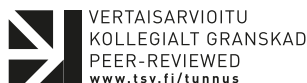


The symbolic universe of the Temple

A case-study of the fifth-century synagogue at Sepphoris
with focus on its mosaic

JOHANNA BOKEDAL



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.121801>

ABSTRACT • For Jews, the Jerusalem Temple is the historical focus of ritual practice and pilgrimage. After its destruction in 70 CE, synagogues gradually became important centres for community and ritual, yet the Temple remained a symbolic site of hope and longing in diasporic Judaism in manifold ways. By means of a case-study of a fifth-century synagogue in the town of Sepphoris, this article examines the synagogue and its mosaic floor to consider the hypothesis that the Jews that commissioned and used this synagogue had a self-categorised religious identity (cf. Turner *et al.* 1987) which referenced a symbolic universe of the Temple (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966) and can be studied through visual, material and ritual symbols. It is further suggested that material and visual evidence must be seen in relation to the rituals performed in the synagogue, and the synagogue itself.

As symbols, geographic places are thought to be more than mere arbitrary sites where something important happens or happened in the past. Somehow the distinctive landscapes, interiors, or the events that transpired there serve to imbue the site with a significance that can evoke emotional associations. (Bell 1997: 157)

In Judaism there is no space more centrally sacred than the Temple: the place where God said his presence would dwell on Earth (2 Samuel 7:1–13; 2 Chronicles 7:1–16, NRSV). Whereas ritual practice and pilgrimage had been centred around Jerusalem and the Temple, after its destruction in 70 CE, Jews had to make significant adaptations to ritual worship. There is consensus that synagogues in the diaspora at some point took on most of the roles assigned to the Temple, in both practical and symbolic ways. This

has been prominently argued by scholars such as Lee Levine, based on findings such as that from the Cairo Genizah (Levine 2010: 1269). However, taking a closer look at the synagogue as a visual, material, symbolic and ritual place and space, arguably Jewish communities in the diaspora during the Late Antique period continued relating their religious, and possibly subtle aspects of their socio-cultural, identity to the symbolic universe of the Temple, which the synagogue itself came to embody. Images of the Temple are symbols that evoke strong conceptual ideas of God's promise (Weiss 2000: 5), and this possibly also applies to a longing for the historical Temple, or the hope of the Temple being rebuilt. I consider all of these views of images of the Temple as important, but here wish to focus on images or evocations of the Temple in connection with ritual objects as participating in the idea of promise and

redemption, and a sense of Jewishness being rooted in a symbolic universe of the Temple through the synagogue, despite socio-cultural adaptations in Antiquity. In this article I offer a case-study from the fifth-century synagogue at Sepphoris; I hold to the view of Zeev Weiss (2000) that we see evidence of the centrality of God's promise of restoration in this synagogue both in relation to a mosaic panel depicting the Temple (sometimes argued to be an image of the Torah Ark, which I will also discuss), but also to the mosaic floor as a whole. However, I further suggest that the material evidence here must be seen in relation to the rituals performed in the synagogue, and the synagogue as a whole – and all as part of the symbolic universe of the Temple. The symbolic universe, as presented by Berger and Luckmann, is a concept that refers to the representational framework that 'orders history [and] locates all collective events in a cohesive unity that

includes past, present and future' (1966: 104). This theoretical concept is foundational here, as this opens up the possibility of considering the Temple and its importance in more ways than one. This, considered in relation to more abstract questions surrounding Jewish identity, or belonging, in the Late Antique period, may indicate that rather than being exclusively a historical Tabernacle, or a building destroyed in 70 CE, the Temple was an active idea, ideal and self-perceived identity-marker of God's presence and promise of restoration, as had been relayed through the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Isaiah 51:3, 61:4; Ezekiel 36:24; Jeremiah 29:14, 32:37) that lived on through the synagogue in several forms.

The structure of this article is anchored in a discussion on the idea of identity in general, and Jewish identity in particular, as well as a consideration of symbolism as a broad concept. I then move on to a brief discussion of

Jon-Paul Lapeña 2018



View of a section of the lower half of excavated Sepphoris, with the Forum and its mosaic floor in the foreground.

the use of mosaics as historical sources, and a contextual description of the Sepphoris synagogue and mosaic. Several components of the mosaic itself are then analysed in relation to further literature and the outlined ideas of the symbolic universe of the Temple, as the theme of Jewish identity in the synagogue is continued – related to the Temple in symbolic ways: visual and ritual, in light of the metaphorical symbolism of the synagogue liturgy as a further evocation of the Temple. Before the culmination of the article, I also include a brief discussion of the common geographical orientation of synagogues towards Jerusalem as a reminder of the continued importance also of the destroyed earthly Temple in Jerusalem post-70 CE and hypothesise why the Sepphoris synagogue differs in this case.

Symbolism and the complexities of identity

Before progressing into the main body of this article, a few central definitions need to be established. How should ‘identity’ (specifically Jewish identity) be defined here, and what is meant by ‘symbolism’, or ‘Temple symbolism’?

On a basic level, a symbol is ‘something that stands for something else’ (Struck 2005: 8906). When compared with other similar terms, such as ‘sign’, ‘metaphor’ or ‘image’, a symbol can, however, be more concretely defined as ‘a representational mechanism that renders transcendent realities into tangible forms’ (Struck 2005: 8906). Symbols are often connected with rituals; Victor Turner (1989: 27–9) described a few important characteristics in this connection. Any one symbol can contain several meanings at once and have the ability to unify these meanings, and may also unite various levels of significance (such as ideological, material or sensory). The various functions of symbols are particularly important here, especially regarding their

ability to unify meanings. Throughout this article, I consider symbols also in the context of rituals, and use Turner’s outline as a base. The application of the language of symbolism to synagogue mosaics can be justified by assuming that these ornamental floors were not just commissioned for decoration (Levine 2005: 595), but, in addition, might justify consideration in a ritual light, as well as a visual and material one. There was most certainly a symbolic value attached to many, if not all, synagogue images during their initial appearance, as well as from a modern perspective. Admittedly, the terms we use are limited by our understanding of the images, and individual ‘symbols’ may not have meant the same in Late Antiquity as now (Runesson 2017: 244–55), but there are some conclusions I believe we can draw.

Symbols are an important component of the exploration of Jewish self-categorised identity during Late Antiquity since it was during this period that specific Jewish symbols, such as the *menorah*, became more established as identity markers (Levine 2005: 231). However, concretising ideas around ‘identity’ and ‘identity formation’ is notoriously difficult. Shaye Cohen recently published an article that questions how distinct a sense of ‘Jewishness’ was in the diaspora during Antiquity. Based on analysis of written material, Cohen states that ‘Jews and gentiles in antiquity were corporeally, visually, linguistically, and socially indistinguishable’, but did also maintain a sense of discreet identity (Cohen 2020: 10, 26). Yet, communities often adapt through encounters with cultures and symbolism other than their own, as we find that Jewish groups did in contact with Graeco-Roman culture in Late Antique Roman Palestine, explaining why it is sometimes difficult to distinguish an idea of Jewish presence and habits from those of non-Jews. Adaptation can also take the form of hybrid

models, where a group modifies aspects of this other culture to fit their own (Hezser 2010: 29), even in understated ways. Self-categorisation theory (Turner *et al.* 1987) works on the basis that identity is something produced in the interaction between individuals or groups with specific situations, which then influences thought and behaviour in fluid and varied ways, but can lead to a sense of a collective 'us' in relation to specific things and events. The approach in this article is to consider Jewish identity in Sepphoris as self-categorisation, here primarily considered in light of an 'us': a Jewish community which related internally to specific forms of religious symbolism even though Jews in Sepphoris are also likely to have expressed hybrid socio-cultural identities. I maintain a strong focus on the internal use of material, ritual and visual representations as a way of upholding an internal, religious group identity as rooted in specific things – here specifically Temple associations. Although the article is limited by contemporary definitions and modern ideas of studying identity-formation through symbols, I take the stance that certain material and ritual aspects considered here point to a larger reference system of meaning, and are also part of the 'system of symbols' that constitute religion, according to Clifford Geertz (1993: 90–1). It would be possible to focus this article on symbolism without mentioning identity but this would, I believe, remove the role and meaning of the agents (the commissioners and users of the synagogue) from the material, visual and ritual aspects of symbolism analysed. Symbols are important for understanding the formation and maintenance of religious and cultural group identities, but the converse may also apply.

On the use of mosaics as scholarly material

Until close to the end of the twentieth century, mosaics were often considered more from a decorative standpoint, rather than as historical sources that can offer insight into the life of historical communities (Bowersock 2006: 2–4). This has radically changed in the last few decades, as mosaics have been increasingly studied, and some have even been able to supplement material that is otherwise scarce, or unknown, in the form of written sources (Bowersock 2006). One such example is the Madaba Map mosaic in modern-day Jordan, which shows a number of towns and cities that were not previously known by name in biblical resources or writings by historians, such as Eusebius (*ibid.* 26). The Sepphoris synagogue mosaic has also been used in various historical studies in dialogue with other material evidence or written sources, ranging from discussions surrounding the role of rabbinical influence in Sepphoris to studies of polemics between Christians and Jews (Cohen 2006: 215–16; Gregg 2015: 140ff.). If we look at mosaic representations in religious buildings, Christians in the Late Antique period were using many of the same motifs as we find in Jewish synagogues from this time, such as the binding of Isaac, or Daniel in the Lion's Den (Kessler 2000: 64–72). We also see some of these representations in the synagogue at Sepphoris, most notably some of the panels closest to the synagogue entrance which feature the angel visiting Sarah. Joan Branham interestingly notes that some Christian written sources show a desire to claim a connection with the destroyed earthly Temple as part of a Christian narrative of sanctity, and even try to disconnect the Jewish synagogue from any links with the former function of the Temple (Branham 1992: 387). Even our focus here is not the discussion of polemics, or even

interactions, between different groups, it is worth considering that irrespective of the role of similar stories and images within Jewish, Christian or Muslim traditions, ‘from the angle of vision or from the faith perspective of the people in one of the communities, the sacred stories rehearsed, studied, and ritually observed were ultimately only their stories, holding only their meanings’ (Gregg 2015: 119). By studying synagogue structure and artistic decoration it is also soon evident that the focus is self-assigned identity-markers, since they were paid and constructed by, or at least for, Jews. We find that there are several subtle messages that place aspects of self-categorised Jewishness firmly in the context of a symbolic universe of meaning through visual and ritual symbolism, in many ways connected to ideas that lead us back to the Temple and what it represents. Below, these will be detailed further in a study of the mosaic itself.

Evoking past, present and future: examining the visual and ritual evocation of the Temple in the synagogue mosaic at Sepphoris

Late Antique Sepphoris was largely populated by Jews (Bowersock 2006: 39), making it a relevant case study for Jewish identity in general, but here more particularly in relation to specific symbols. Its synagogue is particularly interesting as an example since it contains an identified depiction of the Temple (Weiss 2000), although the argument that this is, instead, a Torah Ark has weight among some scholars, such as Steven Fine (1999: 232). There are some other instances of the Temple being depicted in a synagogue mosaic, such as the synagogues at Beit Alpha or Dura Europos (Levine 2005: 241), but the Temple is not among the most common motifs, unlike the *menorah*, which we also



View of the mosaic at the Sepphoris synagogue from the top of the mosaic floor.

find in the Sepphoris synagogue mosaic. The mosaic has been used in a range of studies, as briefly outlined above, and is considered a good example of major trends in Jewish art of the time (Weiss 2010: 179). The synagogue was discovered in 1993 by Zeev Weiss, who has since been one of the leading experts writing about both the mosaics and the synagogue. The floor mosaics demonstrate that there was an awareness of decorative styles within the wider Sepphoris community, and that the same craftsmen were most likely involved in several buildings. Weiss noted stylistic similarities, for example, in a comparison between the synagogue mosaics and those in the Nile Festival building, which is located in the lower city area, a short walk away from the synagogue (2005a: 659).

There are seven parts to the mosaic: the angels visiting Abraham and Sarah, the binding of Isaac, a zodiac, the offerings at the Temple, and a depiction of Aaron offering sacrifices in the Tabernacle. Then there is another row of panels, depicting the Temple surrounded by two seven-pronged *menorahs* with three legs each. These are surrounded by symbols of the Jewish holidays, including the *lulav*, *etrog*, *hadass* and *arava*, as well as an image of *shofar*.¹ The top panel depicts two lions that have their paws on the head of an ox, framing an inscription dedicated to the donor.

There is no consensus among scholars about the best way to study the various components of the Sepphoris synagogue mosaic – if the message of all panels should be considered together as one theme, or if they should be treated as a collection of different messages (Levine 2002: 835). If we take a numerical approach, it makes sense for all panels to be considered together, considering that there are seven distinct sections, which may refer to a symbolic notion of fullness.

- 1 The objects mentioned here are commonly depicted in Jewish art, but form an important part of ritual practice. During the festival of Sukkot, the branch of a palm (*lulav*) is bound together with branches of willow (*arava*) to the left and myrtle (*hadass*) to the right. At the bottom of the cluster, a citron fruit (*etrog*) is placed. These four botanical components together form a ritual and symbolic object which has its roots in a description in Leviticus 23:40. It is held and waved in each of the four directions in the morning during the first seven days of Sukkot, while a blessing is read. The *shofar* is a separate object with its own ritual use. It is a musical horn which is made from the curved horn of an animal, usually a ram, and is usually blown at specific times, such as at during festivals such as Rosh Hashanah and during the end of Yom Kippur, where it signifies a call to repentance.



Detail of the architectural panel, featuring the temple, *menorah* and other ritual objects.

Weiss, for example, takes the view that the whole mosaic floor works together to point to three specific themes: ‘promise, God’s centrality in creation and redemption’ (2000: 5). These principles are ones I believe that we can also see in separate elements of the iconographic scheme. However, these also need to be considered in relation to the underlying symbolism of the Temple.

If we assume that there is a narrative to follow for the visitor, who would enter the synagogue from a doorway and narthex on the south side of the building closest to the panel featuring the angels visiting Abraham and Sarah, we can observe that the first panels that visitors to the synagogue encounter are those of well-known and important narrative stories. Following this is the zodiac, including figurative representation, which is a visual reminder of the calendar year. Perhaps this makes sense structurally, as the zodiac occupies the middle of the mosaic floor, which creates a break between stories from the past with a more eternal, general mapping of each year. Above it, we can see panels which, at first sight, include further depictions of historical buildings and narratives: first a representation of the Tabernacle and offerings, and then an image of the Temple

and ritual objects, just before the last panel with the donor's inscription, flanked by two lions. However, with the exception of the donor inscription, in these panels there is a more general focus than the historical, since we can also observe a wider reference to the role of daily offerings, rituals and Jewish holidays, all of which order the Jewish calendar and way of life.

The Temple representation here is considered as an image whose identity is confirmed as being that of the Temple, either the first or the second, by some (including Weiss), or a depiction of the Torah Ark by others (for example Fine), as briefly mentioned earlier. For the case made here, however, this is not necessarily an important distinction. The ark itself belonged within the Tabernacle and the Temple and was placed in the most central space. The connection between the Torah Ark and the Temple – both as representations of God's sovereignty and presence – is undeniable, and both interpretations, or either of them, of this visual image therefore connect to the same symbolic universe. The association between the synagogue, the people using it and the Temple in various forms is strengthened by the fact that we have a depiction of the Temple on one half of the mosaic floor, and an image of the Tabernacle in the other half, divided by the zodiac. This visually evokes the reality of God's presence on earth in two different material buildings at different historical times, which would have been experienced by the Jews using the synagogue. The location of the Temple image, placed in the middle of the panel centrally in front of where a Torah Ark would have stood on a *bimah*, a raised platform, facing west (Weiss 2000), also makes it important. Considering, once again, the experience of a visitor to the synagogue, the Torah Ark would have captured one's attention walking into the synagogue, but the floor could also arguably have

kept the visitor's eye locked on the floor, possibly as a sign of humility or submission, which was an important Jewish principle (Dickson and Rosner 2004).

Directly above the Temple image is the wreath with an inscription that is, unfortunately, damaged, but which would previously have detailed the name of the donor. It might seem somewhat strange that the name of the donor occupies such a central place. It was, certainly, a way for the donor to be honoured and remembered. Yet, perhaps this can also be read as a sign of submission, or even an offering. The whole synagogue is erected, we could say, as an offering to God and the community – to be used for the continuation of ritual and as a reminder of God's promises – past, present and future. Even here we can therefore read a reference to the centrality of submitting to God, and the mosaic in itself becomes an offering of something beautiful from the donor. Although the synagogue was not the Temple it was still a dedicated space of communion, which in many ways took on the former role of the Tabernacle and Temple (cf. Langer and Leonhard 2021; Levine 2010; Rouwhorst 2013; Skarasune 2002). We return to the significance of this towards the end of this article.

At the side of the mosaic panel featuring the donor's inscription we see images of two lions. They are a common form of symbolism in early Jewish art; lions are also depicted in other synagogues, such as at Hammat-Gader (Weiss 2000: 5, 14), but in the instance of the Sepphoris mosaic it is not completely clear why they are included. They were possibly largely decorative, but are more likely to have symbolised strength and ferocity. This is supported by various scriptural readings. The decoration of the first Temple as described in 1 Kings 7:29 contained carvings of lions, and twelve lions were a decorative feature of the steps leading to King Solomon's throne, where

lions also stood on each side of the throne (1 Kings 10:19–20). There are references to the lion of Judah (Genesis 49:9), or the lion as a representation of the Israelite people rising up in Numbers 23:24. The fearlessness of the lion when faced with attackers is even used as an image of God's own vengeance in Isaiah 31:4. Although the lions could refer either to the Jews, with a scriptural connection, or to God himself, that they were included as part of the decoration of the Temple and the throne of King Solomon is also significant.

Considering the panel below the donor's inscription once again, we might ask what provoked the inclusion of a material and visual representation of the Temple in this mosaic, given that there are fewer depictions of the Temple in synagogue mosaics in comparison with other representational images (Levine 2005: 241). Robert Kirschner significantly argued that artistic references to the Temple do not just depict a memory of the past but also signify the hope for restoration (1992: 81). This is also the conclusion that Weiss has reached regarding the Sepphoris mosaic (2010: 178). In fact, he considers the depiction of the Temple as highly significant since Judaeo-Christian conflict concerning status as God's Chosen People was prominent at the time of the mosaic's construction (*ibid.* 178). As already mentioned, the focus here is to consider the Jewish perspective in relation to the Temple – irrespective of whether or not polemic existed between Christians and Jews in this respect. Based on the case-study of this one mosaic, we can hypothesise more readily on the influence of Graeco-Roman art, while also keeping in mind that self-categorised identity works on several levels, and the Jews at Sepphoris would probably have been aware of Christian as well as Graeco-Roman ways of using symbols, whether or not it directly influenced them in their understanding of themselves. Yet there is a salience to the

image of the Temple here. All by itself, it strongly evokes both the notion of promise as well as redemption: two of the qualities mentioned by Weiss, which arguably characterise the whole mosaic.

However, other symbols here also reference the Temple in the supposed symbolic universe that we can read in this mosaic in its synagogue context. To the sides of the Temple image are two large *menorahs*. It is not surprising to find these here, since the *menorah* is one of the most depicted symbols in the Jewish diaspora from the Second Temple period, with over one thousand confirmed representations (Meyers and Meyers 2016: 384). We first find references to the design of the *menorah* in Exodus 25:31–40; it has both a ritual use as well as manifold symbolic interpretations related to Jewish identity, some of which include remembrance of the Temple, light and life itself, the Torah as light, the Tree of Life, redemption, hope, and messianic salvation (Ovadiah and Mucznik 2014: 605; cf. Roth 1955: 151–64; Goodenough 1954: 95–6; Smith 1957–8: 497–512; Namenyi 1960: 42–73; Sperber 1965: 155). The *menorah* can, indeed, symbolise any or all of these, but we see several central ideas emerging from the associated meanings – including a focus on representing life, the Temple, hope and redemption. The Temple and Torah are concrete objects in one form of interpretation, but several of the meanings mentioned have a more general significance, and also belong together: light and life, God's word and God's presence. The *menorah* itself also brings forth an image of the Tabernacle, preceding the Temple, as described in Exodus. Conceptually, visually and ritually, the *menorah* therefore evokes a manifold message of God's dwelling on earth.

Moreover, it is not only the visual representation of the *menorah* or the Temple here that can be linked to Jewish identity as rooted



View of the fourth-century floor mosaic in the synagogue at Hammat Tiberias, featuring an image of a Torah ark, menorahs, shofar, lulav and etrog, a zodiac panel, and an inscription framed by two lions.

in the Tabernacle or Temple. There are other symbols that are less direct, yet still clear. One example is the frequent mosaic representations of Jewish ritual objects such as the *lulav*, *hadas*, *arava* and *etrog*, as well as the *shofar*, in a range of synagogue mosaics from the Late Antique period, such as at Sepphoris, Bet Shean and Hammat Tiberias. The *lulav*, *hadas*, *arava* and *etrog* are connected to the festival of Sukkot, or Tabernacles, which is a reminder of God's provision during the exodus from Egypt, and have their roots in Leviticus 23:40. The *etrog* and *lulav* alone, Rivka Ben-Sasson mentions, are often seen as representative of all four plants, and are found in the majority of early synagogue mosaics (2012:

7–9), but in the Sepphoris mosaic we can see all four species represented in a bowl to the left of each *menorah*. Ben-Sasson makes the interesting textual connection between the celebration of Tabernacles and the eschatological vision of Zechariah 14:16–19, that all nations shall go to Jerusalem, and that any that do not will not receive rain (*ibid.* 10), and the inclusion of these botanical species, easily recognised by any Jews, would remind them of the fulfilment of God's promises. The Feast of Tabernacles was the time when many Jews also travelled to the Temple to offer thanks and pray for rain, and it places the Temple firmly in the centre of associations. These symbols are also ones we find on coins during the first revolt against the Romans (69–70 CE), and again during the Bar-Kokbah Revolt (132–6 CE) (*ibid.* 7), meaning that they were used at an early date as symbols, probably of unity, but also as a reminder of God's sovereignty.

Moving on to the depiction of the *shofars* to the right of the *menorah* on either side in the Sepphoris mosaic, we may note that, for unknown reasons, they are not aligned in the same direction (unlike in the mosaic at Hammat Tiberias) – with one pointing to the left and one to the right. The *shofar*, together with the *lulav*, *hadas*, *arava* and *etrog*, have all been commonly interpreted as an attempt to recall the memory and significance of the Temple, with an appeal to all senses beyond the merely visual, since their uses in ritual practice were evoked (Levine 2005: 232), and the distinctive sound of the *shofar* called all to repentance. This implies, again, that the visual inclusion and ritual uses have an important and interconnected significance here. In terms of the local context of the use of images, Rina Talgam has pointed to the common practice of visually representing a cult through its sacred objects in 'pagan' Roman art. She thereby draws a parallel with

Judaism. After all, ‘for a religion in which God is invisible, the adoption of this formula [using depictions of ritual objects to visually represent Judaism] was a reasonable solution’ (Talgam 2013: 226). The motifs are, however, clearly rooted in a Jewish sense of symbolic and ritual significance. Arguably even just this single row of panels featuring the Temple and ritual objects can be interpreted as symbolic of a range of messages relating to the past and the future, a symbolic universe made relevant to the then-present community at Sepphoris.

Although the awareness of Graeco-Roman art and styles is an important factor to keep in the discussion, we can also turn our attention more generally to trends specifically in Jewish art at the time. Noa Yuval-Hacham identifies two trends discernible in the style of mosaic floor in diaspora synagogues in general: ‘limited portrayal of figural images and the presence of religious [images]’ (2019: 8). We have already seen that there are primarily religious and ritual images and

symbols depicted in the mosaic at Sepphoris. However, there is also a degree of figurative representation in the zodiac component that, at first glance, appears rather strange. Zodiacs have been discovered in a range of other synagogues, including at the nearby synagogues at Bet Alpha and Hammat Tiberias. One interpretation of the zodiac is that it is based on the Jewish calendar (Hachlili 2002). Weiss expands on this and argues that there are several layers to understanding the zodiac: one is the Roman, cultural relevance, while the other is representative of ‘the power and actions of God as the sole ruler of the universe’ (2005b: 1128). This interpretation that multiple levels of meaning may be attached to this element of the design makes sense if the local context is also considered; that the Jewish community, as mentioned, was also integrated to some extent into Graeco-Roman culture. In a self-categorised meaning, the religious symbolism would still go above and beyond the Graeco-Roman style of the zodiac, and place a greater cosmic meaning behind it,

Jon-Paul Lapeña 2018



View of the zodiac panel at the Sepphoris synagogue mosaic.

where YHWH was central. We also see in this mosaic that the central figure here is the sun, which does not have a face. This leaves open the interpretation that it could be Sol Invictus (Helios), the sun god on his chariot, or a representation of the origin of light and life itself. Not the sun, but the source of it and all other light (Genesis 1:3).

Bearing in mind the definition of a symbol as something which unites meanings, the representation of the Temple made the demolished *locus sanctus* of the Temple tangibly present in the rituals and lives of any Jew who entered the Sepphoris synagogue, but also pointed to wider ideas relating to rituals and symbols which create a plethora of associations. There is also the role of the wider Graeco-Roman artistic and cultural context to consider here, but this does not remove the layer of meaning and significance in the symbols of the mosaic pointing to a clear focus on the Temple and Temple rituals, on a material and visual as well as ritual symbolic level.

A general view of representational images: the socio-cultural context

The mosaics are arguably also important considered from the perspective of the then contemporary synagogue users and their view of images. Images in Late Antiquity had real power, and particularly with reference to the image and presence of the emperor (Engemann 1988: 966–1047). It is also not without reason that the making or worship of images was condemned in Exodus 20:4 during a much earlier period (cf. Leviticus 26:1), even if we clearly also have nuanced interpretation of the use of images through the course of Jewish history (Raphael 2016). However, in the wider Graeco-Roman cultural context of the Antique and Late Antique period, images were also considered as ‘surrogates’

for what they represented (Belting 1996: 1). Among other reasons, this was why it was important for emperors to have their portrait circulated across their empires on coins, in statues and in paintings as a physical extension of their presence and authority (Lavan 2011: 457). This wider cultural concept and understanding, applied to both the visual and symbolic representation of the Temple in various forms within the synagogue, offered a very clear way for the Jewish community to indicate the continued presence of the Temple, which acted as a symbolic representation of God’s protection and presence. In other words, although a case can be made that the synagogue replaced or continued the functions of the Temple in various forms, another argument could be made that the synagogue itself was a representation of both the past and (possible) future earthly Temple and God’s promises of protection and restoration. Even the earthly Temple in Jerusalem was considered only as a representation of the heavenly Temple (Talgam 2013). The symbolic and conceptual ways of visually engaging with the Temple as a physical space, alongside the wider symbolism of it as a general representation of God’s promise, allowed it to maintain a very real and tangible presence for Jews in the synagogue space. For the Jews at Sepphoris, the mosaic of the Temple was arguably also symbolic in this manner on several levels. It indicates that Jewish religious identity was strongly connected with making both past and future ideas of the Temple tangible, while they were also very clearly rooted in the present.

Embodied in the present: synagogue ritual as metaphor

It is also possible to note aspects of the enactment of the Temple imagery in the present as part of synagogue life. Rituals, when

performed, are of course always in the present, and also become a present enactment of whatever symbolism is involved (Gilhus and Mikaelsson 2012: 79). It is still not clear exactly what functions synagogues had when they first appeared around the last centuries BCE, or during the first century CE, depending on location (Skarasune 2002: 123). During the time of the (earthly) second Temple, reading of Scripture did not feature significantly in the rituals performed in the Temple. It was, however, a central component of synagogue gatherings, possibly already from their first conception (Rouwhorst 2013: 824–5). For the sake of comparison, it has also been proposed that the liturgical reading of Scripture in the church was inspired by earlier developments in Jewish synagogue life (*ibid.*). However, in the time when the Temple still stood, these would have been practices supplementary to visiting the Temple and participating in the ritual atonement and purification practices there (Skarasune 2002: 124–5). The historic rituals performed in the Tabernacle, and then the Temple, were primarily centred on sacrifice and purification through ritual (*ibid.* 95). After 70 CE, as ritual practice shifted to synagogues, gradually rabbis and local leaders began to teach that words and verbal prayers could replace the physical offering of animals, although this was originally considered a temporary measure. Nevertheless, through this, ‘they emphasized its continuity with the Temple worship’ (Langer and Leonhard 2021). The use of the synagogue itself has long been interpreted as an allegory for Temple ritual, and there is also evidence that this view of the synagogue was prominent in at least some circles from some time after 70 CE. Although it is a medieval source, a Midrashic fragment from the Cairo Genizah commenting on Isaiah 56:7 has been studied and used to support this. In the words of Levine:

As long as the Temple existed, the daily offerings and sacrifices would atone for the sins of Israel. Nowadays, the synagogues of Israel replace the Temple, and as long as Israel prays in them, they, in effect, replace the daily offerings and sacrifices; and when prayers are recited [therein] at the proper times and [the Jews] direct their hearts [to God through their prayers], they gain merit and will see the rebuilding of the Temple ... (Levine 2010: 1269)

The conclusions that can be drawn from this are that rituals in the synagogue symbolised the original Temple ritual, and substituted for it as a way to continue worship of God after access to the earthly Temple was made impossible. The synagogue then took on the functions of the Temple, but notably changed the way that they were embodied. The Temple, here, is not only the earthly one, but connects more widely to what the Temple itself symbolises: the ultimate power and presence of God embodied in a continuum of reference to symbolism and ritual. The specific symbolism of the *lulav*, *badas*, *arava* and *etrog*, *shofar* and *menorah*, all of which are included in the mosaic, also indicates that the mosaic references God’s promises and presence through the Temple, more so than we might first assume. Whether or not it is a memory of the uses of these objects in the historical, earthly Temple that is hinted at here, or if we should read this in a different light, their inclusion is not accidental, and cannot be disconnected from the way that these objects were used. Nor can we ignore earlier use in the Temple, then current use in the synagogue, or even contemporary uses of these objects as part of rituals that continue in communal Jewish spaces and settings today. The visual representation of the Temple in the Sepphoris synagogue indicates that Jewish ritual identity there in the fifth

century was still closely tied to the Temple. Although one can question if this was a widespread sentiment or was largely just an important representation to include for those who commissioned and paid for the mosaic, it still indicates that the Temple image is likely, in part, to have symbolised the Jewish hope of restoration of the earthly Temple, so that Temple ritual could be reinstated on holy ground. In the meantime, however, the synagogue acted as a widely accepted replacement, temporary or not, and the function and intention of the space, and the significance of the visual symbols, are all relevant to each other. Nevertheless, just like the mosaic depiction of the Temple, the synagogue and synagogue ritual were only a representation of the Temple and its rituals, and not the 'real thing'.² It still gave the Jewish community a clear focus – past purpose, present embodiment, and hope in the future of the Temple.

The Temple in sight: the symbolic orientation of synagogues

On the theme of orientation, something should also be said of the geographical orientation of many Late Antique synagogues, which continues the theme of identity rooted in the Temple. Most synagogues built in Late Antique Palestine are oriented towards Jerusalem. This is another factor that makes it plausible to assume that the memory and significance of both Jerusalem and the destroyed Temple continued to shape Jewish practice and identity (Levine 2005: 326–9). However, the Sepphoris synagogue is unusual in this respect, since it does not conform to this pattern, and instead faces north-west. Levine proposes a range of possible reasons for this:

2 As discussed above, the real Temple could ultimately be considered to be the heavenly archetype.

Ignorance (however unlikely), indifference, convenience (topographical or otherwise), or the need to accommodate some other factor. If the situation today (particularly in the Diaspora) is a barometer, any one of the above, or a combination thereof, may well have played a role in creating this change in orientation. (Levine 2005: 328–32)

The theory of a combination of reasons is plausible, although a lack of awareness of the symbolic value of synagogue orientation does not seem likely, as Levine also indicates. The fact nevertheless remains that the Sepphoris synagogue does not reference the Temple through its positioning, yet the orientational reference to either the Temple or Jerusalem here illustrates the importance of comparing synagogue structures to observe common themes as well as differences. Considering, however, that a Temple mosaic was commissioned for this synagogue, and we can see several symbols in both the mosaic itself and the ritual and symbolic role of the synagogue overall, as discussed, it was clearly not insignificant for the local community that the Temple was commemorated in the building.

Conclusion

As the example of the Sepphoris synagogue demonstrates, while there are many things that can be discerned from any one synagogue, it is important to be aware of similarities and differences between identified synagogues in both the Galilee region and further afield to make informed interpretations concerning Jewish synagogue communities and identity. Despite the strong focus here on searching for a Jewish identity connected to the Temple, Jews in Late Antique Sepphoris and beyond most certainly had more cultural and religious influences in addition to what came from the synagogue sphere. The

concept of the Temple in any form, or meaning, was not the only thing that shaped either private or public worship, a sense of place, or self-categorised identity for Jews living in Sepphoris. Jews in this Late Antique community probably did not define themselves solely through their relationship with either the Temple or synagogue, and arguably a sense of 'Jewishness' was not distinct in the Antique period overall, even if it may have been subtly present (Cohen 2020), and may even have been 'just one part of a larger identity that was essentially Greco-Roman in character' (Hayes 2011: 90). Even after analysing the synagogue and its mosaic, it is most plausible to believe that there were different components of Jewish socio-cultural identity, and that it is more accurate to speak of Jews in Sepphoris as part of a hybrid cultural model (Hezser 2010: 29). Nevertheless, the manifold symbolism of the Temple within this synagogue demonstrates that this earthly place, heavenly archetype, and representation of the future hope of God's restoration and fulfilment of prophecy and promise were all close to the hearts of Jews there: embodied and materialised in rituals and symbolically evoked through the mosaic and the synagogue space itself. The idea that the Temple is seen, and in some ways experienced, through a manifold symbolic universe has also been explored by considering the elements mentioned above as interlinked rather than separate. Exactly what the representation of the Temple in the synagogue at Sepphoris meant to the community might never be fully known, but place and space undoubtedly shaped them. Geographic places become more than places when considered also on a symbolic level. They gain emotional components (Bell 1997) and can also, it may be argued, unify memories and views towards the future through a spectrum of symbolic meanings (Turner 1989), as the example of

the Temple imagery demonstrates. This might also be possible to see in other synagogues if a similar approach to readings of the Temple is applied. In Sepphoris, however, the symbolic evocations of both the physical Tabernacle and Temple together with ritual Temple practices were one way for the Jewish community to propagate a sense of self-defined religious identity in relation to the symbolic universe of the Temple. Through this continuation of religious symbolism and ritual practice in their hybrid cultural context they were able to subtly root and propagate their Jewish identity in Scripture, a geographic place, present enactment through ritual, an internal cultural memory, and a future hope of restoration. ■



Johanna Bokedal is an Assistant Professor in Religious Studies at NLA University College in Bergen, Norway, with research interests in the role of art, aesthetics and materiality in the experience and presentation of religion and spirituality. Bokedal has an MA in the Religious Roots of Europe from Lund University, Sweden, and a Scottish MA in Art History and Modern History from the University of St Andrews, Scotland. Photo by courtesy of NLA University College.

Bibliography

- Bell, Catherine. 1997. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Belting, Hans. 1996 (1994). *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (University of Chicago Press).
- Ben-Sasson, Rivka. 2012. 'Botanics and iconography: images of the lulav and the etrog', *Ars Judaica* 2012: 7–22, <https://www.academia.edu/8120355/A_r_s_J_u_d_a_i_c_a_2_0_1_2_7_Botany_and_Iconography_Images_of_the_Lulav_and_the_Etrog>.
- Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in*

- the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books).
- Bowersock, G. W. 2006. *Mosaics as History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap University Press).
- Branham, Joan. 1992. 'Sacred space under erasure in ancient synagogues and early churches', *Art Bulletin* 74(3): 375–94, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3045889>.
- Cohen, Shaye J. D. 2020. "Those who say they are Jews and are not": how do you know a Jew in Antiquity when you see one?, in *Diasporas in Antiquity*, eds. Shaye J. D. Cohen and Ernest S. Frerichs (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies), 1–46, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzpv5cc>.
- Dickson, John P., and Brian S. Rosner. 2004. 'Humility as a social virtue in the Hebrew Bible?', *Vetus Testamentum* 54(4): 459–79, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568533042650840>.
- Engemann, Josef. 1988. 'Herrscherbild', in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 14 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann), 966–1047.
- Fine, Steven. 1999. 'Art and the liturgical context of the Sepphoris synagogue mosaic' in *Galilee through the Centuries: Confluence of Cultures*, ed. Eric M. Meyers (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns), 227–37.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1993. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London: Fontana Press).
- Gilhus, Ingvild Sælid, and Lisbeth Mikaelsson. 2012. *Nytt blick på religion* (Oslo: Pax).
- Goodenough, Erwin Ramsdell. 1954. *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period IV* (New York: Pantheon Books).
- Gregg, Robert C., 2015. *Shared Stories, Rival Tellings: Early Encounters of Jews, Christians and Muslims* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press).
- Hachlili, Rachel H. 2002. 'The zodiac in ancient Jewish synagogal art: a review', *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 9: 219–58.
- Hayes, Christine. 2011. *The Emergence of Judaism: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press).
- Hezser, Catherine. 2010. 'The Graeco-Roman context of Jewish daily life in Roman Palestine', in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, ed. Catherine Hezser (Oxford University Press), 28–42, <https://www.academia.edu/4268902/_The_Graeco_Roman_Context_of_Jewish_Daily_Life_in_Roman_Palestine_>.
- Kessler, Herbert L. 2000 'The Sepphoris mosaic and Christian art', in *From Dura to Sepphoris: Studies in Jewish Art and Society in Late Antiquity*, eds. Lee I. Levine and Zeev Weiss, *Journal of Roman Archaeology: Supplementary Series* no. 40: 65–72.
- Kirschner, Robert S. 1992. *Baraita de-melekket hamishkan: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Translation* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press).
- Langer, Ruth, and Clemens Leonhard. 2021. 'Liturgy, ritual, worship', in *Encyclopedia of Jewish-Christian Relations* (Berlin: DeGruyter), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/ejcro.4414975>.
- Lavan, Luke. 2011. 'Political talismans? Residual "pagan" statues in Late Antique public space', in *The Archaeology of Late Antique 'Paganism'*, eds. Luke Lavan and Michael Mulryan (Leiden: Brill), 439–77.
- Levine, Lee I. 2002. 'Art, architecture and archaeology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, ed. M. Goodman (Oxford University Press), 824–51.
- Levine, Lee I. 2005. *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
- Levine, Lee I. 2010. 'Synagogues', *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, eds. J. Collins and D. Harlow (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing), 1260–71.
- Meyers, Carol L., and Eric M. Meyers. 2016. 'Images and identity: menorah representations at Sepphoris', in *Viewing Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology* (Leiden: Brill), 384–400, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004306592_016>.
- Namenyi, Ernest. 1960. *The Essence of Jewish Art* (New York, London: Thomas Yoseloff).
- NRSV: *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible* (National Council of the Churches of Christ, 1989).
- Ovadiah, Asher, and Sonia Mucznik. 2014. 'The symbolic significance of the menorah', *Liber Annuus* 64: 603–14, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.LA.5.105512>.
- Raphael, Melissa. 2016. 'Judaism and visual art', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.98>.
- Roth, Cecil. 1955. 'Messianic symbols in Palestinian archaeology', *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 87: 151–64.
- Rouwhorst, Gerard A. M. 2013. 'The Bible in liturgy', in *The New Cambridge History of the*

- Bible* 1, eds. J. Carleton Paget and J. Schaper (Cambridge University Press), 822–42.
- Runesson, Anders. 2017. 'Jewish and Christian interaction from the first to the fifth centuries', in *The Early Christian World*, 2nd edn, ed. Philip Esler (London: Routledge), 244–64.
- Skarasune, Oskar. 2002. *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press).
- Smith, Morton. 1957–8. 'The image of God: notes on the Hellenization of Judaism, with especial reference to Goodenough's work on Jewish symbols', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 40: 473–512.
- Sperber, Dan. 1965. 'The history of the menorah', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 16: 135–59.
- Struck, Peter T. 2005. 'Symbol and symbolism', in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* 13, 2nd edn, ed. Lindsay Jones (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference), 8906–15.
- Talgam, Rina. 2013. 'The representation of the Temple and Jerusalem in Jewish and Christian houses of prayer in the Holy Land in Late Antiquity', in *Jews, Christians and the Roman Empire: The Poetics of Power in Late Antiquity*, eds. Natalie B. Dohrmann and Annette Y. Reed (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press), 222–48.
- Turner, John C., Michael A. Hogg, Penelope J. Oakes, Stephen D. Reicher, and Margaret S. Wetherell. 1987. *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (New York: Basil Blackwell).
- Turner, Victor. 1989 (1967). *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Weiss, Zeev. 2000. 'The Sepphoris synagogue mosaic', *Biblical Archeology Review* 26(5): 1–14.
- Weiss, Zeev. 2005a. 'Mosaic art in early fifth-century Sepphoris: iconography, style, and the possible identification of a local workshop', *AIEMA* (October, November): 657–77.
- Weiss, Zeev. 2005b. 'The zodiac in ancient synagogue art: cyclical order and divine power', in *La mosaïque gréco-romaine IX*, ed. Hélène Morlier (Rome: École française), 1119–29.
- Weiss, Zeev. 2010. 'Artistic trends and contact between Jews and "others" in Late Antique Sepphoris: recent research', in *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity*, David Gwynn and Susanne Bangert (Leiden: Brill), pp. 167–88.
- Yuval-Hacham, Noa. 2019. 'Art and identity in Late Antique synagogues of the Roman-Byzantine diaspora', *Arts* 8(4), doi: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/arts8040164>>.