The floor was only part of the general ornamentation program of a building, which contained frescoes, wall mosaics, liturgical decorations, and furniture. The walls might have been decorated with biblical scenes or Christian symbols and themes. For example, the apse of St. Catherine in Sinai shows wall mosaics with religious motifs, and wall mosaics decorate the churches of Ravenna. Remains of wall mosaics are found in the Cathedral of Madaba, at the Memorial of Moses on Mt. Nebo and in St. Stephen’s church at Umm al-Rasas. Plastered walls with paintings of plants and figures were discovered in many churches in the region (Piccirillo 1989: 337-340). Painted wall decoration and inscriptions painted on the pillars were found also at the synagogue of Rehov (Vitto 1981: 92). Christian writers described the interior decoration of the Gaza churches, which included saints and episodes from the New Testament (Waliszewski 2001: 264). Nevertheless, the mosaics location on the floor had a better a chance of surviving than other parts of the buildings.

Mosaics had a clear-cut function: to pave rooms, halls, and aisles in a great variety of structures. Every mosaic pavement was distinguished by its particular location, the style and features of the images, and the iconographic variety of its depiction and significance. Above all, each mosaic carried different meanings for observers. The mosaic ornamentation provided a singular quality in its powerful images and its iconography, themes, and representations, which conveyed and revealed the hopes and goals of the contemporary society and their cultural setting.

The repertoire of the visual imagery decorating the mosaics contains many elements: traditional motifs, Classical themes, symbols, biblical scenes and everyday life episodes, representations of flora and fauna, the inhabited scrolls, and Nilotic vignettes. Many of these components ornament mosaics in a variety of pagan, Christian, and Jewish structures. However, certain selected and deliberately distinctive themes characterize the mosaics of either churches or synagogues. The Torah shrine panel, the zodiac, Jewish symbols and biblical scenes feature exclusively on synagogue pavements. The cross, rural and genre scenes such as farming, hunting, combat, and personifications as the symbols of the universe distinguish the church floors.

**A. Notes on Composition**

The mosaic pavement, while an artistic concept, was also perceived as a floor. The early Byzantine mosaicists produced the pavements fully aware of the practical character of the floors, serving primarily as a surface on which the visitors could walk (Dauphin 1980: 128-131; 1997: 4-5).

Almost all the designs of synagogue and church mosaics are made to produce the greatest impact from a single viewpoint. This is at the entrance, with the design seen the right way up, and looking towards the building’s focal point. In the church this is the apse and altar at the eastern end; in the synagogue it is the Torah shrine (as an aedicula, niche, or apse) on the Jerusalem-oriented wall. The mosaic usually consisted of an overall design such as the inhabited scroll, or was divided into elements, panels, and compartments.

The development of the mosaic pavements in the late 4th-8th centuries features a unity of the design, all-over compositions, and continuous and repetitive carpets with preference for profligate ornamental designs with the characteristic style of figures. The compositions are vital, vivid, colourful, organized, and natural, with assorted imagery well dispersed and balanced (Dunhabin 1978: 223-226; 1999: 194-196; Dauphin 1980: 132-3; 1997: 5).

Some essential traits characterize the mosaics. These are a plain background, and figures, animals, trees, and buildings frequently rendered in the same size. Naturalistic elements, symmetry, movement, and figures are detached and patched together. Frequently the composition is adjusted to its content. Some devices of composition bind all fields together: a strict symmetry,
The scenes rendered on mosaics are usually groups of two figures; illustrated items and figures are rendered freely in space, in ‘isolation in combination’. Each item is depicted alone but the whole composition is linked by various means. In geometric and organic scrolls each medallion is an independent unit filled with animated figures or objects, usually rendered in isolation from each other but surrounded by static patterns (Avi-Yonah 1960a: 20-23; 1975: 41). A typical characteristic of Oriental art, *horor vacui*, is apparent in almost all designs. Every space is filled: between medallions, around or among motifs, the background, and so on. Another distinct feature is that figures and objects are the same size regardless of their real proportions and scale. The depictions are made conceptually instead of in the visual illusionistic Graeco-Roman manner. Compositions include figurative art and iconic and mythological themes, which are depicted in sections, and as rhythmic and antithetic units.

Some of the mosaics show figures facing in all directions in an organized manner, particularly in the diagonal compositions of animals that appear mainly in side rooms (pl. IX.3; fig. IX-6): the Caesarea ibex, the Church of the Apostles at Madaba, the Mosaic of Paradise at Madaba, and the Church of the Holy Martyrs Lot and Procopius at Mukhayyat on Mount Nebo (Piccirillo 1993: figs. 89, 139, 213). The inhabited vine scroll design in the Caesarea villa (fig. VI-17) can be observed from every side.

Many of the borders are treated as a frame, enclosing the main ornamented field mosaics. The border motifs could be observed in all four directions, upside-down from the entrance, upright on the upper part, and in other positions on the sides, usually different from the general orientation of the field mosaic they frame. Examples are almost all the inhabited scroll borders and meander borders, the Beth ‘Alpha synagogue border, the Beth She’an B synagogue border, and the Caesarea birds mosaic border (pls. VI.4, VI.10; figs. II-3, VI-10, 14; XII-14). An exception is the border of the mosaic in el-Maqerqesh chapel at Beth Guvrin. Here the border frames the field, but the lower part at the entrance is observed upright, like the main mosaic (fig. VIII-3).

Some features in the development of style and composition in the 5th-6th centuries should be noted (Talgam 1998: 82-3). A transition to carpet mosaics, with emphasis on the floor as a unified and firm surface, characterizes pavements of the 5th century, with their stylized and flat composition. A dark outline surrounds complete areas and figures, and creates a flat impression, with sharp division between light and shadow. Anatomical details are portrayed in a stylized and spare manner with no illusion of movement. Sometimes a more naturalistic approach is perceived; tesserae of almost the same size are used throughout the mosaic, with the background arranged in straight and organized rows of the cubes. Important to note is the return of figured subjects.

Significant changes in figure portrayal are notable in the mid-6th century, characterized by the ‘Justinian Classicism’ (during the reign of Justinian 527-565). This was a return to the ideas of Classical art, featuring variable movement, illustrating a stylistic reform and innovation. Somewhat later the composition and figure style is starting to follow a standard scheme.

Several compositional types of mosaic pavements are noted. A common type is images enclosed in frames, many of them within organic carpets such as the inhabited vine or acanthus scrolls; these framed representations are combined into grid or interlace designs, at times without any theme or chronological connection—merely an assortment of subjects. The design is symmetrical, with a vertical axial column containing objects flanked by antithetical pairs of animals and birds. A feature of these mosaics is the lack of regular scale in the images, which are made to fit the medallions.

Another composition is free figures, which Lavin (1963: 236) terms ‘inventory compositions’ and Dauphin (1980: 132-3; 1997: 5) calls the scatter of figures. The images are dispersed over the field. Examples are the Diakonikon pavement at Jabaliyah and the Nilotic scenes at Tabgha, Beth Leontis at Beth She’an, and Sepphoris (pls. V.3, VII.10; figs. V-1,2). Other pavements are arranged in panels or registers on a plain light background with no ground lines. The mosaics are unbound, as schematic individual or scene representations of unconnected vignettes; rural life, animal combat, and the hunt are related, but many are self-contained scenes devoid of unity or association. Such arrangements appear at the aisle mosaic in Kissufim church, the first panel of the nave pavement in the Al-Khadir church at Madaba, and on the Old Diakonikon mosaic on