A significant subject in ancient art and architecture of Palaestina and Arabia is the parallel development and reciprocal influences of ancient synagogues and churches. Serving as religious places of worship, synagogues and churches have an important place in the history and archaeology of the region. Although the earliest religious edifices of Judaism and Christianity were probably first built in other countries, their development and mutual influences in the area are important to our knowledge of both religions (Avi-Yonah 1957; Hachlili 1997: 96-110). Development and change in Judaism, and the rise of Christianity, resulted in a new type of edifice, different in its architecture and religious ceremonies.

The Temple in Jerusalem had been the centre of Jewish national worship, which took the form of animal sacrifice ritual, conducted and attended by a small group of priests. After the destruction of the Temple (70 CE), the Jews established a new institution for the expression of their faith, a ‘House of Assembly’ (Hebrew) and synagogue (Greek), which was a place of worship for a large, participating community, a centre of public life (Hachlili 1996b). Reading and studying the Torah, as well as prayer in local synagogues, replaced the Temple sacrifice rituals as the means of serving God; but ongoing tradition and hope of rebuilding the Temple in the future are portrayed in the iconography and symbolic ornamentation of the synagogue. In the synagogue, the community participated actively in reading the Torah and reciting the prayers.

The church, following the synagogue, was conceived as a community assembly building used for prayer, and especially for the ceremony of the eucharistia, the symbolic feast of bread and wine.

The different functions of the ceremonies of each religion resulted in well-defined, separate considerations in the architecture and ornamentation of their respective sanctuaries. The new form of worship needed a different type of building: a large well-lit area was needed to facilitate reading and prayer; a prominent place was necessary for the most important part of the ritual.

Such buildings soon developed into prayer houses, synagogues for Jews and churches for Christians, and were then also decorated. These buildings were created and developed in the Holy Land, although so far the earliest synagogue and church remains have only been found outside that country.

The synagogue structure as a prayer hall began to appear in Eretz Israel at the end of the 2nd century CE; the erection of new synagogues and renovation of old ones continued until the 7th–8th centuries.

The earliest churches in the country were built in Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the 4th century by Constantine and his mother. However, most of the churches found to date were built later, at the end of the 5th and during the 6th to 8th centuries. The number of churches in the Land of Israel constructed during the Roman-Byzantine period is in the hundreds, whereas a smaller number of synagogues were built at that time. The increase in number and size of synagogues and churches was a result of the inflow, migration, and settlement of Jews and Christians throughout the period, as well as pilgrimage to the Holy Land, mostly by Christians and sometimes by Jews.

The two groups should be compared, as the development of synagogue and church pavement decoration shows interesting similarities and differences, apparently determined by the religious convictions of the Jewish and Christian communities. Still, it should be kept in mind that the decoration of churches and synagogues had to suit the building’s architecture.

A. Similarity and Diversity in Mosaic Pavements of Synagogues and Churches

Comparison of church and synagogues mosaics raises a number of issues. Fundamental differences are seen in design and content—in the dating, in the attitude to the design and scheme of the mosaics, and in the significance of the content, which consists of the repertory and iconography.
depicted on the pavements. The diversity between Jews and Christians is chiefly expressed in the different iconographic choices for their edifices.

Similarities are is much less common. Essentially they are illustrated in some of the designs such as in the inhabited scroll scheme, on both synagogue and church pavements, in vogue during the 6th century though the contents of the scrolls differ greatly. Another shared aspect is the work of the mosaicists, who were invited to pave mosaics in both churches and synagogues.

Synagogues and churches were decorated with mosaic pavements, of which a large number have been discovered, the majority on church floors. Central floors were completely paved: various carpets paved the nave, the aisles, usually the intercolumnar area, and frequently the entrance and the courtyard. These pavements of synagogues and churches do have some similarities but are more frequently different in design and execution. Similarity in mosaic pavements of synagogues and churches is present in some floor compositions, in subject matter, and in many motifs.

*Mosaic Floor Composition*

Between the 4th and the 8th century synagogue and church adornment is concentrated entirely in the interior of the building; the floor of the edifice becomes an important location for elaborate decorations. Each floor is planned as one framed unit but is divided into fields of geometric or iconographic panels, medallions, organic or geometric patterns and other designs. The mosaic fields are further divided into smaller areas such as nave, aisles, intercolumnations and narthex, sometimes each consisting of single carpets. The most elaborate designs usually appear on the nave carpets, frequently separated by richly ornamented borders from the aisles.

Several distinctive systematic schemes of nave carpet design can be recognized in synagogues and churches.

One composition layout is distinctive to a number of nave synagogue pavements: Beth ‘Alpha, Beth She’an A, Hammath-Tiberias, Hammath-Gader, Na’aran, and Susiya (Hachlili 1988: 347-354, Scheme A) portray a design divided into three rectangular panels each thematically distinct and appropriate to its position in the composition (figs. II-1-8). A frame encloses each panel. Other synagogue pavements are divided into more or fewer than three panels, such as the Sepphoris nave mosaic, which is partitioned into seven bands, and the nave floor carpet at Huseifa with only into two panels.

The most common three-panel form consists of (1) a panel usually in front of the Torah shrine depicting Jewish symbols: the Torah shrine or Ark flanked by two menoroth and two or four ritual objects: lulav, etrog, shofar and incense shovel (Hachlili 1976: 47-49; 2000: 154; 2001: 59); at Sepphoris this is the second panel (fig. II-2; Weiss 2005: 65-77).

(2) The zodiac design, frequently rendered in the central panel (at Sepphoris it is the fifth band) consists of a square frame containing two concentric circles. In each corner a bust symbolizing each season is portrayed. The outer circle divided into twelve units depicts the signs of the zodiac, each with the addition of its Hebrew name. The inner circle shows the sun god in a four-horse chariot (at Sepphoris only the Sun in a chariot is depicted).

(3) The third panel at Beth ‘Alpha and at Sepphoris (the sixth band) contains the biblical scene of the Binding of Isaac; Na’aran and Susiya have a biblical scene of Daniel in the lions’ Den and a geometric carpet as another panel; at Na’aran this scene is situated at the lower part of the Jewish symbols panel. At Hammath-Tiberias the third panel contains an inscription flanked by two lions; the Huseifa nave is divided only into two panels: one has the zodiac design and the other is rendered with a vine branches and bird carpet. The Hammath-Gader nave floor is divided also into three panels, one of which (close to the apse) has an inscription flanked by two lions. The other two panels consist of geometric carpets. A similar scheme of two panels may have existed in Yaphi’a (fig. III-2).

The Sepphoris synagogue nave mosaic is divided into seven panels, which are subdivided into smaller panels (Weiss 2005: 55-161). The first, close to the Torah Shrine area, is depicted with an inscription enclosed in a wreath flanked by two lions holding bulls’ heads in their claws. The second panel contains the Jewish symbols design. The third and fourth show biblical scenes and Temple vessels; the fifth panel contains the zodiac; the sixth render the Binding of Isaac, and the seventh perhaps the angels’ visit to Abraham and Sarah (fig. II-2). The division of large rooms into panels has comparisons in the 4th-century Antioch mosaics (Levi 1947, I: fig. 83).