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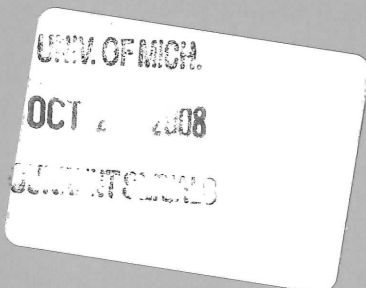
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The Sepphoris Synagogue: Deciphering an Ancient Message through its Archaeological and Socio-Historical Contents. By ZEEV WEISS. Jerusalem: ISRAEL EXPLORATION SOCIETY, 2005. Pp. xiv + 360, illus. \$80.

Sprawling across an unassuming hilly range in northern Israel, Sepphoris, “the ornament of all Galilee” according to first-century Jewish historian Josephus, played a pivotal role in the drama of ancient Palestine. The city’s tortuous history has been documented in numerous sources, from the earliest days of Roman occupation in the region (in the late 60s of the first century B.C.E.) to the twilight of antiquity and beyond. Seventy-five years of archaeological excavations uncovered a major urban center, including a theater, bathhouses, and paved thoroughfares, as well as an abundance of other structures. Although admittedly less impressive in its appearance than neighboring Beth-Shean / Scythopolis, Sepphoris features a handful of tantalizing mosaic floors with some spectacular depictions. The author of the current book, for over a decade the director of the Sepphoris excavations, focuses on one of those findings, the mosaic floor of a fifth-century synagogue unearthed in the northern part of the city.

Late Antiquity, the period spanning the fourth through seventh centuries C.E., witnessed the rise of the synagogue to the acme of Jewish life. Hundreds of these institutions peppered the landscape of the Mediterranean, in cities and villages alike, and their remains, whether large or small, frequently surface in archaeological excavations. Utilizing common architectural features of Roman public buildings, such as the basilical layout and the apsidal wall, the synagogue housed communities who gathered to worship the god of Israel. However, the ritual procedures—what people did in the building, and how they acted out reverence for their deity—although apparently distinct from those of their Roman surroundings, remain largely obscure. Even vaguer are the perceptions, the worldviews, of those engaged with the synagogue. How did the divine nature of the god of Israel register in their minds? How conspicuous was the dividing line between their religious mechanisms and the rituals and beliefs of their neighbors, including both “pagans” and followers of Jesus, who frequently attended the synagogue themselves? Due to lack of written sources (except for the large rabbinic corpus, which I shall discuss below), the only channel of communication with the inner world of the synagogue’s congregants are the pictorial representations that ornament their building. These survive mainly in the form of mosaic floors. One of the most elaborate artistic programs known to date was found by Weiss and his team in the Sepphoris synagogue.

Scholars have long debated the role of the archaeologist in the processing of historical material. Some advocate a minimalist role for those in charge of the digs, restricting their responsibilities to reporting their findings accurately, and perhaps to contextualizing them on the most rudimentary level, but leaving broader cultural and social interpretations—as well as the larger historical reconstruction—to historians. Others feel that archaeologists, if properly trained, are well (and perhaps even better) equipped to deal with the interpretation of their findings, since they benefit from intimate familiarity with the material and its geographical and architectural settings. Weiss, as the sub-title of the book clearly points out, counts himself in the latter camp, and for the most part successfully carries out the multiple tasks he espouses.

The author’s major goal in this volume is to present and interpret the mosaic floor, which takes more than half of the entire book (178 pages of chapters three and five). To this he adds a short Introduction (chapter one); a detailed discussion of the building’s architecture (chapter two), penned with his teacher, Ehud Netzer, formerly the senior director of the Sepphoris excavations; and additional chapters, mainly written by other experts with occasional contributions by Weiss himself, on the Greek and Aramaic inscriptions in the synagogue (chapter four), as well as on the dig’s smaller finds—coins, ceramics, glass, lamps, and other items (chapter six). These chapters coalesce only partially, and the reader is forced to jump between two methodologically and disciplinarily distinct projects that are here fused together somewhat artificially. On the one hand, the book offers a typical archaeological report, characterized by the minutiae of walls, loci, and stratigraphy, accompanied by an informative documentation of the inscriptions and the smaller finds; on the other, chapters three and five embark on an ambitious study of iconography, as well as social and religious histories.

The Sepphoris synagogue lacks in both appearance and magnitude. Its founders squeezed it into a crowded neighborhood remote from the city's center. They endowed it with an inconspicuous exterior and relatively modest measurements and inner layout. They did not, however, spare any efforts when it came to the mosaic floor that covered the entire central hall of the building, up to the *bema* at its front. In seven bands, some of which are further broken into separate panels, the 13.5 by 3.5 m. carpet renders a variety of themes. These include a sequence of (only partially preserved) biblical scenes associated with Isaac's birth and binding, i.e., the famous Aqedah story; a delicately colored band devoted to the zodiac and its monthly signs, with the personification of the four seasons at its corners and a representation of the sun god Helios riding a chariot at its center; a series of panels packed with ritual vessels and other liturgical items taken from the cult of the Jerusalem temple and its biblical predecessor, the desert tabernacle; and finally, next to the *bema*, a band featuring a wreath with a dedicatory inscription (one of many in the mosaic) flanked by two lions mutilating a bull with their claws. Weiss devotes 142 pages (in chapter three) to unpacking the program of the mosaic, to identifying its motives, to understanding their arrangement, and to tracking down parallels both within and beyond the Jewish milieu. He is at his best here, mastering the full range of iconographical evidence and showing a sharp and sensitive eye for detail. This allows him to reconstruct convincingly some of the scenes that were badly damaged and only sparsely preserved, as well as to illuminate the manner in which the artist brought together the various elements of his work.

In chapter five, along with arguing against interpretations that other scholars have proposed for this mosaic, Weiss offers his overall understanding of the work's message. He decodes it as a statement about hope and redemption, which in his view was mainly voiced against Christian counter-claims. This reconstruction stands on two legs: First, Weiss vehemently argues that the artistic depictions in the mosaic were compatible with the ideas voiced by rabbis in their literature from this period, mainly in the so-called aggadic midrashim (books engaged in exegetical expounding of the biblical narrative). In its most extreme formulation, Weiss claims that "the artistic medium reflected rabbinic sources" (p. 226). In another place he even fantasizes about a rabbinic community leader working with the artist on the configuration of certain scenes, thus imbuing them with rabbinic ideology (p. 228). Such a tight bond between the rabbis and the pictorial representations of the floor seems rather artificial, leading to forced interpretations that do not rise above mere speculation.

One example out of many relates to the tree to which the ram is tied in the panel showing the Aqedah. Weiss argues that the biblical narrative never mentions such a tree, and therefore he associates it with a midrashic excerpt that places the Aqedah ram in the garden of Eden under the tree of life (p. 149). But this reading is hardly convincing: First, the midrash itself does not mention that the ram was tied to the tree, only that he stood beneath it; second, for the tree of life, the single-branched, semi-bush in the Sepphoris mosaic seems rather skimpy. But most importantly, a more obvious interpretation suggests itself when we compare the Aqedah panel with its adjacent panel, which depicts the two boys left behind after Abraham and Isaac ascended to the mount. There too a tree, to which the story in Genesis never alludes, frames the scene on the left, in the same spot as in the Aqedah panel. The many parallel and contrasting details in the two neighboring panels—each presents two people, one of whom holds a weapon (a spear in one, a knife in the other), one pair stands below the hill and the other on top of it, and each scene includes one leashed animal—suggest that the tree in the Aqedah panel is part of the artistic language that impels the viewer to contrast the two scenes, and not, as Weiss declares, a midrashic "tree of life."

The most problematic of Weiss' associations of art and rabbinic concepts comes in his discussion of Helios at the center of the Zodiac. Rabbinic phraseology that combines the concept of the god of Israel as the ruler of the world with Greco-Roman vocabulary, mainly the term *cosmocrator*, leads Weiss to suggest that the Helios scene is an artistic presentation of this rabbinic notion (pp. 234–35). But Weiss does not consider the numerous sources where rabbis disdain pagan cultic motifs, a view which would have led most of them to reject the Sepphoris mosaic, at least its Zodiac panel. It is one thing to use Greco-Roman terminology to describe the might of the god of Israel; it is a very different thing to depict him artistically as a pagan god. Weiss' eagerness to tie the rabbis with the mosaic overlooks this distinction. In these examples and in others, Weiss' rabbinic associations seem superficial

and unnecessary. I fully agree that rabbinic literature can and should be applied to the interpretation of art, and indeed some of Weiss' insights from these texts are quite revealing. But the generalization that since some of the mosaic details match themes found in rabbinic literature one may assume an overall compatibility (e.g., p. 227) is an unwarranted hermeneutical extrapolation.

The second level of Weiss' interpretation deals with the social and religious situation in Palestine in late antiquity. Several aspects of his reconstruction merit further thought. First is the central role he assigns to the rabbis in this period. Weiss labels the time frame of his book as "the period of the Mishnah and the Talmud" (p. 1), a designation rooted in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* schools of the nineteenth century, which glorified the rabbis and viewed them as the sole leaders of the Jewish world in the post-Second Temple era, thus naming the period after the two major rabbinic texts. He also categorizes these men as the "rabbinic class" (p. 27), and considers their ideological positions as "standard" (p. 49), thus giving the impression that rabbinic figures functioned as a cohesive leadership group among the Jews. A direct line links these assertions and his rabbinization of the mosaic motifs as represented above. In truth, only a few, mainly Israeli, scholars still cling to such views about the Jewish realm of antiquity. The vast majority, this reviewer included, understand the rabbis as a loosely connected group of intellectuals who were rather marginal in Jewish society of this period.

Weiss' reconstruction also examines the interactions between Jews and others, which he portrays as a dichotomy. Jews and pagans are characterized as conflicting entities (e.g., pp. 1, 218, and elsewhere), who at most can "influence" one another, as in the case of the Jews adopting pagan motifs of the Zodiac. In order to defuse the tension between the pagan nature of the mosaic and the rabbis' often negative views on idolatry, Weiss must rely on the anachronistic views of Ephraim E. Urbach from the 1960s about the declining vigor of idolatry in those centuries (p. 235). Even more striking is the relationship between Jews and Christians, who emerge from this book as diametrically opposed to one another; indeed, the whole message of the mosaic floor is construed by Weiss as part of this "Judaean-Christian controversy" (pp. 249–56). One can only wonder why the excavator of Sepphoris, a Jewish city full of Greco-Roman life (as manifested by the theater and the bathhouses, to name but two prominent institutions), would adopt this naïve view of utter and complete conflict between Jews and "pagans." Were all those who attended these places, or who dined in the *triclinium* around the Dionysius mosaic, considered "bad Jews," "influenced" by the Roman way of life? Similarly, the Judaean-Christian "controversy" is a model embraced by some scholars, but seems out of place for these early days in which the dividing lines were quite blurred, especially to common people on the street.

All in all, when it comes to the broader historical picture, the book leaves much to be desired. This cannot, however, undermine Weiss' achievements. He delivers a clear and illuminating book (for minor typos see p. 52, end of n. 44; p. 227, third line from top in right column; the same footnote twice [12/15] on p. 256; and p. 260 n. 134), grounded in serious research and showing his ability to work in multiple fields and disciplines. His numerous convincing arguments, as well as those that will continue to be debated, will surely have a significant impact on future scholarship.

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Images and Gender: Contributions to the Hermeneutics of Reading Ancient Art. Edited by SILVIA SCHROER. *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis*, vol. 220. Freiburg: ACADEMIC PRESS, 2006. Pp. 383, plates. FS 98.

In 2004 an international symposium was held in Bern, which focused on the value of pictures for the reconstruction of women's history in antiquity (Near East, Israel/Palestine, Egypt, Greece, and the Roman Empire). An outcome to the interdisciplinary conference is the book under review. The volume consists of sixteen papers, ten in German and six in English. The book's editor, Silvia Schroer, who emphasizes the point that pictures have a right to be seen as a language in which cultural codes