

The Zodiac of the Beth Alpha Synagogue

Hannah Tandy

Excerpt

The well-preserved, colorful mosaic that covers the floor of the ancient synagogue at Beth Alpha was discovered in the winter of 1928-29 in the Jezreel Valley, south of the Lower Galilee region of Israel.¹ This artistic piece has puzzled scholars for many years due to its inclusion of the Greek zodiac as the central panel. Striking, expensive, and important, synagogues are hardly built from last-minute designs. It stands to reason that the details of the designs and the decisions of the artists that were commissioned must have been thoroughly thought through and purposeful in construction. Why, then, did the commissioners and artists of the Beth Alpha synagogue choose the zodiac, a pagan symbol, as the focal point for the elaborate three-panel mosaic design? Proposals abound, but no scholarly consensus as to the panel's symbolism and meaning has been found. Some suggest that the unusual design represents the Sukkot holiday;² others that it stands for the mystical ascent of the soul from the earthly realm to the heavens.³ These explanations attempt to create a common theme between the zodiacs that exist in different synagogues, as the astrological Greek zodiac appears surprisingly frequently in different Jewish mosaics. Although astrology and the belief in the power of the stars had some place in the Jewish culture, it was not considered a part of the Jewish faith.

One explanation as to why the artist chose to incorporate the zodiac into the design of the Beth Alpha synagogue is proposed by Levine, who argues that one of the most prominent

¹ Lee I. Levine, *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 280.

² Rachel Wischnitzer, "The Beth Alpha Mosaic: A New Interpretation," *Jewish Social Studies* 17, no. 2 (April, 1955): pp. 133-44.

³ Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, Abridged ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 117-171.

Jewish synagogues, the Hammat Tiberias in Israel, influenced the design elements and themes for many of the temples in ancient times.⁴ However, Levine does not explain why the design is sandwiched between two clearly religiously themed panels, one showing the “Binding of Isaac” and the other a collection of holy symbols. I build off of Levine’s ideas, arguing that the symbol of the zodiac not only reflects the Hammat Tiberias synagogue in order to anchor the mosaic but also enhances the themes behind the story of Abraham and Isaac. I believe that even though the Hammat Tiberias synagogue influenced the inclusion of the zodiac in the Beth Alpha temple, the choice of artists and the juxtaposition of panels suggest that there was a more purposeful design decision made to convey a message of obedience, responsibility, and reward to the people who visited and worshipped in this ancient synagogue...

(Editor’s note: We now jump to the conclusion of the paper to see the final thesis statement.)

The astrological Greek zodiac appears frequently in mosaics in ancient synagogues. One of the most prominent Jewish synagogues, the Hammat Tiberias in Israel, has influenced the design elements and themes for many of the temples in ancient times. While the zodiac appears often in historic temples, its placement and purpose have been frequently debated. In the Beth Alpha synagogue, the zodiac is the central piece of a colorful, well-preserved three-panel mosaic. The belief in the power of the stars had some place in the Jewish culture, but astrology was not considered a part of the Jewish faith. My belief is that the artists and commissioners of the Beth Alpha synagogue chose the zodiac as the centerpiece for the three-panel mosaic design not because of its significant theme or purpose among all other temples but rather as a decorative focal point influenced by the distinguished Hammat Tiberias synagogue. Though the Beth Alpha artists were inspired by the Hammat Tiberias zodiac, they purposefully incorporated the zodiac to enhance the themes of the two religiously themed adjacent panels. The first panel, the story of

⁴ Levine, p. 329.

the sacrifice of Abraham, inspires the notion of obedience to God while the symbolic nature of the third panel represents the importance of showing one's faith and devotion to God. The elaborate zodiac panel in the center represents the promise God has made to his followers, that they will be "numerous as the stars in heaven." While the astrological zodiac mosaic may seem out of place in a religious Jewish setting, if we consider the powerful design influences of older, highly regarded synagogues, and the possibility of the artists weaving their own theme within the artwork, it can be concluded that the three-panel mosaic at Beth Alpha was created with a clear and purposeful vision to remind the Jewish congregation of their responsibility to obey the will of God so they can deserve his blessing.

Works Cited

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Author Commentary

Hannah Tandy

This paper discusses the reason for the inclusion of the Greek zodiac in the Beth Alpha synagogue mosaic and its meaning in the context of the mosaic itself. I wrote this essay as my final paper for my writing seminar, “Mythmakers.” The assignment was to find and analyze a topic that was related to myth in some way. At first I considered writing about Greek or Egyptian mythology, but I wanted to write about something more obscure. I was researching different topics when I came across a picture of the zodiac mosaic of the Beth Alpha Temple in Israel. It was such an interesting image. Why put a Greek zodiac in the middle of a Jewish synagogue? So I chose to learn more about the topic and discovered that I couldn’t find a good theory behind the mosaic’s meaning. I was intrigued by the placement of the pagan symbol and the artist’s choices in design.

Eventually, I was able to come up with what I believe to be an interesting thesis and compelling argument for the use of the zodiac in the ancient temple. I assert that the older, larger, Hammat Tiberias synagogue mosaic inspired the zodiac symbol and that it was used more purposefully within the Beth Alpha synagogue to convey the message that, following in the footsteps of Abraham, if one obeys the rules God has set out for Jewish people, one will glean their rewards.

In the selected excerpts, I lay out the motive and thesis of the paper and give background information on the synagogues at the time as well as specific features of the Beth Alpha temple. I present information from pre-existing explanations, but go on to explain that the analysis that has been done on this mosaic is clearly not comprehensive enough. I also include further background information about the temple’s construction and its place in history that is vital to understanding the meaning behind the mosaic itself.

While considering the mosaic’s place in history, speculating on the choice of artist, and reflecting on other interpretations, I individually analyze each of the three main panels that compose the mosaic in an attempt to build and argue my main thesis. In the final paragraphs, I summarize my findings and determine that the Beth Alpha zodiac mosaic, while influenced by the Hammat Tiberias synagogue, was purposefully placed central to two biblical panels to expand on the story of Abraham and Isaac.

Editor Commentary

Harrison Blackman

There are many impressive things in Hannah Tandy’s paper “The Zodiac of the Beth Alpha Synagogue,” but the one we would like to call attention to is Hannah’s strong use of the delta thesis; the thesis that develops as the paper works through its evidence.

Like a river winding through the landscape, the delta thesis is a means to navigate the contours of an argument, picking up tributary evidence along the way. At the source, the original thesis is just a small indication of where the argument is headed, but at its mouth, the fully developed thesis flows into the ocean of scholarly conversation.

Hannah’s delta thesis launches a discussion of the Beth Alpha synagogue’s zodiac mosaic, a discussion that builds as her paper progresses. After signaling motivating reasons for the paper’s investigation of the zodiac mosaic, Tandy’s thesis reads:

“I believe that even though the Hammat Tiberias synagogue influenced the inclusion of the zodiac in the Beth Alpha temple, the choice of artists and the juxtaposition of panels suggest that there was a more purposeful design decision made to convey a message of obedience, responsibility, and reward to the people who visited and worshipped in this ancient synagogue.”

Hannah’s work alludes to a specific origin for the panels—“a more purposeful design decision”—while motivating her reasons for doing so. Hannah allows some level of ambiguity: she doesn’t show all her cards just yet. The complete argument develops through the examination of her sources, as seen in her argument in her conclusion:

“My belief is that the artists and commissioners of the Beth Alpha synagogue chose the zodiac as the centerpiece for the three panel mosaic design not because of its significant theme or purpose among all other temples, but rather as a decorative focal point influenced by the distinguished Hammat Tiberias synagogue... [the artists] purposefully incorporated the zodiac to enhance the themes of the two religiously-themed adjacent panels.... If we consider the powerful design influences of older, highly regarded synagogues, and the possibility of the artists weaving their own theme within the archive, it can be concluded that the three panel mosaic at Beth Alpha was created with a clear and purposeful vision to remind the Jewish congregation of their responsibility to obey the will of God so they can deserve his blessing.”

Over the course of the paper, Hannah’s argument has developed from an informed outline to a sharp, well-supported claim. Here, we have started with a loose hypothesis—“a more purposeful design decision”—and then a striking explanation of the “purposeful vision” of the synagogue planners, informed by Hannah’s close analysis of the mosaics she used as evidence. When well executed, the delta thesis can have a big payoff, and in this case, it’s a payoff that exists as a fully developed idea entering the scholarly conversation.