Though these scholars try to elucidate the tripartite design through deeply contemplated inspirations and a programmatic layout, it seems more reasonable to assume that the popularity of this scheme of panel divisions on synagogue floors derives from the desire of the Jewish community to incorporate into their synagogue decoration a balanced and harmonious design containing iconography and symbolic patterns, which demonstrated the Jewish character of the synagogue as a place where the community gathered for cultic and liturgical objectives. This general scheme, with its tripartite panels, each with its own motifs rendered on synagogue pavements, with considerable gaps in dates and geographical areas, was presumably chosen from the repertoire of existing pattern books containing uniquely Jewish subjects.

The following chapters survey and discuss the symbolic and narrative panel themes according to the order of the tripartite composition:
Chapter II The Jewish symbols panel, situated in front of the Torah shrine
Chapter III The zodiac scheme, usually in the central panel
Chapter IV Biblical scenes sometimes depicted on the third panel.

The Jewish Symbols Panel

After the destruction of the Temple, the late antique synagogues operated as a combination of congregational assembly hall. Torah reading was emphasized and prayer was now obligatory. With the lack of a religious and cultic centre, the synagogue became the focus, the symbol of the community’s uniqueness.

These synagogues contained a distinctive feature, a predetermined, permanently-built focal point. This was the Torah shrine, an architectural structure which contained the Ark of the Scrolls and set in the Jerusalem-oriented wall. Archaeological evidence proves that only now had the orientation to Jerusalem become important. In fact, the synagogue orientation was most likely determined by the position of the Torah shrine structure. The congregation inside the hall prayed facing the Torah shrine, hence facing Jerusalem (Hachlili 1976: 52; 1988: 231-232; 2000: 146). This emphasis placed on the Torah shrine and the Jerusalem orientation symbolized the sanctity of the place and acted as a reminder of the Temple.

Reading the Torah has been the most important duty in the synagogue from ancient times until the present day, and a major factor in the life of the Jews. It has become a symbol of survival and preservation for Judaism throughout the ages, and is a major constituent of the Jewish spirit. Clearly, the most prominent architectural feature of ancient synagogues was the Jerusalem-oriented Torah shrine.²

In excavations of most synagogues in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora, the important fact has emerged that nearly every excavated synagogue yields fragments, traces of a site, or the actual site of the Torah shrine as early as the 2nd century CE.³ The Torah shrine structure in ancient synagogues in the Land of Israel (and the Diaspora) took one of three forms: aedicula, niche, or apse (Hachlili 1988,166-187; 2000: 147-151).⁴ Each of these had its own structural form,

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² In synagogues in Galilee and Golan the Torah shrine was located on the south wall, while in Judaea and the south of the Land of Israel it was on the north wall. In the synagogues of Syria, Apamea and Dura-Europos it was on the south or south-west wall of the synagogue; in the western Diaspora the Torah shrine was usually on the east wall. Exceptions are the Sephoris synagogue, which has an aedicula in the western end of the hall, and the Hamam-Lif synagogue, which has a niche in the western wall that may have served a different purpose.

³ This contrasts with the now unaccepted scholars’ premise (Sukenik 1934: 52-53; Goodenough 1953, I: 210; II: 91; Avi-Yonah 1961: 172; Avigad 1960: 30) that in early Galilean synagogues in the Land of Israel there was no permanent structure for the Ark of the Scrolls, and that the scrolls were placed in a portable, wheeled chest that was moved into place whenever necessary, and that only later, in the fourth century, was a fixed repository built.

⁴ Some exceptions do exist: in the Land of Israel synagogues without any trace of a permanent place for the Torah shrine in the building architecture include ‘Assaliyye, Hirbet ed-Dikke, Huselifa (‘Usufiya), Kanef, and Yaphi’a. But most of these are either unexcavated or destroyed to such an extent that it is impossible to locate the site of the Torah shrine. The existence of an aedicula in unexcavated Galilean synagogues such as Kafir Bar’am is theoretically possible if one takes into account that the southernmost columns were erected far enough away from the entrance to allow room for an aedicula abutting onto the inner southern façade. Remains drawn by Kohl and Watzinger (1916: Pl. XII) seem to support this conjecture, as do the remains of Umm el-Kanatir. As the Hirbet ed-Dikke plan (Kohl and Watzinger 1916: Pl. XVI) shows that the central section of the south wall is completely destroyed, we can only surmise that an aedicula was situated there, although it would not have been on the façade wall, which is the western wall in this Golan synagogue. For the Torah shrine in Diaspora synagogues see Hachlili 1998, 67-79.
but all served as repositories for the Ark of the Scrolls.

The Torah shrine structure can be reconstructed from those found in synagogue excavations. Artistic renditions on mosaic pavements, stone or basalt reliefs, wall paintings, tombstones, lamps, and gold glasses augment what is known from the excavations. Examples of Torah shrine depictions appear on mosaics and reliefs from synagogues in the Land of Israel, but in the Diaspora depictions are restricted to funerary art and lamps where only the Ark of the Scrolls is portrayed.

A. The Torah Shrine and Its Artistic Depiction

On several synagogue mosaic floors the most prominent panel is that portraying the Jewish ritual objects. It is situated in front of the Torah shrine, which probably contained these same objects of the synagogue cult. The mosaic panel is composed of a symbolic, anathetic design; that is, similar but non-identical objects are arranged symmetrically: a Torah shrine or ark flanked by a pair of menoroth, each menorah in turn flanked by two or four ritual objects (Hachlili 2001: 59).

The synagogues mosaic panels of Hammath Tiberias, Sepphoris and Susiya depict the Torah shrine with the Ark of the scrolls within (pl. II. 1; figs. II-8) while at Beth 'Alpha, Na'aran, and Jericho only the ark is rendered (pl. II.2; fig. II-10).

Artistic Renditions of the Torah Shrine Enclosing the Ark of the Scrolls

The general outline and scheme of the mosaic panel is largely uniform, but marked differences exist among the depictions in the artists’ diverse creations and also in the concept.

The artistic renditions portray a uniform Torah shrine consisting of the following elements (Hachlili 1976: 43-49; 1988: 268-172; 2000: 154-155): a façade of two, four, or six columns on pedestals or on a base which carry an arcuated lintel (straight or a Syrian gable) with a conch that decorates the vaulted upper part of the gable; (fig. II-9); a base on which the Torah shrine is built and a flight of stairs leading up. Inside the façade the Ark of the Scrolls is shown in the shape of a pair of decorated closed doors. This Torah shrine form is somewhat similar to other sacred niches and aediculae in the pagan Hellenistic-Roman world (Hachlili 1980: 57-58).

The location and form of the Ark of the Scrolls can be deduced from inscriptions that mention the ark, from remains found in synagogues of the Land of Israel, and from the depiction of the ark on objects and mosaic pavements (Hachlili 2000: 157-158). The Ark of the Scrolls was a chest or an ark, commonly of wood and containing shelves to hold the Torah scrolls, which was placed inside the Torah shrine. The Ark of the Scrolls in the Land of Israel is usually depicted as a chest with closed double doors decorated with a conch (Hachlili 1988: 272-278, 1998: 366-350; Safra 1989: 71-73). In the Diaspora the Ark of the Scrolls is rendered as an open chest containing scrolls placed on shelves; no indication appears of the form of the Torah shrine (fig. II-14).