2. THE DATING OF THE GUSH HALAV SYNAGOGUE: A RESPONSE TO JODI MAGNESS

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Jodi Magness’ article subtitled “The Problem of Typology” has a ring of anachronism about it. The “typology” to which she refers is an allusion to the older, largely Israeli scholarly view, which in truth has been inoperational since the early 1970s. The most articulate spokesman for that view was also the most articulate spokesman for its demise, Michael Avi-Yonah:

Formerly regarded as the earliest of existing Galilean synagogues, the building [Capernaum] was now dated some two hundred years later on account of the fourth and fifth centuries found buried under the pavements or near the walls.... Other scholars have so far been skeptical of this opinion, which indeed leaves a great deal to be explained.¹

Avi-Yonah was absolutely clear about the passing of the older chronology but expressed lingering doubts about why there would be a plurality of synagogue forms so close to one another in a single period.² But even the most ardent supporters of the older typology recognized that only new archaeological data could substantiate claims for dating. Though Magness claims that this is all she wants to do, namely, create new data from the reports, the fact is that in regard to Gush Halav she has misconstrued key data in the reports, which in turn has led her to new conclusions about chronology that must be rejected out of hand.

Before explaining how I believe Magness has gone wrong in her reading of the data and hence her conclusions, I would like to say something about common sense and the historical method. By suggesting that the Gush Halav and Capernaum synagogues are constructed in the fifth and sixth centuries respectively, Magness not only throws out the older typology but, indirectly as a result of her sugges-

² Hachlili, ibid.
tions, would question the very nature of Jewish life in Byzantine Palestine. To be sure, such a case has been made for a more vibrant and active Jewish community at that time, and even I have said this. But both synagogues in question would have to have been constructed in an era when Christianity also flourished in the community, both possibly as communities in which Christian pilgrimage seem to have flourished. At least, Professor Magness might have offered an explanation about why the Jewish community would have undertaken such huge building campaigns at these times. But, no, she is content to stay with archaeological minutiae, and I only would say that the situation of the Jewish community in Christian, Byzantine Palestine was less than sanguine at the time and that the building restrictions on synagogues imposed by Theodosius II in 439 C.E. are surely relevant. Similarly, many archaeologists and art historians still maintain that they can distinguish between a Roman-period and Byzantine-period building:

Christianity was the leading power in the Byzantine Empire, and Christian architects determined the prevalent architectural styles. It was in a Christian-Byzantine cultural setting that the Jews originated a dialogue of adoption and adaptation. They could assimilate to or struggle against the environment, but they could not remove themselves from it.

The answer to our initial question is yes. We can date a synagogue to the Roman or Byzantine period by its architecture, even when there are no clear archaeological data.

Although I would not go so far as Tsafrir, his point is well taken.

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4 See J. Wilkinson, Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades (Warminster, 1977). It should be noted in regard to Gush Halav that by the fourth century C.E. there was a Christian community in Gush Halav in the upper city where a Christian tomb was excavated; so N. Makhouly, “Roch-Cut Tombs at El Jish,” in Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine 8 (1939), pp. 45-50. It is not impossible that some of the coins in the Gush Halav hoard were actually tokens intended to be used by pilgrims to the Holy Land. Among the artifacts found in the tomb were amulets that might be considered “Jewish-Christian.”
