Personification is a common theme on secular and Christian mosaic pavements inherited from Hellenistic art. Many personifications show classical influence. The recurrent themes found on the pavements are personification of natural elements such as Earth, Sea, and rivers. Time and the year are embodied in the personification of the zodiac, months and seasons, the sun and the moon. Some less frequent and unique personifications are the ocean, wisdom, and representations of a country or a city.

A. Earth

The personification of Earth, or Ge, is found on several mosaics of secular and church pavements in Israel and Jordan with similar images and attributes.

Usually the figure of Ge appears as a woman’s bust with a wreath of grain, flowers, and fruit. She holds fruit in her sash to represent agricultural abundance and fertility. She is sometimes accompanied by two offerers or is part of a group containing the four seasons. The bust of Ge appears in a circular medallion on the El-Maqerqesh mosaic at Beth Guvrin. Yet although inscribed Ge, the El-Maqerqesh figure in fact symbolizes Autumn as part of the personification of the four seasons on the medallions in the centre of this mosaic (Vincent 1922: 259-281; Avi-Yonah 1932: 146, No. 23; 1993, I: 197). Earth/Autumn is rendered as a half-length female figure with a crown, dressed in a tunic and holding fruit in her sash (pl. VIII.2b). In the composition of her arms, hands, and sash this figure of Ge is quite similar to the one at the Worcester Hunt in Antioch as Levi (1947, I: 577, note 89) suggested.¹

A personification of Earth appears in column B5 on mosaic II of the southern aisle at Petra church (Waliszewski 2001: 248-249, 318). It is a damaged bust of a woman, with only the top of her head, an arm, and a putto on her right shoulder survived (pl. XII.1a). The Greek inscription ΠΗ appears at the sides of the figure.²

A distinct motif—the personification of the Ge flanked by two young offerers—is rendered on inhabited acanthus scroll mosaics of St. George’s church, on the upper mosaic of Priest John at Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (Mt. Nebo), and in the church of Bishop Sergius at Umm al-Rasas (Saller and Bagatti 1949: 51-72; 69-70, 100-101, pls. 10: 2, 22, 3; Maguire 1987: 69-72; Piccirillo 1993: 38, 174, 178, figs. 223-224, 226-227, 230, 251, 368; 1998: 324-5, 352; figs. 138, 211-213). On the upper mosaic of Priest John, Earth, with the Greek inscription ΠΗ, is portrayed as a female bust wearing a tunic. She has two strings of beads around her neck, and a wreath of ears of corn, fruit, and grapes and a turreted crown on her head, like a representation of Tyche; similar crowns are on the heads of the four seasons at the Hippolytus Hall at Madaba. In her hands she holds the end of her sash filled with fruit. In these two Khirbat al-Mukhayyat examples the same rendition of Earth appears in the central acanthus medallion and is flanked by a pair of young offerers (karpoforoi) with baskets of fruit shown in the side medallions. The manner of representation and garments on these pavements is similar. The depiction of Earth holding a sash filled with fruit is similar to Ge from the ‘House of Ge and the Seasons’ in Antioch-Daphne (Donceel-Voûte 1995: 97, fig. 9).

The pavement of the church of Bishop Sergius shows Earth, disfigured by iconoclasts, as a reclining woman wearing a tunic, earrings, and a bracelet on her left arm; she holds the corners of her cloak filled with fruit. Beside her are offerers (disfigured) and she has the Greek Ge inscribed

¹ An early representation of Ge with a turret crown was discovered on a mosaic pavement in a Roman house in Jerusalem (Monastery of St. Petrus in Gallicantus on Mt. Zion, Piccirillo and Aliata 1992; Avner 1995).

² Roussin (1985: 271) identifies as Earth the female bust with jewels and headdress, and holding a cornucopia, depicted in the central medallion of the inhabited acanthus scroll border of the Jerusalem Orpheus.
at the sides of her head (Piccirillo 1993: 38, 234, fig. 368, see also the remains of a similar scene at the sanctuary of the church of Bishop Isaiah at Gerasa).

A disfigured personifying bust of Ge appears in a square medallion in the centre of the nave of St. Paul’s church at Umm al-Rasas (Piccirillo 1997: 385-7, fig. 5, fotos 27, 29; 2002: 544; Piccirillo and Alliata 1999: 200, pl. IV). The Four Rivers of Paradise are seen in four medallions surrounding the damaged Earth figure; the remains show Earth wearing a cloak and tunic, and a halo has replaced the head. All the figures suffered iconoclastic disfiguring and crude repairs.

Saller and Bagatti (1949: 100-101) state that the personification of Earth is related to the classical type of ‘Abundance’. The offerers are a new element, a concept derived from the writing of the Fathers that represents the celebration of offering the fruits of the earth as gifts to God (also Maguire 1987: 71; Merrony 1998: 468). Piccirillo (1993: 38) maintains this portrayal of Earth repeats a classical type identified with Generosity. Merrony (1998: 450-451, 468) contends that Earth is associated with the four seasons. However, only the personification of Earth in the south aisle at Petra appears with the four seasons on the same mosaic, each in a different medallion; at El-Maqerqesh Autumn is accompanied by the inscription ΓΗ. At Priest John chapel the motif of the personification of Earth and her offerers appears on the two inhabited scroll mosaics in the church in association with farming, hunting, and pastoral activities. In St. Paul’s church the connection is with the Four Rivers of Paradise.

B. The Sea (Thalassa) and Ocean

The personification of the Sea is depicted on three church mosaics in Jordan. It decorates the central round medallion of the nave mosaic of the Church of the Apostles at Madaba (Lux 1968; Piccirillo 1993: 38, 106; figs. 78, 80). Sea is rendered as the bust of a woman, with her breast partly bare, a wide-eyed face and loose hair rising from the sea waves; her left shoulder is draped and her raised right hand is ornamented with bracelets. Fishes, jellyfish, two sharks, and a sea monster surround her. An inscription commemorating the donors and the mosaicist frames the medallion. Piccirillo maintains that the personification followed the depiction of the goddess Thetis emerging from the waves.

Two other personifications of the Sea, damaged by iconoclasts, are in medallions of inhabited acanthus scrolls on two mosaics from Umm al-Rasas (Piccirillo 1993: 38, 234, 241, figs. 365, 395), one in Bishop Sergius church representing the Abyss, and possibly another at the Church of the Rivers; this manner of personification might have been borrowed from the classical representation of Oceanus portrayed in Antioch mosaics.

The Ocean appears in the south aisle of Petra church (B6-7), inscribed Oceanus. He is represented as a bearded (elderly) man, looking to his right; two horn-like lobster claws emerge from his head; his left leg leans against a small dolphin, and his feet are bare (pl. VIII.1b; XII.1b). He wears a draped cloth; his raised right hand rests on an oar with a long shaft while the left hand holds a small model of a sailing boat (Waliszewski 2001:250, 319). Ocean is a unique motif in the repertory of the area yet it is modelled on classical iconography and earlier depictions in North Africa and Antioch.

C. The Four Rivers of Paradise

The four rivers flowing from Paradise are recorded in Gen. 2, 10-14: the Gehon, the river generally associated with the Nile (traditionally following Jeremiah 2: 18, although this is an interpretation: the Hebrew name is Shahor) is a mythic river winding around the land of Kush. The Phison, a river flowing around the Land of Havilah, the source of gold and precious stones, is associated with the southern kingdom of Arabia or sometimes identified with the Ganges. The Tigris and the Euphrates flow in the Land of Assur.

The decoration of several church buildings contains the personification of the Rivers of Paradise. Yet the Nile, rarely as a personification, appears much more frequently alone than as one of the Four Rivers of Paradise. It flows through its typical flora and fauna, or through its cities (Maguire 1999: 181-182; for the Nilotic theme see Chap. V). Personifications of the Four Rivers of Paradise are seen on several mosaic pavements in the eastern Mediterranean usually accompanied by their names inscribed in Greek: Γηων, Gehon; Φησων, Phison; Τίγρης, Tigris; Εύφρατης, Euphrates.

The pavement of the baptistry in the northern building of the Jabaliyah church shows the Four