CHAPTER FIVE
SYNAGOGUE ART, SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPACT

Following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (70 CE), the strict rabbinical attitudes regarding Jewish art began to give way to greater tolerance. The art of the Second Temple period is purely uniconic; no figurative designs are depicted, probably due to the prohibition of the second of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:4–5; Deuteronomy 5:8–9). Archaeological evidence also confirms that during the Second Temple period representations of animate beings were avoided (Hachlili 1988:65–83, 103–119; 1998:237–8).

A major, conceptual change occurred in Jewish art in Late Antiquity, at the end of the 2nd century CE, and particularly during the 3rd and 4th centuries CE. Representational art began to flourish and figurative art played an extensive and essential part. This development is all the more surprising in light of the previous attitude to animate art. The changes, reflected in Talmudic literature, were the result of political, economic, and social circumstances. The Jews of this period no longer feared idolatry. The leading rabbis emphasized the latter part of the Commandment, “You shall not bow down to them or serve them”, and tended to enforce the prohibition only where the danger of idolatry was present.

During the Late Antique period the Jews developed their own figurative and imagery art, acquired customs and decorative elements from the surrounding cultures, and also adopted pagan motifs—figures, birds, and animals—in synagogue and funerary art. The Jewish figurative repertoire includes animal and human motifs, biblical narrative scenes, and a few mythological designs and other themes, used in the decoration of mosaic pavements. Similar themes appear in Jewish poetry. The Jewish attitude to art was basically decorative, to add beauty and ornamentation to their buildings (Hachlili 2009:17–22).

Jewish religious leaders were probably permitting iconic depictions by the 2nd or 3rd century CE. Representational decoration and the sources testify to a policy of religious pragmatism and avoidance of the formulation of binding teachings. Scholars have considered the relationship between the second of the Ten Commandments and its visual application in Judaism (Urbach 1959:204; Gutmann 1971b; 1984a:1328–1330; Avi-Yonah 1973:133; Avigad 1976:280–284; Kraeling 1979:343–345). Blidstein (1973:19–24) surveys Tannaitic teachings regarding plastic art and maintains that "the rabbis were quite aware of the difference between an image that was worshipped and one that served a decorative function alone." Rabbinical evidence suggests that figurative art was tolerated if it did not encourage cultic worship. Furthermore, no Jewish law forbids the depiction of religious subjects. On the contrary, they were allowed.

The floor of the synagogue became an important location for elaborate mosaic decorations between the 4th and 7th centuries CE. Often a mosaic pavement was planned as one framed unit, divided geometrically into panels. The symbolic and iconographic themes on early synagogue mosaic pavements of the 4th–5th centuries contrasted with contemporary uniconic Christian mosaic art, and were a means of emphasizing the difference between the Jewish and Christian notions of mosaic pavement ornamentation.

The theory accepted by most scholars is that pagan motifs used in Jewish representational art lost their original, symbolic, idolatrous significance and evolved into purely ornamental motifs (Avigad 1976:282, 285; Avi-Yonah 1973:126). Certain pagan mythological and symbolic motifs were acquired
by the Jews through Jewish legends and Midrashic literature; however, the vast majority of the appropriated pagan motifs were simply a means of decoration that added beauty and embellishment to a structure.

1. **Architectural Ornamentation**

The Galilean and Golan synagogues, as well as a few others, are extensively adorned with ornate exterior façades, in addition to impressive ornamentation and other architectural decorations within the prayer hall itself. Further artistic embellishments include pavements decorated with mosaics, which became the major adornment of the synagogue hall during the fourth to seventh centuries CE, though some synagogues had stone slab floors while others used plaster to floor the halls. Mosaic pavements depicting figurative images came into vogue during the fourth century CE.

Extensively adorned and richly ornamented exterior façades characterize Galilean and Golan synagogues and some others as well, suggesting that the synagogue was meant to impress and to attract attention. The architectural ornamentation consists of relief work on lintels, gables and arches, architraves, friezes, capitals, and pedestals. The synagogue of Capernaum, for example, which is built and decorated in white limestone, must have been impressively conspicuous among the black basalt buildings surrounding it. The interior is usually kept quite plain, except at Capernaum and Korazin where a rich inner frieze decorates the hall’s upper story.

The northern group of Galilean and Golan synagogues exhibit considerable uniformity in their limestone and basalt construction, architectural plan, and, primarily, in their richly ornamented portals and façades, which differ from those of synagogues in other parts of the Land of Israel.

1.1 **Ornate Façade of Galilean and Golan Synagogues**

Three distinct lintel and doorjamb ornamentation types exist in the entrance-frames of these synagogue façades: Types A and B are characteristic of Galilean synagogues whereas Type C typifies the Golan synagogues and Korazim (Hachlili 1988:200–206; 1989:1).

**Type A** consists of ornate portals with a molded stone lintel usually decorated on the face, the upper part forming a torus-like decorated frieze. The lintel was supported by two undecorated, molded, monolithic doorposts (Figs. V-1a, 2). This type is found at: the Arbel synagogue main entrance on