Solid Metaphor and Sacred Space: Interpreting the Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Relations Found at Beth Alpha Synagogue

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Solid Metaphor and Sacred Space: Interpreting the Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Relations Found at the Beth Alpha Synagogue.

by

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Abstract

With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, more than an iconic symbol of Jewish identity was destroyed. As the epicenter of religious life for Jews within the land of Israel, the Temple stood as both a symbol for religious hope and as the physical embodiment of Judaism. Yet, in the centuries that would follow synagogue’s like the one found at Beth Alpha would come to fill its absence.

In this thesis I will demonstrate how the use of Christopher Tilley’s theory of the solid metaphor helps us to better understand both the art and architecture of the Beth Alpha synagogue and the synagogue’s connection to the then absent Temple. I argue that by conceptualizing this synagogue as a solid metaphor for the Temple, we can interpret how the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations found in the composition of the mosaic carpets present sacred space. Through this application of Tilley’s theory, I argue that we can model this paradigm off of Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple.
Introduction

Almost the antithesis of the aniconic style which dominates most of Judea during the Hasmonean era, the transition into Herodian-Early Roman eras appears to mark a new beginning for Jewish art whereby imagery of Judaism’s religious objects are now placed within different contexts and domains.¹ Within this period, depictions of the menorah, palm branch (lulav), citron (ethrog), incense shovel (machta) and ram’s horn (shofar) can be found on a range of objects not only in Syria Palestine, but also within Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean and the Diaspora.² The following archaeological finds are just a few noteworthy examples of this artistic shift within the material culture: a decorative stone with a menorah in relief, as well as palm trees, was found at the site of a first-century CE synagogue at Migdal;³ a fragment of plaster with graffito depicting a seven-armed menorah was found in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem;⁴ the lulav and ethrog are both impressed upon coinage minted during the Jewish-Roman Wars (66-135 CE);⁵ and painted above the arch of the aedicula at the Dura Europos Synagogue is a menorah flanked by a lulav and ethrog (256 CE).⁶

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³ Levine, Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art, 337.
⁴ Nahman Avigad, Discovering Jerusalem (Shikmona ; Israel Exploration Society, 1980), 147-9; Rachel Hachlili, The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-Armed Candelabrum: Origin, Form, and Significance (Brill, 2001), 42-3.
⁵ Levine, Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art, 59-61.
⁶ Ibid., 101-4.
This motif for depicting Judaism’s religious objects, however, is sharply contrasted by one notable exception; why are there no depictions of the Temple prior to its use in 135 CE for coinage from the Second Revolt? Barring a relatively small selection of examples—which would include the last two I mention above—the Temple is an image which does not come to have a major presence in Jewish art during Late Antiquity. How did the once preeminent symbol of Jewish identity fail to find major expression in Jewish artwork in a period marked by the first depictions of religious imagery? Why do we instead seem to find a proliferation of images which create symbolic associations with the then absent Second Temple? In this paper we seek to explore these considerations by focusing on the artistic design of the mosaics found at the Beth Alpha synagogue and asking whether these mosaics reveal symbolic and associative connections between this site and the then absent Temple. What is the impact these connections have and how do they relate to concept of sacred space within this period are a just a few questions we will consider throughout the following investigation.

The Beth Alpha Synagogue

Found in the Jezreel Valley in 1928, the Beth Alpha synagogue was an important archaeological find due to the well-preserved mosaics discovered within its nave. When viewed along the synagogue’s central axis, running roughly north-south, the mosaic carpet has three panels which contain the following figural and iconographic

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7 Ibid., 338-9.
8 Ibid., 280.
images: the first panel portrays the biblical scene of the Binding of Isaac (‘Aqedah); the second panel contains a zodiac with representations of Helios, the twelve zodiac signs and the seasons; the third panel centers on a Torah shrine which is flanked by pairs of animals and religious objects as well as two pulled-back curtain panels. With their discovery, which at the time was only the second known example of the use of the zodiac within a synagogue, scholars were challenged to answer questions concerning their meaning and the reasons why the Jewish community at Beth Alpha would choose to use such images.

The issues first raised by the discovery of these mosaics over one century ago have only become more complex—as our understanding of the sociohistorical context surrounding their production has increased—and complicated—by new issues and developments that continue to arise from archeological digs being conducted throughout the region. However, over the past two decades a noticeable trend in ancient synagogue studies has occurred. As scholars have begun to question and rethink the use of figural and iconographic artwork within Early-Roman-Byzantine synagogues, the relationship between the Temple and the ancient synagogue has again become a major area of interest.

This paper in effect will seek to expand on the inroads these scholars have already made by further asking whether we can create a model for how the presence of Jewish symbolism in the Beth Alpha synagogue would impact the moods and/or

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9 Ibid., 282-5.
10 It is important to note that Beth Alpha was not the first synagogue to be found with a zodiac panel; the synagogue at Na ‘aran was discovered in 1918. However, due to what appears to be an instance of iconoclasm, the iconography at Na ‘aran no longer remains intact. See ibid.; Hachlili, Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel, 304-9.
religious attitudes of Jews during the post-Temple period. In one part, my investigation concerns answering questions surrounding how the use of figural and iconographic art in Jewish synagogues relates to the concept of the sacred. In the other, this paper seeks to address methodological issues, which may arise when we ask these questions about the material evidence. Although scholars have already given a great amount of consideration to answering what and why questions on the topic of symbolic imagery at Beth Alpha, I believe resolving questions concerning how the use of these symbolic images would help generate the concept of the sacred within the synagogue’s space are essential for the field of religious studies.

Solid Metaphor and Beth Alpha

Turning to the theoretical writings of archaeologist Christopher Tilley, I seek to test whether the symbolism found in the mosaic carpets at the Beth Alpha synagogue form an intersection between material culture and religious experience. By approaching it in this way I seek to accomplish two feats. First, I seek to present how the presence of symbolic imagery relates to the rituals that may occur within this religious space. Second, I intend for my application of Tilley’s theories to test whether this dynamic relationship allows for the concept of the sacred to be emplaced within this religious space.

Primarily, the arguments I present seek to elaborate this emplacement by demonstrating how the composition of the mosaics at Beth Alpha presupposes the synagogue as a solid metaphor for the Temple. However, most readers will be quite unaware of who Christopher Tilley is or why his concept of the solid metaphor would be
important for the study of religion. Although I will go into much greater detail on the
import of Tilley’s theoretical writings in Chapter 3, I will briefly offer the following
synopsis. In *Metaphor and Material Culture*, Tilley proposes the material culture of a
given community reflects a negotiated dialogue of cultural meaning.\(^{11}\) As such, the
objects a society creates are, in and of themselves, highly communicative vehicles of
meaning, i.e. solid metaphors.\(^{12}\) For Tilley, material culture is itself both a selective
process, through which a society continually creates new meaning(s) through the
recombination of its constitutive features (material objects), as well as series of
relational connections, which come to generate meaning(s) within the context of a given
cultural experience.\(^{13}\) In essence, Tilley’s theory of the solid metaphor suggests material
culture is a language of *things*. What is more, the overarching argument Tilley puts forth
throughout his scholarship suggests that material culture can be read in order to infer
meaning from the context of *things* within space.\(^{14}\)

Therefore, the application of Christopher Tilley’s theory of the solid metaphor in
the analysis and interpretation of the architectural and artistic design of Beth Alpha
allows for new possibilities. By interpreting the Beth Alpha synagogue as solid
metaphor, we may then come to answer questions concerning how the design of interior
space within this synagogue establishes sacred space. As seen in the mosaics at Beth
Alpha, not only is the motif of using Jewish iconography still in use some four centuries

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 6-11.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 21-3.
after its emergence, it appears to have become an integral feature of the Second Temple’s religious successor, the synagogue. My investigation seeks to explicate how this intersection between Jewish symbolism and religious architecture would allow the latter (the synagogue) to become a metaphor for the former (the Temple). By presenting and applying Tilley’s theory of the solid metaphor, I intend to establish how the synagogue came to not only embody the then absent Temple, but also the sense of continuity for Jews by establishing its interior as sacred space.

Throughout the remainder of this paper I will test this theory through the following hypothesis. By acting as a solid metaphor of the Temple, the Beth Alpha synagogue foregrounds and maps Jewish rituals within a series of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations, particularly through the use of symbolic imagery found in its mosaic carpets. Running along the north-south axis of the synagogue, between the entranceway and Torah ark, these mosaic carpets allow for regions within the synagogues’ interior to be established as sacred space through the associative connections they make between these interior areas and the courtyards of the Temple. As such, we can model this relationship by interpreting how the use of symbolic imagery relates to and overlaps with sacred/profane hierarchies relating to Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple.15

The remainder of this chapter will be given to a brief outline of the chapters to follow. In Chapter 1, I will present a general survey of Beth Alpha using Eleazar L. Sukenik’s site report. This chapter will include a technical survey of the site, including an analysis of the composition of the mosaic design. Chapter 2 will provide the reader with a brief overview of the critical issues being raised by scholars on the topic of Beth

15 Ezekiel 40.1-44.3
Alpha. This will be followed in Chapter 3 by my presentation of the theoretical writings of Christopher Tilley. Tilley’s theories will be presented in chronological order so as to demonstrate how his theory of the solid metaphor is a development of his earlier writings. I believe this ordering is necessary for showing how the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships designed within the mosaics are an essential feature for interpreting the Beth Alpha synagogue as solid metaphor. In closing, Chapter 4 will present my interpretation of the Beth Alpha synagogue as solid metaphor. In this reading, I intend to demonstrate how the synagogue is more than a simple backdrop for religious experience; in fact, the synagogue enables one’s experience to be foregrounded within religious space, thereby structuring how one first perceives and then participates with the sacred. It is in this final reading where I will address the viability of using Tilley’s theories as a potential methodology for interpreting how the interior of the synagogue is established as sacred space through the presence of the mosaic carpets.
Chapter 1

The topics covered within this chapter will be threefold. I will begin with a brief but detailed survey of the site using the seminal work on Beth Alpha, Eleazar L. Sukenik’s *The Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha*. The focus of this review will be to layout the general construction of the synagogue in order to understand the orientation of the mosaics within the site. I will then follow with a preliminary analysis of the artistic design of the mosaics. Although my analysis in this portion will remain general, I will highlight a number of key details the mosaicists used in their design. For the hypothesis we are testing, we will pay heed to how these mosaics are interrelated.

A General Survey of Beth Alpha

The first topic we will consider in this preliminary investigation of Beth Alpha concerns the construction and architectural design of the synagogue. As mentioned above, this section will serve as a condensed overview of Eleazar L. Sukenik’s *The Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha*. In order to better understand how the mosaic carpets establish the interior of the synagogue as sacred space, as is the contention we are testing, I believe we must first seek to understand how such connections are made possible. We must therefore begin by describing the architectural plan of the synagogue’s interior; this includes its orientation, the compartment of its space and the ways it either allows, denies or augments one’s access and movement towards/from the
spaces contained within. In what follows is my summation of Sukenik’s survey of the
site.\textsuperscript{16}

Following its discovery in December of 1928, the seven-week archaeological dig
at Beth Alpha shortly began. Conducted by Israeli archaeologist Eleazar L. Sukenik and
the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the dig occurred between January 10 and
February 26 of 1929.\textsuperscript{17} Sukenik surveys the synagogue as being 27.20m x 14.20m in
extent.\textsuperscript{18} The synagogue is enwalled on four sides, and access to the interior is given on
the western wall of the courtyard. Although Sukenik believes there was a possible
second point of entry within the adjoining chamber of the synagogue, it no longer
remains intact at the time of the dig.\textsuperscript{19} The walls of the courtyard and synagogue are
composed of untrimmed limestone. These walls, respectively, have thicknesses ranging
from between 60-78cm and 70-85cm.\textsuperscript{20} Sukenik gives the orientation of the synagogue
as being 27° SW, or as being roughly oriented towards Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{21} However, it must
be noted that Sukenik believes this orientation is likely accidental.\textsuperscript{22} The site plan and
cross sectional diagrams Sukenik provides show that the site is divided into an exterior
courtyard, a vestibule and the synagogue proper.\textsuperscript{23} Based on Sukenik’s diagrams,
Marilyn Joyce Segal Chiat gives the following measurements for these spaces: the

\textsuperscript{16} For site floor plan, see “Plate VI: Reconstructed plan of synagogue” found in Eleazar L. Sukenik, \textit{The
Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha: An Account of the Excavations Conducted on Behalf of the Hebrew
Univ., Jerusalem} (Georgias Press, 2003).
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 11-3.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 12.
court yard is 9.65m x 11.9m; the vestibule extends 2.57m from the synagogue’s northern wall; and the main hall with apse is 10.75m x 12.40m.\textsuperscript{24}

Within the interior of the synagogue there are three lateral areas, henceforth being described from west to east, and one longitudinal area extending to the south. The lateral areas in this arrangement are composed of an aisle, a nave and another aisle; the area extending longitudinally from the nave towards the south is the apse. Using the central entranceway on the northern wall as a vantage point for viewing the interior space of the synagogue, Sukenik gives the following measurements for these areas: the western aisle is 2.75m wide; the central nave is 5.40m wide; the apse, whose area is centered within the nave, is 3.80m wide; and the eastern aisle is 3.10m wide.\textsuperscript{25} Sukenik notes that the depth of the apse (2.40m in total) extends 2.30m from the southern wall.\textsuperscript{26} Also, fixed within the two tiers of the apse’s platform, which respectively rise 50cm and 75cm above floor-level, are “narrow steps” whose widths Sukenik does not give.\textsuperscript{27} These two features of the apse (its elevation and extension) are important to note at this point because they allow for the space contained within the apse to be differentiated both horizontally and vertically from the rest of the synagogue’s interior space. This differentiation in the interior layout will come to serve as an important feature in the model we will test later within this paper.

Beyond the spatial dimensions of the interior of the synagogue, Sukenik describes a number of additional features which remain \textit{in situ} at the time of the dig.

\textsuperscript{24} Marilyn Joyce Segal Chiat, \textit{Handbook of Synagogue Architecture}, Brown Judaic Studies; No. 29 (Chico, Calif: Scholars Press, 1982), 123.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 13.
There are benches made of untrimmed stone and covered in plaster along the walls, whose characteristics and construction are not uniform throughout. Moreover, a number of the benches come from a later construction date and their placements exist within areas of the interior that previously were without benches. Like most structures of this synagogue's size, the roof is supported by two rows of pillars within the interior, each measuring approximately 52cm x 52cm. The composition of these is that of basalt blocks trimmed on three sides and laid in a “header” and “stretcher” fashion. These pillars also have a layer of plaster applied in a similar fashion to the rest of the interior. If I understand the argument Sukenik makes later in his general survey correctly, the presence of a second story can be deduced from the differences between the construction of these pillars and the fragments of columns, half-drums and the single capital found in the northern end of the synagogue. We should also note that the intercolumniation of these pillars (2.05-2.20m) is great enough to allow for a relative amount of vision for seeing what occurs within the nave and apse, although such an amount would depend largely on where one sits within the interior.

For the arguments I will put forth in the Chapter 4, it is important at this time to note how two features found between the central nave and apse relate to each other. Specifically, we will consider how the southernmost mosaic carpet (Jewish symbols panel) in the tripartite design relates to the steps leading into the apse. When we look at the design of this panel, there are two diagonal lines which mark a differentiation

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28 Ibid., 12.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 13.
31 Ibid., 12-3.
32 Ibid., 16.
33 Ibid., 13.
between the upper right-hand and left-hand corners from the rest of the panel. Although a portion of the left-hand side of the mosaic was destroyed due to a later addition, it is likely that this missing portion of the mosaic closely mirrors its opposite. Sukenik interprets these lines as marking a curtain (paroketh) which hangs in front of the panel’s depiction of the Aron ha-Qodesh. Based on this imagery, Sukenik postulates the two perpendicular round hollows found to either side of the platform’s steps are likely designed to hold the poles for such curtain to hang from within the synagogue. If Sukenik’s theory is correct, then the arguments we will consider in the following chapter made by Joan Branham about the function of chancel screens within synagogues and churches during this period are doubly important. First, as a physical barrier such a curtain would partially, but not completely hinder one’s visual and physical access into the apse. Second, the funnelling of access into the apse through the steps and transposability of the curtain would allow for the dramatization of ritual. If either the revealing or covering the Torah ark was an important enactment for this community, then the effect of this ritualization would be related to the curtains transposability.

The Mosaics

The composition of the mosaics is generally described as being a tripartite mosaic. Using her typology of Scheme A mosaics to describe the characteristics of

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34 Ibid., 13,34.
35 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 375-8.
38 For images of the mosaic, see Rachel Hachlili, Ancient Mosaic Pavements: Themes, Issues, and Trends: Selected Studies (Brill, 2009), 19.
Beth Alpha’s, Rachel Hachlili argues more similarities than dissimilarities can be found between these mosaics and those found at synagogues discovered at Na’aran, Beth She’an A, Hammath-Tiberias, Sephorris, Susiya, ‘En Gedi, Hammath Gader and Huseifa (as well as the possible inclusion of Yaphi’a among this list).\(^{39}\) However, there remains no consensus over how the differences between these sites can be explained. One of the leading arguments suggests the stylistic discrepancies may reflect regional and/or local aesthetic tastes.\(^{40}\) With varying degrees, these sites generally have tripartite design schemes containing the use of three common themes (biblical narratives, zodiacs and Jewish symbols), the last of which is often found adjacent to a platform (bema) containing the Torah ark.\(^{41}\)

Following what appears to be the logical order due to the orientation of the images contained within, I will begin by analyzing the ‘Aqedah panel. When viewing this panel from the right to left, we have what appears to be a depiction that follows the narrative of Gen. 22:9-19. The panel begins with Abraham holding a knife and it appears as if he is in the process of throwing Isaac upon the altar’s fire (Gen. 22:9-10). Both of these figures are identified by the Hebrew inscriptions surrounding them. To their left is a hand extending from a cloud and it is directly above a ram tied to either a tree or poorly depicted thicket (Gen. 22:11-13). Beside these images are two Hebrew inscriptions that Sukenik translates as saying “Lay not thine hand upon the lad” and “and behold a ram.”\(^{42}\) The last three images are of two young males with a saddled ass

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 17-8.
\(^{40}\) Ancient Synagogues - Archaeology and Art: New Discoveries and Current Research (Brill, 2013), 125.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., 256-65.
When read against the biblical narrative, I do not find Sukenik’s argument that the mosaicist ran out of space and then fit the ram vertically in the center to make up for this error to be compelling. The arrangement of these three sections of the panel follow the order of the biblical narrative, therefore the vertical orientation of the ram requires a different explanation. Lastly, Sukenik includes within this panel the 40cm strip containing the nine palm trees of alternating colors of black and red tesserae. Based on the bands of tesserae encompassing the ‘Aqedah and zodiac panels, I believe this strip of palm trees is intended to further demarcate a clear separation between this panel and its neighbor.

The adjacent panel to the south contains the representation of the zodiac wheel. This panel’s dimensions are almost square (3.55m x 3.75m) and it contains two concentric circles. Contained within the innermost circle is an image of Helios in frontal portrait and he is shown atop a chariot drawn by four horses (*quadriga*). Sukenik interprets this imagery as being, “the most important moment of the sun’s circuit, as it rises out of the darkness of night.” Encompassing Helios is the larger concentric circle that is divided by twelve radial bands of guilloche. Within each of the segments is a figural representation of one of the twelve zodiac signs with its Hebrew inscriptions. If, as numerous scholars have argued, the use of the zodiac within synagogues during this period stems from calendrical use, then it appears this panel likewise begins on the

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46 Ibid., 36.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
right. In this location we have an image of Aries (Taleh) and the remainder of the wheel follows in a counter-clockwise pattern. The areas left between the outermost circle and the corners of the square are filled with allegorical busts of the seasons, who similarly follow a counter-clockwise pattern. However, the placement of the seasons are at odds with the placements of the zodiac signs. Whereas Aries is located due right, Nisan is located adjacent to the panel containing Jewish symbols in the upper-left corner, or as being 90° misaligned. The mosaics at Na'aran contain a similar misalignment, which suggests either the respective designs are intentional or the (mis)placement of months within the wrong seasons likely stems from a common source.

In the final panel, which we previously noted as being adjacent to the platform’s steps, is the Jewish symbols panel. The most prominent feature of this panel is the double-doored Torah ark with “three vases on its lintel, a gabled roof with a hanging lamp… and a conch beneath it.” Placed in the center of the panel, the Torah ark is flanked by pairs of a number of symbolic images which are found in an antithetic symmetrical composition. These symbols include, inter alia, lions, menorahs (menorot), palm branches ( lulavim ), citrons ( ethrogim ), ram horns ( shofarot ) and incense shovels ( machta ). There is no scholarly consensus on how to understand the placement of these latter five images within the synagogue. The images would have surely been recognized by Jews during this period as being objects tied to either the

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49 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 45.
53 Levine, Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art, 284-5.
55 Levine, Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art, 285.
Temple or their use in rituals performed for the major pilgrimage festivals, if not both. Although space does not allow for an exhaustive review of literature concerning the use on these symbols within the synagogue, the following chapter will give a brief review of scholarship on the relationship between the mosaic design of ancient synagogues and the Temple.
Chapter 2

In this chapter, we will dedicate our investigation to exploring how recent scholars have addressed the composition of the mosaic carpets at Beth Alpha. Particularly, we will pay attention to how these scholars present the relationship between Jewish material culture in this period and contemporary movements within Jewish society. As we will see, these scholars offer a range of opinion on how to interpret the use of figural and iconographic imagery within Jewish material culture during this Byzantine period.

A Review of Scholarship on Beth Alpha’s Mosaics

We should begin our review with one of the most prolific scholars on the topic of Jewish mosaics, Rachel Hachlili. One argument that Hachlili often makes in her writings on synagogue mosaics is that we must be mindful of three characteristics of Jewish art during this period, if we are to correctly identify how these artistic motifs came about. First, it is common for art in this period to display horror vacui, or a fear of empty space. This point is notably reflected in the three panels we have just investigated; there is little, if any, space left bare by the mosaicist. Second, Jewish forms of figural art derive from what Hachlili argues is a conceptual method, one unlike the visual illusionistic one that dominates Greco-Roman art. Third, during this period Jewish

56 Hachlili, Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel, 345-65.
57 Ibid., 348.
58 Ibid.
artists produce artwork containing iconic and mythological themes depicted through the use of sections and rhythms, thus becoming antithetically untied and harmonious in their composition.\textsuperscript{59} For Hachlili, this last characteristic–previously referred to in this paper as antithetic symmetrical composition–becomes a major area of development by Jewish artists in this period.\textsuperscript{60}

Another argument that Hachlili makes is that synagogue mosaics are intended to be walked upon.\textsuperscript{61} For Hachlili, this suggests that the production of mosaics containing figurative images reflects the attendant consequences of walking on such images. Hachlili argues Jews during this period consciously sought to contain and suppress the incipient shift towards Greco-Roman idolatry by moderating how Jews interacted with such imagery; therefore, she argues that by walking on these mosaics, Jews actively denied the power of these images.\textsuperscript{62} Although I agree in part with Hachlili’s argument here, that mosaics are designed to be walked upon, I do not find the other half of her argument to be convincing. Such an argument suggests that either Jews likewise sought to denigrate images depicting the menorah, the Torah shrine and biblical figures, or that they consciously held some amount of duplicity as they walked on Jewish images found in synagogues throughout the period.

Edward Kessler contends the mosaics at Beth Alpha demonstrate that an artistic midrash is present and in use at the time of its composition.\textsuperscript{63} Kessler argues this point

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Ancient Mosaic Pavements : Themes, Issues, and Trends: Selected Studies, 30; Ancient Synagogues - Archaeology and Art: New Discoveries and Current Research, 391.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Ancient Mosaic Pavements : Themes, Issues, and Trends: Selected Studies, 285.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
by analyzing three features in the ‘Aqedah panel that follow neither the biblical narrative nor rabbinic thought. First, Kessler points out the mosaicist depicts a hand extending from the cloud to forestall Abraham, and not an angel. Second, Kessler argues the ram appears to be tied to a tree, and not caught by his horns in a thicket. Third, and what Kessler argues is the most antithetical, Isaac is depicted in this panel as a child. For Kessler, this final aspect is the most direct in demonstrating that the mosaicist is inspired by a source other than the rabbis because it denies Isaac's complicity.

The centrality and comportment of both the ram and hand within this composition, whose proportions and placements are similarly depicted in the frescos at Dura, suggest to Kessler that artists in this period derive their imagery from sources other than the rabbis. Kessler states, “The Rabbis did not aggrandize the animal’s role as they did Isaac's; nor, as far as I know, did they describe the animal as being tethered to a tree. Thus, the source of this artistic midrash is not to be found in Rabbinic literature.” Although I remain unpersuaded by Kessler's claim that the mosaics at Beth Alpha are best understood as an artistic midrash, his presentation of the centrality of the ram and Hand of God appear to reflect Hachlili’s position that the antithetic symmetrical composition was an essential quality of the mosaic.

Seth Schwartz rather staunchly argues for the rejection of programmatic readings of Beth Alpha’s mosaics by previous scholars, because they disclose an attempt at “a Rabbinicizing approach to the interpretations of synagogue art”—here I am reminded of

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64 Ibid., 78.
65 Ibid., 79.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 78-79.
68 Ibid., 79.
69 Ibid., 77.
Sukenik’s use of Berakhot 59b and Pirke R. Eliezer § 6 for his interpretation of the image of Helios.\textsuperscript{70} For Schwartz, the late-antique piyyutim provides a better source for interpreting mosaics due to the fact they were created to be read within the synagogue.\textsuperscript{71} Schwartz presents this claim by citing a piyyut on the day commemorating the destruction of the Temple on the Ninth of Av. This piyyut unfolds as a scene of great distress and turmoil over the loss of the Temple. While one would expect the content of a piyyut given on this day would seek to encapsulate the sense of remorse and regret for the destruction of the Temple, the paytan skillfully incorporates the signs of the zodiac within their tale.\textsuperscript{72} While we can only speculate whether at the recital the paytan gave included a performance which mirrored his poetic jaunt, we should recognize the effect that seeing such an image would have left on one hearing this poem. Schwartz argues, this piyyut “retains the sense, perhaps implicit in the synagogue decoration itself, that the ritual of the synagogue, in this case the communal mourning of the Ninth of Av, mirrors heavenly ritual.”\textsuperscript{73}

Joan Branham and Steven Fine, respectively, approach the presence of the mosaics within the synagogue as reflecting a broader desire of Jews during this period to reproduce symbolic images in order to recreate or capture the lost sacrality of the Temple. As I have already briefly made mention to within this paper, Branham argues the use of the chancel screens within churches and synagogues in this period function as a part of the process of erasure.\textsuperscript{74} For Branham, aspects of the synagogues’

\textsuperscript{70} Seth Schwartz, "On the Program and Reception of the Synagogue Mosaics," ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 180.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} Branham, "Sacred Space under Erasure in Ancient Synagogues and Early Churches," 375-8.
architecture present a duality. On the one hand, the use of the features can create a medium through which the now absent Temple becomes embodied within the synagogue; on the other, this process leaves little doubt as the current state of the Temple. As such, the synagogue embodies both the expression of the Temple as well as its direct denial.\(^\text{75}\)

In “Vicarious Sacrality: Temple Space in Ancient Synagogues,” Branham argues this duality can be seen through the presence of the cultic symbols within the Jewish symbols panel. Through the connections these images established between the Temple and synagogue, the latter was granted a “vicarious” sacrality.\(^\text{76}\) Branham states:

The evocation of the heavenly/Jerusalem Temple tradition within the synagogue space allows Beth Alpha to participate in the sacrality associated with divine rupture. Only the re-creation of ‘symbolic Temple space’ with the realm of the synagogue enables this subordinate institution to take part in the sacred—a notion that remains irretrievably bound to the Temple’s proprietorship. The synagogue’s link with Temple sacrality should not be seen as a literal transference of Temple space to the synagogue apse, but instead might be perceived in terms of a ‘vicarious’ rapport; that is to say that by definition, the synagogue takes the place of another in its “imagined participation in the experience of the another.” The Temple’s sacrality is, therefore, displaced and deferred to the synagogue until the Temple is rebuilt. In this sense, the synagogue’s artistic and liturgical representations of the Temple become mnemonic referents to Temple space, figuratively and vicariously reconstructing its presence in the synagogue’s domain [emphasis in the original].\(^\text{77}\)

Branham’s choice of language to frame this process as being vicarious is revealing. Through this “deferred” process, we can see how the connections Jews made between the synagogue and Temple are made real.

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\(^\text{75}\) Ibid., 392-4.


\(^\text{77}\) Ibid., 342.
In *This Holy Place*, Fine argues the presence of mosaics in Byzantine synagogues, along with the presences of the Torah ark and *menorot*, sought to establish these buildings as being *imitatio templi*.

Using *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* to substantiate this claim, Fine states:

> Archaeologically, synagogue floors “figured with images and likenesses” appears during the fourth century. It is my contention that carpet mosaics, a favorite type of pavement in public buildings (including synagogues, churches, mosques, and palaces) during the Byzantine and early Islamic periods, are retrojected by our Targumic tradition to the *pesifasin* [i.e. partitions] of the Temple. If I am right, the permissible figured carpet mosaics that were thought to have existed in the Temple were used as a precedent by the author of our Pseudo-Jonathan tradition to legitimize the use of carpet mosaics in the increasingly “templized” antique synagogue mosaics. This loop parallels the one that we have suggested between the ark and the Ark of the Covenant and between the synagogue lampstand and the Temple *menorah*. This exegesis might have provided a powerful argument in support of mosaics against opinions that were predisposed to forbid and perhaps destroy them: just as mosaics “figured with images and likenesses” were permissible in the *Miqdash*, they now legitimately Exist within the *miqdash me’at*.

While we must currently put aside questions concerning Fine’s use of this text, the dating of which may ultimately undermine the claims he wishes to support through the use of this text, there are two important issues he raises which we should consider. First, it is clear the author of this text wishes to accomplish something by retrojecting the mosaics within the courts of the Temple. Whether their purpose is to legitimize the use of mosaics or messages contained within them we cannot say. However, the consequence of this Targumic tradition suggests that as mosaics gain legitimacy through their association with the Temple mount, they are also granted an expropriated...

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78 Steven Fine, *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue During the Greco-Roman Period* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 92-4.

79 Ibid., 92.
status. Second, if Sukenik’s argument that the Jewish symbols panel at Beth Alpha actually depicts the real interior of the synagogue, then we should seek to consider how the presence of the curtain at Beth Alpha would relate to this *imitation templi*. With these considerations in mind, we will now proceed to the following chapter that is dedicated to exploration of the theoretical writings of archaeologist Christopher Tilley.
Chapter 3

The primary focus of this chapter will be to present the theories of Christopher Tilley and to elaborate how they form a theoretical model for demonstrating how the mosaics at Beth Alpha establish the interior of the synagogue as being sacred space. In order to accomplish this task, our investigation will be threefold. First, we will outline major theoretical developments in Tilley’s research relating to his use of linguistic theory. Second, we will consider how his theory of the solid metaphor stems from his earlier works, paying close attention to how his analysis of architecture as solid metaphor is derivative of his works relating to paradigmatic and syntagmatic connections. Lastly, the desired effect of this reading of Tilley’s writings is to develop a solid theoretical foundation for testing whether the composition of the mosaics at Beth Alpha discloses important facts about the interior space of the synagogue and how it may be conceptualized.

Tilley and Linguistic Theory

In 1987, Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley pushed back against proponents of the burgeoning New Archaeology movement by publishing both Social Theory and Archeology and Re-Constructing Archaeology. These complimentary works largely

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80 Shanks and Tilley, Social Theory and Archaeology; Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice.
sought to introduce developments being made by modern and postmodern linguistic and social theorists to the broader discourse of the field. Interestingly, in Social Theory and Archaeology, Shanks and Tilley conceptualize the process of generating datum from material culture as a translational act. Conceived in this way as an act of recovery from the past, Shanks and Tilley argue, “It is up to us to articulate the past in our own speech… [and] to trace the connections down the signifying axes and place them back in our present.”

In light of such a revelatory statement on their part, it becomes apparent why Shanks and Tilley place emphasis on the use Saussure’s dichotomization of language into associative connections and syntagmas. Whereas texts are inherently structured to disclose meaning in communicable ways, thus allowing the interpreter access to its given meaning, material culture does not always allow such access. However, that does not mean material culture is by nature muted and silent. Shanks and Tilley argue:

Material culture can be considered to be constituted on terms of a spiraling matrix of associative (paradigmatic) and syntagmatic relations involving parallelism, opposition, linearity, equivalence and inversion between its elements. Each individual act of material culture production is at the same time a contextualized social act involving the relocation of signs along axes which define the relationships between signs and other signs. The meaning of these signs is constituted in their lateral or spatial and horizontal or temporal relations. The signs reach out beyond themselves and towards others and become amplified in specific contexts or subdued in others. Material culture does not so much signify a relationship between people and nature, since the environment is itself socially constituted, but relationships between groups, relationships of power. The form of social relations provides a grid into which the signifying force of material culture becomes inserted to extend, define, redefine, bolster up or transform that grid. The social relations are themselves articulated into a field of meaning partially articulated through thought and language and capable of reinforcement.

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81 Social Theory and Archaeology, 116.
82 Ibid.
through the objectified and reified meanings inscribed in the material culture. The material logic of the relationships involved in the contextual patterning of material culture may run parallel to, subvert or invert the social logic or practices involved at the sites of the production, use, exchange or destruction of artefacts. Material culture as constituted by chains of signifiers-signifieds should not be treated in a simplistic fashion as necessarily representing anything in particular, such as red ochre or use of red as symbolizing blood or pots of shape X as signifying male and pots of Y signifying female, *on its own*. The signifying force of material culture depends on the structure of its interrelations, and the signification of any particular artefact or item can be seen as being intersected by the meaning of other items.83

Based on these arguments, we should give due consideration to whether the mosaics at Beth Alpha exhibit such notable patterning. As I have previously given in my depiction of the mosaic design, I believe it is apparent that there are in fact paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations “involving parallelism, opposition, linearity, equivalence and inversion” between the figural and iconographic images of the mosaics.84 As we have already seen, each of the three panels portrays a strong central image, which in this case portrays an image directly associating the presence of God with a place, surrounded by supporting images. Likewise, these central images fall along the central axis of the synagogue, which again must be noted as being oriented to Jerusalem and the former Temple.

In 1991, Tilley would continue his work with linguistic theory by publishing *Material Culture and Text*. Extending the arguments of his two previous works with Shanks, Tilley is more direct in asserting the relationship between archaeology and the study of material culture as text. The topic of this book concerns whether the 2,000 rock carvings at Nämforsen are to be considered crude and indecipherable depictions or as

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83 Shanks and Tilley, *Social Theory and Archaeology*, 103.
84 Ibid.
being inherently structured and interpretable. The basis for Tilley’s arguments in this book stem from his belief that we can “read” these rock carvings as more than a series of simplistic signs.\(^{85}\) Tilley argues, “Material culture is ‘written’ through a practice of spacing and differentiation in just the same manner as phonetic writing.”\(^{86}\) Tilley approaches this task by analyzing how the placement of the rock carvings at Nämforsen situate signs within space. The major contention Tilley raises in this book is that the rock carvings can be differentiated into paradigmatic series and syntagmatic chains.\(^{87}\) Tilley’s use of the paradigmatic-syntagmatic dichotomy here allows him to distinguish between the metaphorical and dimensional qualities of the rock carvings as they are depicted within space.\(^{88}\)

For Tilley, the designs of the Nämforsen rock carvings signify distinctive, liminal attributes of the cosmological ordering of the societies that created these depictions. Their location and proximity mark numerous social distinctions: the location of types within space; the movements between, transitions toward, separations from and clusters around foci; the transformation of types when two or more intersect.\(^{89}\) In his discussion of the patterning of the characteristics of these depictions, Tilley associates their ordering within space as that of a sentence. On this topic, Tilley states:

A sentence is not just a collection of linguistic signs to be understood in their difference. The meaning in it is a predicative act in which something is relayed to someone in the here and now. The meaning of the sentence takes on an active character according to the wider discursive formation (arena of writing/speaking) in which it is situated, so that the same sentence and the same words can take on different meanings in relation to the social


\(^{86}\) Ibid., 1.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 22.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 78-92.

\(^{89}\) Ibid., 146.
conditions of the enunciation and reception. Meaning is not neutral but relates to institutions, groups and struggles.\textsuperscript{90} Through their patterning and arrangement, Tilley argues these rock carvings form sentences that allow for the societies who create them to negotiate and map their physical emplacement within the cosmos, both physically and figuratively. For this reason, among others, the spatial context of these rock carvings are significant.

For Tilley, the presence of these rock carvings at Nämforsen suggest this location was the site of a heterotopic place. Tilley argues:

In small-scale societies such heterotopias are sacred places often associated with life-crisis rituals and ceremonies, removed from day-to-day existence... They may juxtapose in a single real space other places or spaces to create a perfect ordering of existence, meticulously well-ordered as opposed to the messy daily life-spaces.\textsuperscript{91}

Upon such a position, we should not be surprised to find that Tilley envisions Nämforsen as being integral to myth, ritual and meaning for the societies who used this place. Tilley states:

Myth typically orders the world by providing sacred reference points or paradigms for action through metaphor. Time and space become plastic and malleable. Simultaneity is created between the present and mythic origins, times becomes collapsed rather than being regarded as a linear series, causes and effects are not separated. The contingencies of the present may be given a sacred quality by integration with an origin lying outside historical time.\textsuperscript{92}

Notice how this conceptualization of the role and impact Nämforsen has both with and for the societies that use it is not unlike Geertz’s conceptualization of religion as a cultural system. However, we must be quick to recognize the distinctive aspects of Tilley’s arguments. The process whereby this conceptualization of Nämforsen as sacred

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 154.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 137.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 140.
space derives from the structural characteristics of the rock carvings that establish this place within the category of otherness. Yet, Tilley argues such iconological representation of myth allows for it to remain completely collapsed or atemporal. Such possibilities are allowed within material culture, as opposed to textual narratives, because the paradigmatic and syntagmatic rules governing it are different. Instead, the case of the Nämforsen rock carvings suggests it is metaphorical meaning, as opposed to literal meaning, that is preferred by this society.

In 1999, Tilley returns to investigating the relationship between signification and material culture in *Metaphor and Material Culture*. Unlike his previous works, *Metaphor and Material Culture* is largely Tilley’s review of a number of anthropological and archaeological case studies. Although structuralism still plays an important part in this work, Tilley places a greater emphasis on exploring the metaphorical relationship between material culture and society. For Tilley, the artifacts a society produces are the physical embodiment of its collective expressions and experiences. This suggests that material culture is idiomatic; it arises from particular contexts and vernaculars, to mediate and give shape to the ideas and concepts, which he believes would otherwise remain *inexpressible* with verbal language.

Although this conceptualization of material culture as a form of symbolic expression is not unique, it is Tilley’s emphasis on the metaphoric nature of this process that is persuasive. In part, solid metaphors allow for cultural systems to produce compact and vivid material objects that can be structured and arranged to generate

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93 Ibid., 140-1.
95 Ibid., 7.
cultural meaning. From such processes, individuals then experience these clusters of meaning through normative modes of societal participation. Tilley bases the phenomenological aspects of this argument upon the distinction Merleau-Ponty makes between metaphor, the physical embodiment of cognition and the “incarnational” quality of linguistic meanings. Tilley states:

The body is the ground or anchor by means of which we locate ourselves in the world, perceive and apprehend it. The centre of our own existence is always our body, as an axis from which spatiality and temporality are oriented: the human body inhabits space and time (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 138). Rather than mirroring the world, speech can be conceived as an extension of the human body in the world, a kind of artefact, by means of which we extend ourselves in the world, gain knowledge of it and alter it. Metaphor is an essential part of this process. Cognition is essentially a process of seeing something as something and this is the core of metaphorical understandings. Seeing something as something is grounded in culturally mediated bodily experiences. As [Mark] Johnson puts it, “concrete bodily experience not only constrains the “input” to the metaphorical projections but also the nature of the projections themselves, that is, the kinds of mappings that can occur across domains.”

Therefore, Tilley suggests that objects are used in ritual performances because they “stimulate fresh metaphorical connections, new ways of thinking about and describing reality.” Particularly, I believe it is this grounding and emplacement of the human body within specialized areas of space and around types of objects, which we associate with being sacred, that allow individuals to internalize the bodily experience of being religious.

Tilley’s concept resonates so well because this process is simple. Although Tilley’s theory of the solid metaphor may appear cumbersome, we only need to pick up the nearest object at hand and ponder the metaphorical connections it generates. A

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96 Ibid., 34-5.
97 Ibid., 272.
baseball, for example, contains within itself numerous qualities that extend well beyond its white leather exterior and stitching. More than being an object used during a leisurely activity, it encapsulates a range of values about Americana spanning the last century. Beyond simply associating the baseball as a symbol, it is our physical experiences of using this object that both shape and are shaped by the contexts of living in North America. Therefore, the baseball simultaneously exhibits both aspects of the sign-signified relationship. When we analyze a baseball as being a byproduct or function of the sport, we fail to consider how this object has shaped the identities of millions of individuals growing up in North America.

Similarly, when we consider religious objects, such as the bread and wine used for the Eucharist, it is possible to fail to recognize how our physical engagement with these objects create linkages between our self-understanding of being religious and the religious activities that generate such sentiments. At the same time, we should recognize the capacity religious objects have in communicating compact and vivid theological messages in meaningful ways. Whereas a sermon may communicate a wealth of spiritual knowledge for the listener, the Eucharist contains a physical experience that in many ways reifies its core message. As solid metaphors, the bread and wine consumed when partaking in the Eucharistic rite substantiate a religious claim, and in doing so, they come to establish real experiences for engaging with the sacred and mysterious elements of Christianity. Once we begin to make associations between the material culture of religion and Tilley’s theory of the solid metaphor, it becomes apparent how the use of this concept allows for a fresh perspective for scholars to use when talking about religious ideology and ritual.
The Synagogue as Solid Metaphor

One aspect we have not discussed about Tilley’s theory of the solid metaphor concerns his understanding of architecture as solid metaphor. Since our contention is that the synagogue of Beth Alpha is a solid metaphor of the Temple, we should seek to consider how Tilley addresses architecture in his writings. Fortunately, James Strange has discussed such topics in “The Synagogue as Metaphor” and “The Archaeology of Religion at Capernaum, Synagogue and Church.”98 Due in one part to the complimentary nature of these two articles, and in the other for concerns about space, we will only consider in this chapter the findings Strange gives in “The Synagogue as Metaphor.”

After briefly introducing his readers to the scholarship of Christopher Tilley, Strange begins this article by presenting five theses Tilley posits about solid metaphors. They are as follows: “the inexpressibility thesis” suggests metaphors give forms to ideas and descriptions about reality that are not possible through literal language; “the compactness thesis” suggests metaphors enable communication between members of the same culture in the simplest and “most parsimonious” way possible; “the vividness thesis” suggests metaphors encode and recall information about experiences in detailed and colorful ways that facilitate memory; metaphors facilitate the production of novel ways for interpreting reality; thinking about metaphors, especially as scholars, enables

us to reveal “factual statements” about the ways metaphors shape our thought processes and interpretations.  

Strange then goes on to analyze Tilley’s section on architectural metaphors. Discussing Tilley’s reference to Bourdieu’s premise that a house is a structuring structure, Strange states, “by analogy, we might hypothesize that a synagogue was also a variation on a theme derived from its social order in terms of size, material, entrances and exits, orientation, ground plan, and areas devoted to specific activities, including rituals.” Strange then proceeds to analyze the synagogue’s interior through six characteristics of houses that Tilley emphasizes as being related to their role as solid metaphors (directional affiliation, silhouetting, nesting, skeuomorphs, synecdoches relating the cosmos, and transitions). Strange deduces from these characteristics the following inferences about the synagogue at Gamala:

I. The siting or emplotment of the building is not intended for prosaic or ordinary use and its isolation coheres with its status as some kind of sanctified space.

II. This synagogue’s silhouette is distinctive and the gabled roof with its tiles would immediately call attention to itself. This difference further sets it apart as different space.

III. The entrance requires walking through a vestibule before entering into the interior. This transition marks a distinction between exterior as public space and the interior as private space.

IV. The interior’s arrangement nests the central open space within the columns, the columns within the aisles, the aisles within the tiers of

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100 Ibid., 100.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid., 106.
103 Ibid., 107.
104 Ibid.
benches, the benches within the exterior walls. This sets the interior space apart from the benches.105

V. Clearstory lighting illuminates the interior central space and draws one’s gaze upward. This light further distinguishes the interior space from benches and the vestibule.106

VI. The building’s columniation makes some positions along the benches better for viewing the interior than others. Although the building distinguishes the interior space as different, seeing the interior space is not necessary.107

VII. A platform on the wall opposite of the vestibule’s doorway sits higher than the benches on the adjacent walls. The placement of this platform makes it the first thing which is seen when a person enters the interior and it is elevated so that they would have to look upwards towards it.108

Based on these findings, Strange concludes the architectural features of the synagogue at Gamala demonstrates the synagogue’s role, which according to the Mishnah Megillah, is for Torah reading or the reading of other biblical scrolls.109 As I understand the hypothesis that Strange is testing in this article, the design of the synagogue at Gamala supports religious activity, in part, by acting as a solid metaphor of the Second Temple forecourts.110 If this hypothesis is valid, then it suggests Jews using the synagogue at Gamala for Torah scroll or other scroll reading are thus shaped by the metaphorical connections this synagogue generates between itself and the forecourts of the Second Temple, which further suggests that these circumstances would require appropriate emotional and physical responses. With these two considerations in mind,

105 Ibid., 108.
106 Ibid., 109.
107 Ibid., 109-10.
108 Ibid., 112.
109 Ibid., 113.
110 Ibid., 101.
we will now turn to investigating the composition of the mosaics at Beth Alpha in light of Tilley’s theories.
Chapter 4

In this chapter, we will now seek to test the hypothesis that is set out in the introduction: By acting as a solid metaphor of the Temple, the Beth Alpha synagogue foregrounds and maps Jewish rituals within a series of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations, particularly through the use of symbolic imagery found in its mosaic carpets. Running along the north-south axis of the synagogue, between the entranceway and Torah ark, these mosaic carpets allow for regions within the synagogues’ interior to be established as sacred space through the associative connections they make between these interior areas and the courtyards of the Temple. As such, we can model this relationship by interpreting how the use of symbolic imagery relates to and overlaps with sacred/profane hierarchies relating to Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple.\(^\text{111}\)

Beth Alpha as Solid Metaphor

When a person enters through the central doorway of Beth Alpha, they see the following on the central axis on the floor: a dedicatory inscription; a mosaic panel portraying the ‘Aqedah; a mosaic panel depicting the zodiac, containing the names of the months and seasons; a mosaic panel containing an image of a Torah ark, flanked by symbolic images associated with the Temple (lulavim, ethrogim, shofarot and

\(^{111}\) Ezekiel 40.1-44.3
machta); a curtain cording off the apse, through which portions of the Torah ark can be seen. The contention being raised in this chapter is that these mosaic panels, as solid metaphors, create a linearity through the placement of their central images along the central axis of the synagogue (See Figure 1). Furthermore, our contention seeks to establish how the arrangement of these phenomenon give visual cues about the nature and content of what occurs within this building. For example: all three panels have features which draw one’s gaze towards the center; all three contain elements which indicate a human-divine relationship; all three reference images, that to greater and lesser extents, relate to the Temple. While the range of possible interpretation for these panels is quite large, as Tilley presumes to be the case when he says an artifact’s meaning is inexhaustible, we must consider how users of this synagogue would likely generate associations between the content of these mosaics and the nature of the synagogue’s interior space.

When we consider Strange’s argument that the design of the synagogue at Gamala draws one’s eye towards the illuminated interior, we have a similar set of circumstances at Beth Alpha. However, at Beth Alpha the aesthetics of the mosaics and the curtain would only further differentiate and distinguish the areas within the nave and apse from those contained outside of the columns, i.e. the aisles and benches. Therefore, the nesting of the nave and apse within Beth Alpha is more strongly contrasted than that at Gamala. Furthermore, if Sukenik’s theory is correct and the Torah ark is placed within the apse, as the Jewish symbols panel depicts, then we can

Figure 1. Model of the Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Relationships within the Mosaics.
postulate that the intent of the design of the mosaic panels would be to draw one’s eye towards the axis that unites these two spaces. By extension, any rituals that would use this axis while in transit to the apse, such as to “pass before the Torah ark” or conduct the *Amidah*, would produce quite an effect. Also, any act that transpired beyond the curtain would likely have attached to it a mysterious quality due to the curtain’s denial of visual access into the apse.

The design of the mosaics at Beth Alpha similarly suggests the area contained within the apse is considered sacred space. This association is generated from the paradigm of images relating to the presence of the *shekinah*, all of which occur along this central axis (See Figure 1). In the first panel, we have the depiction of God’s presence at Mount Moriah. In the second panel, we have an image that depicts God as being seated above the heavenly domain, through the metaphor of Sol Invictus. In the final panel, we have images of ritual objects associated with the Temple, as well as the Torah ark, whose nature in this panel is argued to be metaphoric for the Temple façade.¹¹³ At the end of this paradigmatic series we have the steps leading into the space contained within the apse and to the Torah ark. This series of central images therefore suggests the mosaicist sought to thematically present the presence of the *shekinah* within space (Mount Moriah, the Heavens, and the Temple Mount). If we follow this progression to its logical end, we can deduce that the *shekinah* is similarly present in the area containing the Torah ark. Therefore, this paradigmatic series draws the atemporal connection that just as God is present in these domains (at Mount

¹¹³ For example, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai grants the *lulav* a special status in the commemoration of the Temple. See Misnah Sukkah 3.12.
Moriah, in the heavens, at the Temple Mount), God is also present here in the synagogue.

The nesting of this paradigmatic series of images within the interior of the synagogue suggest that there is a sacred/profane hierarchy at work within the interior of Beth Alpha. We should note that this paradigmatic series of images overlap with the sacred/profane hierarchies given in M. Megillah 3:1 and the Yerushalmi. In M. Megillah 3:1, we are given a progressive series detailing how an individual should use the proceeds of selling a lower category of sanctity in order to purchase something from a higher one: from the sale of a town square one may purchase a synagogue; from a synagogue the Torah ark; from the Torah ark the Torah wrappings; from the Torah wrappings a scroll of the Prophets or Hagiographa; and from one of these scrolls the purchasing of the Torah.\textsuperscript{114} This series cloisters the Torah scrolls within protective layers (the wrappings, the Torah ark, the synagogue) from the least sacred category, the outside area containing public space. Noticeably, when this hierarchy of sanctity is applied to the layout of Beth Alpha, it likewise places the Torah ark in the space located the furthest from public space.

However, Levine argues the Yerushalmi varies in how it addresses this hierarchy by instead presenting it as a dichotomy between the sanctity of the Torah ark or that of the synagogue (Y. Megillah 3, 1, 73d).\textsuperscript{115} Although Levine is correct in making this distinction, this dichotomization can easily be explained in that the least sacred category of space (the outside public space) is now absent from the discourse. Therefore, this


tractate ignores profane space and instead focuses solely on discussing how lower and higher categories of sanctity relate to the interior of the synagogue. These issues aside, both sources suggest that the interior of the synagogue is segmented into distinguishable categories of sanctity and that they are marked by the presence of material objects within space. Logically, we can then postulate from the nesting of the Torah ark within the space of the apse, which these texts associate with being sacred, that the paradigmatic series of images along the central axis of the synagogue seek to articulate the elevation of this space. Yet, where the rabbis grant such a status to the Torah ark by its proximity and use in holding the Torah scrolls, these images grant it this sacrality through the depiction of God within space.

Through the mosaicist’s production of this paradigmatic series, we can propose that Jews at Beth Alpha understood these images as communicating that the shekinah is similarly made manifest in the synagogue’s space, thus granting it an aura of sanctity. This transposition of sanctity within the apse is most directly related to the content of the Jewish symbols panel. When we allow for the free association of the synagogue as solid metaphor for the Temple, we can establish a basic model for how the shekinah manifests itself in the synagogue. Through the metaphorical association of the synagogue’s Torah ark and curtain with that of the Ark of the Covenant and the veil for the Holy of Holies, we have a readily interpretable situation at Beth Alpha.

Ezekiel’s Vision

In the preliminary chapters of this paper we deduced the following postulates: the compositions of the three mosaic panels respectively emphasize their central image;
these images align along the central axis of the synagogue; this axis creates a route between the central entranceway and the point of entry into the apse; the curtain and steps only permit physical and visual access into the apse along this central axis. When we combine these facts with the metaphorical associations we have just discussed, there becomes a clear indication that the architectural and aesthetic design of Beth Alpha is complimentary in nature, which suggests the intent of its design is to articulate how the interior of the apse is sacred space. Furthermore, when we consider the correlations between the spatial design of the interior of the synagogue at Beth Alpha and the mapping of the Temple space, as given in Ezekiel 40:1-44:3, a number of correlations occur.116

For example, the Temple and the areas surrounding it are segmented into a sacred/profane hierarchy.117 On this hierarchy, J. Z. Smith states, “With respect to the temple mount, the land is profane; with respect to the temple, the temple mount is profane; with respect to the throne place, the temple is profane.”118 What is more, Smith argues this delineation of space is best understood through its verticality. “Each unit is built on a terrace, spatially higher than that which is profane in relation to it.”119 With the exception of the zodiac panel, the paradigmatic series we have discussed fits neatly within this hierarchical model: the ‘Aqedah panel depicts the generic space of Mount Moriah; the Jewish symbols panel depicts imagery associated with the sacred space of

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117 Ibid., 56-7.  
118 Ibid.  
119 Ibid., 57.
the Temple Mount; and the curtain acts as the physical embodiment of the Temple, whose verticality is further highlighted by its elevated position on the bema.

Within this proposal, the placement of the nine red and black palm trees between the ‘Aqedah and zodiac panels can be seen to serve two functions. First, they establish the horizon between the space of Mount Moriah and the heavens above, which are portrayed in the adjoining zodiac panel. Second, images of palm trees adorn the pilasters that occur at each of the vestibules depicted in Ezekiel’s vision (Ezekiel 40:16-23; 28-35). What is important about this second fact is that each of these vestibules demarcate the boundaries where steps allow for a person to ascend higher within the Temple. Thus, palm trees are directly associated with an elevation in the sacred/profane hierarchy described in Ezekiel’s vision. If we take these two aspects into account, then we have along the axis of this synagogue a series of three different sets of steps: the first set of steps occurs within the vestibule leading into the central entranceway; the second set of steps is symbolically presented at the banding between the ‘Aqedah and zodiac panels, where images of palm trees are placed; the third set of steps occur on the bema.

If this model is valid, then we further differentiate the areas contained within the interior of the synagogue into what Smith argues are zones of power and relative sacrality within the Temple.120 Along the benches and walls of the synagogue would be the sphere of the people.121 Here, this space is largely relegated as a place for people to congregate, but it lacks any sacred quality other than the fact it is contained within the

120 Ibid., 57-60
121 Ibid., 58.
walls of the synagogue. The nave of the synagogue would correspond with the sphere of the Levites.¹²² This sphere is isolated from that of the people by the presence of the columns and it contains the ritualistic performances that fall under the purvey of the Levites. Last, we have the apse which would overlap with the sphere of the Zadokites.¹²³ Included in this area are the duties relating to the innermost sanctuaries of the Temple. Noticeably, the placement of the curtain within Beth Alpha would either partially or completely mask the tasks that would occur within this space, which would further establish how these later synagogue rituals harken back to the Temple cult.¹²⁴

Conclusion

Although these associations are not always direct, they allow for this later Jewish community to have a sense of connection between their religious activities and those that would have occurred when the Temple still existed. We can see then that Tilley’s theory of the solid metaphor in many ways allows for us to construct fresh models and theories about the relationship between the ancient synagogue and the Temple. I believe I have articulated an argument in this chapter that validates the hypothesis we set out to test within this thesis paper. All things considered, I believe the design of the Beth Alpha mosaic carpets presents an interesting case study into the material culture of Judaism. By examining this case as an example of solid metaphor, we have considered a number of hypotheses, a few of which warrant further consideration. It is my opinion at this time that we can say, with a fair amount of certainty, that the intent of

¹²² Ibid., 57.
¹²³ Ibid.
¹²⁴ Hachlili, Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel, 237-8.
the mosaicist at Beth Alpha was to construct an associative connection between this synagogue and the then absent Temple. Furthermore, I believe the composition and arrangement of the mosaic carpets sought to communicate a statement about the sanctity of the synagogue, which was found to be recoverable through the application of Tilley’s theory of the solid metaphor. Although my interpretation of the design of the mosaic carpets requires further comparative analysis, primarily against other synagogues from this region and period, we have a potential starting point for exploring the correlations between Jewish material culture and Temple sanctity in this later period.
References