

Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 31 (2021)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 31



Book review:Asaf Friedman, Art and Architecture of the Synagogue in Byzantine Palaestina, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019

Zeev WEISS

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.28094](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.28094)

Copyright © 2021, Zeev WEISS



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

WEISS, Z. (2021). Book review:Asaf Friedman, Art and Architecture of the Synagogue in Byzantine Palaestina, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 31, 467–474.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.28094>

A. FRIEDMAN, *Art and Architecture of the Synagogue in Byzantine Palaestina*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019, 174 pp. ISBN 9781527532786

Ancient synagogue art varies in both subject matter and artistic quality. While the exterior of some synagogues in ancient Palestine were adorned with decorative elements, most synagogue buildings focused on enhancing the inner space of the prayer hall with architectural decoration, liturgical furniture, wall paintings, and mainly colorful floor mosaics that today merit a great deal of attention. Mosaic carpets with rich figurative depictions appeared in the synagogue's nave while those containing geometric and floral patterns usually embellished the aisles. The array of motifs adorning the mosaic carpets in the late third century CE, and more intensely in the course of the Byzantine period, was inspired by Greco-Roman and early Christian iconographic traditions.

The many studies on synagogue mosaic art in late antiquity focus on the iconography, style, sources, and meaning of the figural images inside the building. Asaf Friedman's monograph, devoted to the study of the art and architecture of Byzantine synagogues (fourth to seventh centuries CE), approaches the subject from a different perspective. He indeed focuses on the figural and symbolic motifs embedded in the various mosaic carpets but, at the same time, examines the intricate geometric patterns that decorated large areas inside the prayer hall. In his quest to determine the nature of art in the Jewish realm, he seeks to identify the geometric symbols chosen by each community and ascertain their mystical meaning based on rabbinic and other sources. This is an artistic discussion that attempts to trace the intricate connection between art and architecture and between text and image, and to outline a number of principles concerning the nature of synagogue art in Byzantine Palestine.

The book comprises two major parts, each of which is divided into several chapters. Part One, containing five chapters, spells out the thematic principles for deciphering visual language. Following a brief socio-historical introduction, Chapter

1 analyzes the relationship between Jewish art and rabbinic texts. According to Friedman, the images in synagogue art are not merely decorative elements but also signify religious aspects, maintaining that through an analysis of recurring motifs one may reveal their true significance and gain insight “into the philosophical, aesthetic and mystical laws of the people who created them” (p. 6). The motifs he deals with are varied, from a large panel to a small detail, including geometric patterns that adorn other parts of the mosaic. In the course of presenting his findings, Friedman addresses the use of figurative art in Jewish circles, introducing views from past and present research. He posits that the existence of Jewish literary sources indicates the involvement of rabbis in synagogues, even in supervising the design of the building, and that the use of pagan idols is permitted as long as one is not worshipping them (p. 11). In addition to the use of classical Jewish literature for interpreting synagogue art, he attaches great importance to the mystical exegesis PaRDeS (Hebrew acronym for “heavenly orchard”), which he maintains dates to the third century CE and is essential for decoding visual texts (p. 12). In this context, he refers to the role of religious symbolic numerology in the Jewish realm as expressed, for example, in various parts of the Passover Haggadah (p. 13).

Chapter 2 treats the architecture of the ancient synagogue. After describing the history of the synagogue, its relationship to the Jerusalem Temple, distribution throughout the region, and chronology, the author focuses his discussion on the architectural elements of the building. He opens with a presentation of synagogue plans, points out some of the differences and similarities in the layout of various buildings, elaborates on the Torah ark that was introduced into the synagogue at a later stage, and then ends with a discussion of the orientation of the building and the direction of prayer toward Jerusalem. Here he makes the distinction between the Torah ark and the Temple shrine depicted in a mosaic panel located in front of the Torah ark in several synagogues. The former refers to the actual cabinet (chest) built to house the scrolls and the latter is a representation of the Temple façade (p. 18). Subsequently, he discusses the synagogue building’s façade and the myth of the women’s gallery, and then draws the reader’s attention to the interior design of the third-century CE Dura Europos synagogue, which he believes served as a prototype for later synagogue buildings. The chapter concludes with a thought-provoking discussion concerning mosaic elements which may serve as “directional” markers for reading the various informative layers embedded in the mosaic layout (p. 22).

The mosaic carpet set in the nave in several synagogues was divided into three unequal units: the zodiac appears in the center, the architectural façade and

Jewish symbols are set in the panel closest to the *bema*, and the biblical themes are dispersed throughout the other panels of the mosaic floor. This tripartite panel design is the subject of Chapter 3, in which Friedman seeks a holistic interpretation of such carpets appearing, according to him, at Ḥammat Tiberias, Sepphoris, Susiya, Bet Alpha, Na'aran, and Ḥammat Gader (p. 23). He opens with a description of each panel, analyzes every detail, and compares such panels appearing in several synagogues. He then offers his own interpretation of each panel and finally provides a comprehensive explanation linking the various depictions (23-28). The proposed interpretation is predicated on two complementary explanations based upon the methodological inquiry of PaRDeS: the first, P (Heb. *Peshat*), refers to the literal meaning of the panels based on the biblical text. The other refers to the mystical meaning based upon three methods of exegesis: R (Heb. *Remez*, hint), their allegorical meaning; D (Heb. *Derash*, interpretation), their comparative midrashic meaning; and S (Heb. *Sōd*, secret), their hidden (mystical) meaning (pp. 28-31). Consequently, Friedman concludes, walking on the mosaic panels was tantamount to disregarding them, an action intended to destroy some pagan symbols and, in addition, directed against Christian beliefs (pp. 31-32). The chapter concludes with a presentation of the identities of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Samaritans in the Late Second Temple period whose sectarian or group signatures are recognizable, according to Friedman, in various artistic and architectural elements in the Byzantine synagogue (pp. 32-34). He suggests, without any supporting arguments, that the lion symbolizes the Sadducees, and the bull or ram—the Pharisees; the appearance of the two symbols together in one locale is indicative of the conflicts between these two sects sharing the same building. Furthermore, he unconvincingly argues that Jews and Samaritans shared communal space in five synagogue buildings oriented toward Mount Gerizim and that their mosaics contain symbols representing a compromise between the two communities.

Throughout Chapter 4, Friedman offers symbolic interpretations for the recurring geometric and stylized floral motifs in synagogue mosaics; some are mystical in nature but lack adequate references to corroborate his inventive explanations. Thus, for example, he argues that the number 4 is the most common element appearing in the geometric panels, representing the four sons in the Passover Haggadah or the binding of the Four Species on Sukkot that “symbolizes our desire to bond the four “kinds” of the Jews in the service of God” (p. 35). The inclusion of 28 squares (multiples of 4 and 7) in one carpet at Susiya represents the Blessing of the Sun (*Birkat Haḥammah*), a Jewish ritual recited every 28 years to praise the

Creator, whereas the medallion in the center of the same mosaic is adorned with a rosette of 26 petals denoting God's name in Gematria (Jewish numerology) (p. 36). A stylized rhomboid floral design represents the tree of knowledge (pp. 37-38); the number 8 appearing in octagonal geometric mosaics symbolizes new beginnings—"It was on the eighth day, the first day after Creation, that God returned to work and a new week began"—but "it also indicates wealth and success on Earth" (p. 39); a mosaic band with ten interlocking circles represents the Ten Commandments (p. 41); and a geometric panel of a grid made of red and black split hearts at Jericho is considered a "giant map and compass that doubles up with religious belief" (pp. 45-47, 153).

The fifth and final chapter of Part One is devoted to formal visual semantics and seeks to elucidate the religious rhetoric concealed in other motifs appearing in several synagogues not mentioned in previous chapters. He provides a complex interpretation for the panel portraying the eagle and Medusa mask from Japhia (pp. 49-50), searches for the meaning and relationship between the figurative images arranged in a series of vine medallions in the mosaic at Ma'on-Nirim (pp. 50-53), offers an explanation for the laughing lions at Hammat Gader (pp. 53-54), and concludes with a discussion of the meander pattern, a well-known design in Byzantine mosaics (pp. 54-56). He focuses on each element separately; his proposed interpretations provide each symbol with a religious meaning but, in effect, it is difficult to find a common thread (if any) that connects the four topics discussed in this chapter. Furthermore, the thought-provoking interpretations presented in this chapter may be appealing to the reader, but the author does not provide enough information to support his arguments. For example, the eagle at Japhia may be reminiscent of God's words, "I bore you on eagle's wings" (Exod 19:4), however the interpretation of the image with the spirals and the three columns below it is offered with absolutely no corroborating evidence. According to Friedman, the face portrays a typical young Jewish male; the spirals represent *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world through charity and repentance); and the three columns represent the three biblical Patriarchs. Thus, he surmises, the amalgamation of the three elements illustrates the idea that "Those who are descendants of the three patriarchs and obey the Jewish laws should ascend to heaven" (p. 50). Likewise, Friedman's attempt to link the panel of the laughing lions from Hammat Gader (which, he maintains, symbolizes "the life of the next world") with the Sadducees, and then to associate this sect with the synagogue, seems completely bizarre (p. 54).

Part Two of the book is a twelve-chapter catalogue wherein each describes the architectural and artistic finds of the twelve synagogues discussed in the book. The chapters are divided into four subcategories—Sadducees, Pharisees, Sadducees and Pharisees, and Jews and Samaritans—and are similarly structured. Each opens with a presentation of the architectural finds, followed by a detailed description of every carpet visible inside the prayer hall, into which Friedman incorporates his ideas, including some of those presented in Part One. A brief summary at the end of each chapter spells out the author's arguments for the identity of the community and the synagogue's association with a certain group or, in the case of shared use, two groups.

The book concludes with a brief summary in which Friedman presents, once again, the main issues and insights discussed in previous chapters. These are usually repetitions of ideas presented in the first parts of the book, to which he adds new insights that shed further light on his take of the synagogue and Jewish society. He speculates that ordinary members of the community were not allowed to sit in the nave during the service because it prevented viewing the mosaic (p. 164), suggesting, therefore, that those attending the synagogue sat either on the benches arranged along the building's walls or in the gallery, if one even existed. Friedman maintains that rabbinic literature makes no reference to either geometric designs or more concrete object-oriented depictions (p. 164). He thus speculates that the rabbis only endorsed the conceptual visual designs for the synagogue's decoration, but the final stamp of approval was given by the communal leaders "as a way to show the congregation that there are some precedents in their decision making" (p. 165).

The book is supplemented by a glossary, bibliography, and index. It contains a large number of figures, mainly plans of the synagogues and mosaic carpets discussed in the volume, in which the author illustrates, in color, the various motifs he discusses. It is an effective tool that helps the reader understand the author's arguments, even if they are difficult to accept.

The interpretation of synagogue mosaics characterizes past and present scholarship, however this book offers a broader prism that holistically examines the geometric and figurative depictions in synagogue mosaic floors and their meanings. It claims that a visual language adhering to traditional literary sources was developed in the synagogues of ancient Palestine and that whoever designed them "left labels for the figures and clues in the form of directional markers for the geometric forms" (p. 159). This is a pretentious claim that could open up new avenues of inquiry in the study of ancient synagogue art, however it is not without

its problems. Along with the value that such a study might offer, I find much of this book to be inherently faulty in its methodology and inadequacy to corroborate its claims, in addition to its problematic editing.

The book focuses on twelve synagogues decorated with mosaics uncovered over the years in ancient Palestine, but refrains from discussing the impressive mosaics at Khirbet Wadi Ḥamam and Ḥuqoq. Although the latter synagogues were excavated in the last two decades—Khirbet Wadi Ḥamam between 2007 and 2012 and Ḥuqoq since 2011—Friedman fails to augment his discussions with information from the published preliminary reports of these sites. Their inclusion in the discussion could have enriched his analysis, and at times would have even confirmed or disproved some of his hypotheses.

In describing the findings from the various synagogues, Friedman often relies on secondary scholarly literature (e.g., Levine, Hachlili, Fine), quotes them, adopts their ideas, and at times even takes things out of context. For example, in order to support his claims that Jewish sectarian groups continued to exist through late antiquity, he argues that “the priestly class changed and they paved their way to communal leadership in the Galilee following the void created by the waning power of the intellectual elite known as the rabbinic class” (p. 32), thus relying on one sentence on p. 92 at the beginning of my article, “Were Priests Communal Leaders in Late Antique Palestine? The Archaeological Evidence,” published in 2012. However, my article, in fact, goes *against* this claim and argues unequivocally that neither the introduction of architectural elements nor the inclusion of artistic motifs in mosaics lends any support to the notion of a rise in the status of the priests or that they held a specific role in the leadership of the late antique synagogue. Elsewhere (p. 98) he maintains that the rabbis were involved in the synagogue, basing his argument on excerpts from Levine’s *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (2005), in which he explains that the degree of rabbinic involvement and influence in the synagogue was complex and varied and should not be understood as a sweeping and facile generalization (pp. 181-182, 466-498); Friedman also assumes that “the secondary *bima* (at Susiya) was the rabbis’ official place of adjudication” (p. 98).

In his quest to interpret the various images on the mosaic floors, the author uses all sources indiscriminately, mixing them together without giving consideration to their chronology, typology, or geographical provenance—be they tannaitic or amoraic, halakhic or midrashic, Palestinian or Babylonian. In most cases his explanations are based on early rabbinic literature, but he is also inspired by the anachronistic medieval Lurianic Kabbalah (pp. 38-39) and assumes that

the dedicatory inscriptions set in 14 circles in the aisle of the Sepphoris synagogue refers to the number of books in Maimonides' 12th-century *Mishneh Torah* (p. 88)!

His explanations for the geometric patterns in synagogue mosaics, which are characterized by overinterpretation, are difficult to accept—not only because he offers several explanations for the same motif, but mainly because his suggestions, which are based on a numerical analysis of a recurring model in some synagogues, seems entirely coincidental. For example, according to Friedman, the number 4 may symbolize the four sons in the Passover Haggadah or the binding of the Four Species (as mentioned above), but one may equally ascribe it to the four cardinal directions in which God resides, the four seasons of the year, the four Matriarchs, the four Kingdoms in Daniel 7, etc. Even if these or other ideas were important to the Jews in any given community, no proven connection was found between the mystical ideas and the geometric patterns. Furthermore, even if the geometric patterns are recurrent in some synagogues, this is certainly a familiar phenomenon in mosaic art in the Byzantine period—in private construction, in the public sphere, and in the many churches built in this period throughout the region. A comparative analysis of the mosaic patterns in the various structures and used by different religious communities certainly would have contributed to the discussion. I would add that exposure to other studies devoted to Byzantine mosaic art by Ernst Kitzinger, Henry Maguire, and Mark Merrony, for example, would have provided Friedman with the appropriate methodological tools in his research and could have enhanced his arguments and discussions.

The proposed identification of the synagogues based on sect and group identity needs more corroboration, but it seems that Friedman is unaware of the diverse studies dealing with the Jewish society in Roman times and late antiquity. Suffice it to say, the author could have gained important insights into the socio-religious and cultural identities of the Jews in late antique Palestine were he familiar with the scholarship of Martin Goodman, Catherine Hezser, Hayyim Lapin, Stuart Miller, Oded Irshai, Günter Stemberger, and many others.

Unfortunately, the many repetitions throughout the book demonstrate that it is not well edited. Ideas raised in the first part of the book are repeated in the second part, and then are reiterated in an abridged form in the summary. At times, we find repetitions in the same chapter, as the case in the descriptions of individual synagogues at Ḥammad Tiberias (pp. 61-63), Bet Alpha (p. 69), and Susiya (pp. 97-98). Some of these chapters open with a description of a building's remains and then repeat the description later on with some more details. At times,

Friedman contradicts himself in the same chapter and even on successive pages. For example, on p. 119 he dates the synagogue at 'En Gedi to the end of the second or early third century CE, while on p. 120 he dates the same building to the Late Roman period (i.e., the first–second centuries CE); he states that the synagogue at Na'aran is oriented toward Jerusalem (p. 127), while at the bottom of the same page he indicates that the building faces Mount Gerizim; he identifies the two images preserved in the mosaic circle at Japhia as a ram and ox (p. 147), while on p. 148 he identifies them as a buffalo and ox.

Some of the factual information Friedman furnishes is inaccurate or incorrect. For example, the synagogue at Ḥammad Tiberias is not dated between 286 and 337 CE (p. 9), the synagogue at Bet She'an (Tell Iztaba) was not constructed in 508-509 CE (p. 139), and there are 13 inscriptions set in circles in the aisle of the synagogue at Sepphoris (and not 14, as stated by the author) (p. 88). Elsewhere, he erroneously identifies motifs depicted on mosaic floors, which is clearly reflected in the identification of the objects on the central axial column in the mosaic at Ma'on-Nirim. He refers to kraters as amphoras and two linked baskets full of grapes as a table (pp. 52-53). Finally (though probably not exhaustively), he misspells the names of some of some settlements (Susya, Yafia, and Tell Ictaba) without verifying their standard or usual spelling (Susiya, Japhia, and Tell Iztaba).

Having stated my above reservations, Friedman's study is nevertheless challenging and thought provoking. He examines recurrent motifs in the mosaics of ancient synagogues and offers new directions in their analysis, albeit sometimes problematic, based on information appearing in rabbinic literature. Although studies of this kind that focus on synagogue mosaics from a broad perspective should be encouraged, the ambitious attempt to solve the intricacies of Jewish art set forth in this book must be used with great caution.

ZEEV WEISS

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem