

ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES IN THE JUDEAN DESERT AND IN THE JERICHO VALLEY

by

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Until some fifty years ago, literary sources were the only form available on the scale and significance of the Jewish settlements of the Second Temple period and Mishna and Talmud times in the Judean Desert and in the Jericho Valley. The discovery in 1947 of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the Caves of Kh. Qumran ushered in a new era of dramatic archaeological discoveries in the Judean Desert, shedding new light on the history and scope of Jewish settlement in this region. Surveys conducted after the Six Days' War by Israeli scientists in areas newly opened up in the southern Hebron region and the Jericho Valley yielded important information on numerous Jewish settlements, thus adding to our existing fund of knowledge, but relating mainly to the Judean Desert Sect in the period between the First War with the Romans to the Bar Kochba Rebellion. Recent excavations of hitherto unknown synagogues and the renewed study of synagogues excavated many years ago have added vastly to our knowledge of Jewish settlement in this region. The discovery of Second Temple synagogues at Masada and Herodion evoked unjustified surprise, since literary sources such as Josephus Flavius, the New Testament, and *ChaZal* (Our Sages of Blessed Memory) report the existence of synagogues at that time. It is, however, true to say that these are the first archaeological remains of that period to be discovered.

The most interesting synagogue found to date is that of the flourishing Jewish settlement at En Gedi on the shore of the Dead Sea. It dates to the period following the Bar Kochba Rebellion. Two synagogues apparently built by the same architect at the large Talmudic settlement of Eshtamo'a and at nearby Susia have been thoroughly studied as to plan and decoration. Although the synagogues at Jericho and Ma'aran to the north-west were excavated many years ago, re-discovery and conservation activities at Na'aran have yielded many new details. The Masada synagogue is situated in the north-west part of the fortress near the wall. It takes the form of a square hall with the entrance on the east and stone benches along three of its sides. A small room, apparently a repository for the Tora Scrolls, adjoins its east-

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ern side. A *geniza* yielded fragments of scrolls. The hall was bare of decoration. The walls and benches built of stone from the ruins of Herod's palace on the spot are covered with a layer of muddy plaster mixed with straw. In Herod's times the hall had a different floor-plan; it may however have served even then as a synagogue. It assumed its present form in the days of the Masada fighters who, in the thick of battle against the Romans, built a small sanctuary within their citadel walls.

A structure similar in plan to that of the Masada synagogue was excavated in recent years at Herodion, the fortress palace and burial place of King Herod. During the First Revolt against the Romans, the hall in the south-western part of the magnificent palace was fitted with stone benches built partly of stones from Herod's palace, as at Masada, and from columns taken from the pillared garden to the east of the hall. The entrance to the synagogue is in the eastern wall. A ritual bath dating to the same period has been preserved nearby.

The two synagogues at Masada and Herodion, constructed during the Second Temple period, are characterized by a total absence of decoration, by entrances in the east wall, and by benches lining the walls. The Ark of the Law was apparently not located within the hall; Tora scrolls were brought from an adjoining room when prayers were held. The resemblance between the halls of these two synagogues and the halls of pagan temples of the same period at Dura Europos in Syria is most surprising,

The remains of a modest synagogue apparently begun in the third century C. E. have been uncovered recently to the north-west of Tel Goren, the ruins of early En Gedi. In the fifth century this building underwent significant changes with the addition of a new mosaic floor and doorways. The synagogue and its adjacent buildings (one possibly a hostel or inn) add to our fund of information on this sizeable Jewish community dating from the Second Temple period to the end of Byzantine rule, identified in the En Gedi inscriptions as "Qartha." In its final stages the synagogue had a nave and three aisles to the east, west, and south. The north side facing Jerusalem was fitted with a niche for the Ark of the Law. In front of this niche is a rectangular *bema* once apparently fitted with a wooden screen separating it from the nave. The "Qathedra de Moshe" (Seat of Moses), the seat of honour of the head of the community, was placed to the right of the Ark of the Law. In its earlier form, the north wall had an opening in place of the present Ark of the Law; this opening faced Jerusalem as in the synagogues of this period in Galilee. Among the many finds are charred scrolls, a seven-branched bronze candelabrum, and numerous coins. Of particular interest is the first basin for washing hands and feet to be found in a synagogue. It was discovered to the west of the synagogue in a corridor leading to the three main entrances of the nave. The synagogue's mosaics, dating from the building's two major periods, are notable for their simplicity

of design. The earlier floor has geometrical designs only, among which is a fully-preserved swastika which served as the central element. The later floor is decorated with birds (peacocks and others), three stylized lamps, geometric designs and inscriptions. Several unusual and highly interesting inscriptions in Hebrew and Aramaic came to light in the western aisle. The first inscription sets forth the fathers of humanity (1 Chron. I:1-4). The second inscription describes the twelve Signs of the Zodiac and the months of the year, starting with Nisan and ending with Adar, as well as the Patriarchs and the three companions of Daniel. There are additional dedicatory inscriptions, some mentioning "Bnei Qartha" (sons of the city) and other individuals such as Yonathan the Cantor and Hizqyo, Yosef, and 'Iron (?), sons of Halfo. The most intriguing of the inscriptions contains oaths against slanderers, thieves, or revealers of the secrets of the local citizens.

This synagogue is unique in that it has no parallel among the synagogues known to date. The fact that the Jews of En Gedi deliberately refrained from making use of pagan symbols such as the Wheel of the Zodiac (rendered here by an inscription and described in words) – so popular in many of the synagogues in the country and even at Na'aran and possibly at Horvat Susia in Judaea – gives an interesting indication as to the secluded nature of the En Gedi community in the period of the Mishna and the Talmud.

As far back as forty years ago, the ancient synagogue at Eshtamo'a was investigated by the Hebrew University. Eshtamo'a (Samo'a) is identified by Eusebius, along with En Gedi, as a large Jewish village of the fourth century C. E. After the Six Days' War, the building was cleared and conservation activities were carried out; in the course of this treatment various details of plan and decoration were revealed. This synagogue and a recently excavated synagogue at Horvat Susia (the latter not known from literary sources) are latitudinally aligned, with the focus of the building – the niche for the Ark of the Law and the *bema* – situated against the long wall which faces north towards Jerusalem. The entrances, particularly richly carved at Eshtamo'a, face east, apparently in strict observance, as in the Masada and Herodion synagogues, of the ruling that "synagogue entrances are to be installed only in the eastern wall." The unusual orientation of these two latter buildings can thus be explained; the Ark of the Law is in the northern wall facing Jerusalem, and the entrance is in the eastern wall rather than in the southern wall. Both buildings have a portico supported by four columns and a large open-air courtyard on their eastern facade. The walls of the sanctuary are lined with stone benches and floors of the nave and portico are made of mosaic. The few mosaic fragments preserved at Eshtamo'a show a strong stylistic affinity with the mosaic at H. Susia. An Aramaic dedication has been preserved at Eshtamo'a; El'azar HaCohen, one of the contributors to the synagogue, is "remembered for the good."

As in the case of the building itself, the mosaic floors of H. Susia underwent many modifications. The original floor of the nave was a plain white mosaic and it was only later that a polychrome mosaic was installed. Its motifs were an unusual rendering of the Ark of the Law flanked by seven-branched candelabra within a architectural facade; remnants of the scene of Daniel in the Lions' Den appear with parts of the outer portion of the Zodiac Wheel in the center, later replaced by a large rosette. The Zodiac Wheel seems to have been replaced due to southern Judaea's gradual rejection of pagan elements such as this.

Resemblance can be traced between the Eshtamo'a and H. Susia synagogues and the recently discovered Horvat Sham'a synagogue in Galilee. The H. Susia mosaics include a number of highly interesting inscriptions such as a dedication in Hebrew setting forth a chronology beginning with the Creation, the only such inscription known. Another Hebrew inscription "remembers for the good" Isi HaCohen the notable who installed the mosaic and plastered the walls with lime with moneys collected at the wedding celebration of his son Rabbi Yohanan HaCohen the scribe son of Rabbi. This inscription was dated by the excavators to the ninth-tenth centuries C. E., and indicated the existence of the synagogue up to a relatively late stage of Moslem rule in Eretz-Israel, when a mosque was erected in its place.

The Jericho Valley has thus far yielded two synagogues - at En Duk (apparently Na'aran) and in Jericho proper. The remains of a synagogue at Na'aran were discovered accidentally at the end of the First World War when a shell fired by the retreating Turks exploded on the spot. The building was investigated during the 1920's by archaeologists of the Dominican Order in Jerusalem; after that the place was forgotten. Israeli troops on manoeuvres re-discovered the synagogue only recently. The building was repaired and given conservation treatment under the aegis of the Army Staff Officer for Archaeological Matters.

The synagogue belongs to the Byzantine period basilicas known from other parts of Eretz-Israel, such as Bet Alpha and Nirim. Due to its poor state of conservation it cannot be determined whether the building had an apse. The floor has striking mosaics arranged around the Wheel of the Zodiac with the names of the signs and seasons written in Hebrew. Most of the figures of the Zodiac and other parts of the mosaic were destroyed by iconoclasts whose identity has not yet been determined. Close to the assumed site of the apse in the part of the building facing Jerusalem, we find a detailed rendering of the Ark of the Law flanked by seven-branched candelabra as well as the biblical scene of Daniel in the Lion's Den, which indicate a relationship between this mosaic and that of Horvat Susia. The above-described portions of the mosaic and the many inscriptions are housed today in the French Biblical School of the Dominican Order in Jerusalem. Of the many Aramaic dedications we shall mention among the donors the

holders of public office Pinhas HaCohen and Benjamin HaParnas; women are not missing from the roll – such as Rivka wife of Pinhas and Halifa daughter of Rabbi Safra.

The synagogue uncovered forty years ago at Jericho by the Mandatory Department of Antiquities also takes its place among the basilicas. It faces south-west towards Jerusalem. The stylized pattern of the mosaic floor of the sanctuary has no living creatures, a fact which indicates a late date for the synagogue, apparently the seventh-eighth centuries C. E., at the height of iconoclast activity. In the centre of the floor (an unusual location), a highly stylized Ark of the Law is depicted above a seven-branched candelabrum; beneath the candelabrum is the Hebrew inscription "Peace upon Israel." The dedicatory inscription in Aramaic reads: "Remembered for the good, may the entire holy community be remembered for the good, the great and the small whom the Lord of the World aided and they were strengthened and made the mosaic. He who knows their names and those of their sons and households shall inscribe them in the Book of Life with all the saints, friends of Israel. Shalom Amen."

The remains of synagogues in the Judaeen Desert and the Jericho Valley briefly reviewed here afford an opportunity of studying the development, within a shared geographic-historical context, of the floor-plan and decoration of these buildings. It would be premature to draw any far-reaching conclusions from the remains that have come to light to date. It may, however, be said that even in the Judaeen Desert, so far removed from the centres of settlement, links may be traced with pagan and Jewish art and architecture of the period. It may also be said that a deliberate attempt is distinguished, at En Gedi, Horvat Susia, and Jericho, to refrain from portraying the pagan symbols which were so frequently employed in synagogues in other parts of Eretz-Israel.

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