

Hammat Tiberias and its synagogues

Contributed by Stephen Langfur

The Lake of Galilee and the Dead Sea belong to the same north-south fissure in the earth's surface, known to geologists as the Dead Sea Transform. This rip in the earth's crust belongs to the divergence of the Asian and African tectonic plates. The Transform extends about 600 miles from the southern edge of Turkey to the Red Sea, reaching its deepest point — indeed, the deepest point on the face of the earth — at the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is about 1360 feet below world sea level, and occasionally, on its shores, warm mineral springs break through, having risen from the innards of the earth. The Lake of Galilee, at minus 640 feet, also has mineral springs. No less than 17 gush forth at a place on the western shore just south of Tiberias. Originating more than a mile beneath the surface, they are hot (60-62 degrees Celsius, about 140 Fahrenheit). They are also rich in minerals: calcium, potassium, bromide and sulfates (as well as radioactive radon gas). Their waters ease the pains of rheumatism and arthritis. From ancient times, therefore, people journeyed here to bathe. Jewish law even permitted bathing here on Sabbath (one was also allowed to cook). Starting in the period of Greek domination in the land, from the conquest by Alexander the Great (332 BC) until the Maccabean revolt, which started in 167 BC and proved successful by 143 BC, a town developed. It was called, not surprisingly, "hot," that is, Hammat (pronounced "khammat": kham means hot in Hebrew).

Since Jesus was a healer, and since many sick people used to come to the hot springs, it is reasonable to suppose that their presence nearby was a factor in his choosing to focus his public mission in the area of the lake. Yet why not nearer to the springs? Why on the north shore? The answer may lie in the fact that the tetrarch Herod Antipas had established his capital in Tiberias, founded by him around 20 AD. Antipas imprisoned and beheaded John the Baptist. "Now when Jesus heard that John was delivered up, he withdrew into Galilee.

cb(4,13); Leaving Nazareth, he came and lived in Capernaum..." (Matthew 4:12-13). Perhaps Jesus did not want a similar fate to interrupt his mission at its start. By using Capernaum as his base, he could remain in a region that was largely Jewish, but if Antipas went after him too, he could quickly move by boat to the nearby territory of Antipas's half-brother and rival, Herod Philip. Capernaum was the closest town on the lake to Philip's domain on the other side of the Jordan River. We may also recall that in Matthew, Mark and Luke - the Synoptic Gospels - Jesus is very reticent about his messiahship. He goes all the way up to Caesarea Philippi, Philip's largely pagan capital, for a conversation that lets his identity out, and he warns his disciples not to tell anyone.

While building a road to the modern Tiberias in 1920-21, workers found the ruins of Hammath. An excavator then discovered a synagogue, which was dated as in use from the third to the fifth centuries AD, including a seven-branched candelabrum (menorah) carved out of limestone and complete with holes for oil. (Photo of this.)

In 1947, while workmen were expanding a modern bathhouse, they discovered more of the city, including another synagogue. Systematic excavation began only in 1961. The diggers found a series of synagogues built one on top of the other. The earliest building, dating from the first century AD, may have had another use, but the next, built in the fourth century (according to the redating by Jodi Magness, "Heaven on Earth: Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 59, 2005, p. 13), was identified as a synagogue. It fell in that century, perhaps in the earthquake of 363. On its ruins arose the synagogue whose mosaic floor is the main attraction of the site today. Its largest "carpet" shows the signs of the zodiac (the name of each is written beside it in Hebrew, sometimes misspelled) and, in the center, pictured as riding through the sky, is Helios, god of the sun.

Such symbols in a synagogue may arouse surprise, but we find the zodiac elsewhere too: at Beit Alpha, Sepphoris, Husifa on Mt. Carmel, and Na'aran near Jericho. There seem to be traces of it at Susiya in the Hebron hills and Yafia near Nazareth. The astrological signs are listed in an inscription from the synagogue at Ein Gedi. Most of these buildings presented modest facades to the world, saving their glory for the interior. From the same periods, there were also majestic synagogues in Roman style, built with columns and large dressed stones, for example, at Capernaum,

Chorazin, Merot and Arbel. On the Golan Heights and in the Hebron area there were still further variations. Altogether, the remains of more than a hundred synagogues have been found, dating from the third to the eighth centuries. (Their presence contradicts the widespread notion that the Romans forcibly exiled the Jews from the land. See the note on Bar Kokhba.)

But isn't there a ban on images? And what is the sun god doing here? Is it "kosher" to busy oneself with the zodiac, that is, with astrology? And in a Jewish house of worship!?


On images.

The Biblical text concerning images is straightforward:

"You shall not make for yourselves an idol, nor any image of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:

you shall not bow yourself down to them, nor serve them, for I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and on the fourth generation of those who hate me,

and showing loving kindness to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments." (Exodus 20:4-6)

 In the period of the Second Temple (515 BC - 70 AD), the ban appears to have been taken literally. In the architecture, frescoes and mosaics at Jewish sites from this time we do not find images. (An exception: Josephus reports that Herod the Great placed a golden eagle over the gate of the Temple; pious Jews ripped it down (and were executed). {tips}The Jewish War. Translated by William Whiston. (Abbreviated in text as War.){tips} Book 1, Ch. 33). In the necropolis of Beth She'arim, however, which dates from the second to the fourth centuries AD, the limestone sarcophagi (including those of important rabbis) are decorated with images in sculptured relief, the exact kind of thing against which their ancestors had risked their lives in protest. And here at Hammath and elsewhere, we find images in the synagogue floors. How shall we explain this change?

First, there is no doubt that they were synagogues, for Jewish motifs dominate the other mosaic panels.

It seems that Greco-Roman culture had permeated the land so thoroughly, and images were so much a part of everyday life, that the discrepancy with the Biblical text did not bother the pious, if they noticed it at all. We have an indication from the Mishnah, concerning a rabbi who bathed where there was a statue of Aphrodite:

Proclus, son of a Philosophos, put a question to Rabbi Gamaliel in Acco, who was accustomed to bathe there in the bathhouse of Aphrodite. ... "Why are you bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite?" He responded to him, "We may not answer in a bath." When he came out, he said to him, "I did not enter inside her border, she has entered inside mine. Nobody says, 'The bath was made as an adornment for Aphrodite,' but he says, 'Aphrodite was made as an adornment for the bath.' And another thing: Even if someone were to give you a fortune to do it, you wouldn't approach an idol you revere while naked or after you'd experienced a seminal emission, nor would you urinate in front of it. But look, this statue stands beside a sewer, and everyone goes and urinates in front of it. ... When people behave toward something as a deity, then it is forbidden to us [Jews], but that to which people do not relate as a deity is permitted. (Mishnah, Nezikin, Avodah Zarah 3:4)

Yet the image of the sun-god smack in the middle of synagogue floors! It still seems strange, and one can't easily explain it away. We recall, though, that back in the time of the Second Temple, the Essenes (who were extremely strict in ritual matters) showed "devotion to the Deity in a way all their own. Before the sun rises they do not utter a word on secular affairs, but offer to Him some traditional prayers as if beseeching Him to appear." (Josephus, *The Jewish War*. Translated by G.A. Williamson. Penguin, 1981|*War* II 125 -145.) The Essenes (whose ideal Temple was oriented toward the sun, and whose calendar was solar) were reflecting the subliminal influence of Persian Zoroastrianism. It conceives the cosmos in terms of a struggle between light and darkness. This religion had strongly affected the descendants of the Jewish exiles who had stayed on in Mesopotamia. The Persian prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra) viewed reality in terms of a struggle between light and darkness (a form of dualism). Beneath the supreme god of goodness and light, Ahura Mazda, the prophet had found a place for an old Indo-Iranian deity named Mithras, who was later identified with the "unconquerable sun." In the 2nd century BC, many Jews, expelled from Mesopotamia by the Parthians, made their way back to the land of their fathers and brought the Zoroastrian influence with them. It is not altogether surprising, therefore, to find the Essenes identifying the Jewish God with the sun. The same eastern influence (not necessarily via the Essenes) comes out in the middle of the synagogue floors.

The zodiac

In astrology the sun and the zodiac function together. "The Zodiac is the ring of constellations that the Sun seems to pass through each year as the Earth orbits around it." (Source) Although the courses of the moon and the planets are also crucial, the main celestial "sign" for an event (a birth for example) is the constellation with which the sun "conjoins" on the day the event occurs. We could say, "the constellation through which the sun, in its route, seems to cross on that day," but the ancients saw a conjunction, because they thought of all heavenly bodies as existing at equal distances from the earth on a celestial sphere. To speak for a moment like a modern: the earth and the other planets (except Pluto) orbit on the same plane around the sun; someone standing on the sun, watching these planets circle year after year, would see them moving against the fixed background of certain constellations, which are more or less in line with that plane: the ram, the bull, and so on. This belt or highway of constellations, forming the fixed background, is the zodiac. The ancients distinguished 12 constellations on that belt.

We are not on the sun; we are on the earth that is moving, like the other planets, around the sun. But as we move, the sun appears (or would, if we could look at it) against the changing background of the zodiacal highway: one month it is "in" the ram, the next month "in" the bull, etc. (More on this, with a qualification.) From our perspective on earth, the moon and the planets also move in relation to the zodiac. "Because the stars maintained their patterns while planets mysteriously moved among some of them, the constellations of the zodiac acquired particular significance." (Clark Foundation, my emphasis - SL.) In the view of astrologists, the various conjunctions of the heavenly bodies signify the vicissitudes of human fate.

The conjunctions can only bear such significance if one perceives a divine will (or wills) behind those "mysterious" movements. It was natural for the ancients to do so: human life depends so much on what happens in the sky. Cuneiform texts discovered at Ugarit, dating from 1200 BC, indicate that El, the Canaanite high god, had 70 children, all associated with the stars. They leave a trace in the Bible as the stars that fought against Sisera (Judges 5:20) or as the "host of heaven" (1 Kings 22: 19). Yet the stars are many. A strict monotheist will be wary of them and avoid astrology:

Isaiah 47:13-14 "You are wearied in the multitude of your counsels: let now the astrologers, the stargazers, the monthly prognosticators, stand up, and save you from the things that shall come on you.

cb(47,14); Behold, they shall be as stubble..."

Jeremiah 10:1-2 "Hear the word which Yahweh speaks to you, house of Israel!

cb(10,2); Thus says Yahweh, “Don’t learn the way of the nations, and don’t be dismayed at the signs of the sky; for the nations are dismayed at them."

cb(10,3);

These Biblical injunctions were far from the minds of those who used this synagogue at Hammat Tiberias or other synagogues like it. (The benches were located around the sides. Given the relation of Helios to the astrological symbols, one could choose a place according to one's birth sign!) Most rabbinical authorities agreed that the stars do influence human affairs, but some held that Israel was exempt. (Selected examples from the online Jewish Encyclopedia.)

In the fifth chapter of his doctoral dissertation, *Astrology and Judaism in Late Antiquity*, historian Lester J. Ness has given an interesting explanation for the presence of the zodiac in these ancient synagogues:

"Ancient Jews were part of the larger society, although with some distinctive customs, notably the worship of a single god, YHWH, and a disdain for the use of religious images. During the Hellenistic period, Jews adopted the practice of astrology enthusiastically, but they gave the principles of astrology their own Judaic interpretation. Thus, the planets were still imagined as personal beings, who might answer requests. But the beings were seen as subordinates of the single God, angels of YHWH, not independent deities. The power of astrology came from YHWH, and was administered by the angels. In the same way, Jews adopted the use of astrological art for religious symbolism. But, as with astrological practice, the art was given a distinctive Judaic interpretation. Thus, it was not possible to portray YHWH directly in a synagogue. But it was possible to portray Him indirectly, by portraying His satraps, the planets. In the examples which survive, Sol Invictus in the center of the zodiac represents the whole planetary system, pars pro toto. ...

"The entire composition not only praised God's power, but also reminded worshippers of God's love and care for Israel. It is no accident that the zodiac is coupled, at Beth Alpha, with the sacrifice of Isaac or, at Naaran, with Daniel in the lion's den. These two panels reminded viewers of how God rescued Isaac and Daniel when they needed Him. Moreover, all the zodiacs are found in connection with panels of symbols from Jewish cult. Just as God is faithful to care for the universe, including the Jews, so the pious Jew will be faithful to worship the Almighty God, who so often, in the Bible, declares His love for Israel. The virtues of this theory [Ness concludes] are that it explains the zodiac mosaics by taking astrology and its role in Jewish society seriously. We do not require Jews to be either totally isolated from the rest of the human race, or apostates from Jewish tradition. Jews used the same horoscopes, spells, and symbols as their neighbors, but they used them in a Judaic way for Judaic purposes. Like their modern descendants, they were both part of the larger surrounding society, and at the same time faithful to the Israelite tradition."

In most of the known ancient synagogues with mosaic "carpets," the carpet below the zodiac contains a Biblical scene, such as the near-sacrifice of Isaac (at Beit Alpha), the visit of the angels to Sarah (at Sepphoris), or Daniel in the lions' den (at Na'aran). In the example at Hammat Tiberias, however, the equivalent panel contains, instead, two lions guarding nine dedicatory inscriptions in Greek. One of them mentions "Severus, the pupil of the most illustrious patriarchs." (This helps date the mosaic, because the Jewish patriarchate was abolished by the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius II in 429 AD.) Severus's patriarchs were the members of the Sanhedrin, who assembled in nearby Tiberias. At the time when this synagogue functioned, they were creating the Palestinian version of the Talmud. (The other, more completely preserved version was written in Babylonia.) Because of this inscription, the synagogue is sometimes referred to as that of Severus.

Logistics

Hammat Tiberias is a National Park.

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Opening hours:

April 1 through September 30, from 8.00 - 17.00. (Entrance until 16.00)*

October 1 through March 31, from 8.00 - 16.00. (Entrance until 15.00)*

*On Fridays and the eves of Jewish holidays, the sites close one hour earlier. For example, on a Friday in March one must enter by 14.00 and leave by 15.00.