination cannot be an arbitrary lot. The common denominator of this hodge-podge seems to be astrology, Judaism paganism and, possibly also early Christian ideas.

There must have been a reason for this undertaking and I suggest that it was a means to fight the rising power of Christianity, more precisely, to entice those who were attracted by the rising religion. Since persecutions and executions only made the situation worse by creating martyrs, a new method was devised.

There could be little doubt that the Romans indeed built temples since Eusebius described his own time and was eyewitness to these events. In addition, the Romans certainly were not foolish and no doubt were aware of the grim truth at that point of history; there was no sense to combat Christianity with temples of Roman gods.

My guess is that the Romans, following their typical policy of 'divide and rule' tried to exploit the dispute among Christians on the nature of Jesus, that is, whether he was a son of man, a notion advanced by, for example, a sect of gentile Christians which adopted Jewish customs and was known as the Ebionites, and other groups that claimed that he was son of God. According to David Flusser (1983: 109; 1987: 56) the motive of *Bar Enosh* 'son of man' has a central role in *1 Enoch* 37-61 and *Daniel* 7. Scenes from *Daniel* were displayed in the temples of Na'aran and Susiya. I suggest that the zodiac at Beth Alpha follows *1 Enoch* chapter 82.

8. There seemed to be problems concerning the nature of these building already in antiquity. Lee I. Levine (NEAEHL s.v. synagogues, p. 1423) wrote:

The synagogue adopted many of the prevalent artistic forms of ornamentation of the time...The designs in many mosaic floors were drawn from Byzantine models found in churches, palaces, and villas...A similar influence can be detected in the synagogue façade well - particularly of the Galilean-type synagogue. Such buildings are indistinguishable from contemporary pagan edifices, as their decorations and plans are identical...One rabbinic source (B.T., *Shab.* 72b) tells of a man who walked along the street and bowed down before a building, thinking it was a synagogue. Only afterward did he realize that the building was, in fact, a pagan temple.

Maximin's scheme did not work and it is possible that even Maximin understood it. Eusebius wrote:

In truth he carried his drunken excesses to such a point that he became mad and deranged in his cups, and when drunk would give such orders as he would repent of next day when he was sober. (Ecclesiastical History, VIII 14: 11)

By all accounts, at least some of the buildings had been constructed before the beginning of the 4th century when Christianity was still an underground movement and certainly could not have proclaimed itself in such a manner. After that time, Christians could have displayed their symbols openly but these buildings lack any Christian signs like crosses, fishes, etc. Moreover, not even in a church one would expect to find such elements as, for example, a centaur, a medusa, Hercules with

his club (all discovered in Chorazin), or the symbol of the Romans, the eagle, found occasionally on lintels. In fact, ancient churches almost always pointed to the rising sun (Avi-Yona 1957:264) so these buildings could not have been constructed as churches.

9. Examining the data, I cannot escape the conclusion that in some cases early Christians were actually spoofing the Romans and using the temples as secret worshipping places. In Susiya there were secret tunnels to facilitate a quick escape, in En Gedi there was a secret to be kept and in Beth Alpha a baptizing pond covered with heavy stones. The Romans were not completely fools and in some places, like En Gedi and Rehov, there are signs indicating that the buildings were burnt down.

10. The source of the assumption that there was sometime a tradition which permitted Jews to depict pictures of human beings in the synagogues despite the clear instructions given on Mt. Sinai is based upon a portion of the Talmud Yerushalmi preserved in Leningrad and published by J.N. Epstein (as related by Sukenik 1932: 53). It states that "in the days of R. Abun they began to depict figures on mosaic and non protested." Sukenik commented:

From this it is to be inferred that it was not until the time of R. Abun (the first half of the 4th century) that it became permissible to make pictures on mosaics pavements, the reference obviously being to pictures of animals and the like. Apparently the reference here is to pictures on mosaic pavements in private houses but not in synagogues. It is conceivable that an individual allowed himself to depict figures on Masonic in his private dwelling against the will of the Rabbis. But it is inconceivable that the synagogues should have been adorned with pictures before the contemporary religious leaders acquiesced in.

One would expect such a major change in Jewish tradition to be discussed extensively in the Talmud but all we got is an obscure reference in one manuscript on which archaeologists have made such an immense inference. The idea of human figures in a synagogue, and moreover, in the form of naked Greek gods, is absurd. Modern archaeologists have turned the sages of the Mishna, Gemra and Talmud into idol worshipers.

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