A group of ancient synagogues discovered in Israel, ranging in date from the 4th to the 6th century CE, contain mosaics showing very similar zodiac cycle designs (Hachlili 1977; 1988: 301-309; 2002). This is surprising in view of the pagan origin of the zodiac, and all the more so as the mosaics would have been immediately visible to anyone entering the synagogue as they lay inside the main entrances. This widespread use, over two centuries, of a ‘pagan’ motif invites many questions as to its meaning and function in the synagogue.

The zodiac panel has been found in a group of synagogues whose mosaic floors display a typical tripartite scheme composition. The zodiac is the central panel, except at Sepphoris.

These synagogues are: The Severus synagogue of Hammath-Tiberias is the earliest with mosaic pavements, dating to the 4th century (Dothan: 1983: 39-49). The zodiac is the central panel of the tripartite nave design (fig. II-1; pl. III.1). The Sepphoris synagogue mosaic floor dates to the 5th century (Weiss & Netzer 1996: 14-15; Weiss 2005: 104-141); the zodiac is depicted on the fifth of the seven bands of the nave hall (fig. II-2; pl. III.2).

According to the Aramaic inscription the Beth ‘Alpha synagogue dates from the time of Justin I (518-527 CE; the preferred date) or Justin II (565-578) (Sukenik 1932: 57-58); the zodiac is the central panel of the tripartite nave design (pl. III.3; fig. II-3). In the late 6th-century Naʿaran synagogue the zodiac is the central panel of the tripartite nave design (Vincent: 1919; 1921; 1961) (pl. III.4a). At Huseifa, a late 5th-century synagogue (Avi-Yonah: 1934), the zodiac is rendered on the upper panel of the nave mosaic (figs. II-8; III-1).

The 6th century Susiya synagogue (Gutman et al. 1981: 126) did contain at one time a mosaic floor with a zodiac panel, which was later changed into a geometric pattern (figs. II-5, pl. III.4b). The only surviving part is the corner of the zodiac showing a wing, possibly one of the seasons.

To this group of mosaic pavements should be added a Hebrew inscription discovered on the Gedi synagogue mosaic floor (Barag et al. 1981: 118) dating to the late 6th century. It contains the names of the signs of the zodiac, followed by the names of the corresponding Jewish months in the second panel of the western aisle (pl. III.4c; fig. XI-4).

The mosaic floor at Yaphi’a shows a similar design of a square containing two circles, a large

**Figure III-1.** Huseifa, remains of the zodiac panel.
one and a smaller one; between them twelve small interlacing circles are rendered (fig. III-2). The two surviving circles contain a bull and the head of a horned animal. Sukenik (1951: 18-23, followed by Foerster 1967: 218-224) claims the circles contain the symbols of the twelve tribes. Goodenough (1953, I: 217-218; 1964, VIII: 168) argues that this mosaic portrays a zodiac. However, the Yaphi’a circle design differs from the other zodiac schemes (Hachlili 1988: 295-297).1

The recurrence of the zodiac design in a number of synagogue mosaics indicates its relevance to religious thought, and calls for analysis of its place and importance in synagogal art.

The Jewish designs evince differences in the depiction and the execution of the figures in each of the zodiacs; these underline the development of a distinctive scheme and model.

The zodiac is designed as a square frame containing two concentric circles. The innermost circle portrays the sun god Helios in a chariot. The outer, larger, circle is divided into twelve radial units, each containing one of the signs and bearing its Hebrew name. Outside the zodiac circle, in the corners of square frame, busts of the four seasons are portrayed symbolically. These are named in Hebrew, after the month with which the season begins. At Sepphoris synagogue the zodiac panel is similar to the others in the group in form and content, but it shows some additions, changes, and innovations (Weiss & Netzer 1996: 26-29; Weiss 2005: 104). The composition of each mosaic is harmonious and balanced, each section having a significant and integral place in the design (figs. II-9-12).

By studying the representations of the various figures and parts, as well as their parallels in Roman art, we may learn their origin, how they were influenced, and the uniqueness and significance of the Jewish design.

A. Description of the Zodiac Panels

The zodiac circles at Hammath Tiberias, Sepphoris, and Beth 'Alpha counter-clockwise, whereas at Na’aran and Huseifa they run clockwise. The signs correspond to the seasons at Hammath Tiberias and Sepphoris, while at Huseifa, Beth 'Alpha, and Na’aran they do not (pls. III.1-3a; figs. III-3,4; Table III-1). At Hammath Tiberias and Huseifa the zodiac figures are directed in-

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1 Signs of the zodiac on three arch slabs were found at Meroth (Ilm & Damati 1987: 47).