

ARCHAEOLOGY

On The Floor of a Village Synagogue

By FRANK THONE

SOME TIME about the year 525 a contractor named Marianos and his son Hanina were given the job of laying an ornamental floor in the synagogue of a village in northern Palestine.

It wasn't a very large town or a very distinguished one; its name is now forgotten, and neither Roman nor Jewish history contains any reference to the place. It was just another of the innumerable Main Street towns of the world, whose inhabitants carried on their several businesses, assembled piously on the Sabbath, and in due time were gathered to their fathers, all without raising dust or shedding enough blood to earn a few pen strokes on parchment. You look out drowsily on dozens of such places today whenever you go on a journey, strung along the right-of-way like beads on a thread. Like the small-town folk of today, the people of this forgotten village were a really religious lot, and they wanted their meeting house to be a place they could really be proud of; a place, moreover, that would instruct their children through their eyes as the Torah reader instructed them through their ears. So Marianos and his son Hanina were commissioned to cover the floor of the synagogue with pictures in stone—mosaics, we call them now. They did their workmanlike best, and were so well satisfied with what they had wrought that they put in an inscription telling who they were and that they finished the job in the reign of the Emperor Justinus.

Certain of Date

This dated signature, written in bits of colored stone, turns out to be one of the most important things about their whole artistic effort. For this synagogue which they thus decorated is the only building of its kind in Palestine of whose date we can be at all certain. Ruins of other and more pretentious synagogues have been found, but of their time only an approximate notion has ever been gained. And synagogues in Palestine are obviously as important, in

The house of worship of a lost Main Street town of the Middle Ages reveals strange designs in mosaic. In addition to the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, childish drawings on its floor depict Greek symbols—a Sun Chariot and signs of the Zodiac.

rebuilding our picture of the life of former times, as are churches or mosques or classic temples, all of which are the



THE SUN CHARIOT

And the twelve signs of the Zodiac, Greek symbols found in a Hebrew sanctuary

subjects of increasingly active archaeological research.

But however much applause Marianos and Hanina may have been given by their neighbors and patrons for their artistic efforts on the floor of the synagogue, the immortality they sought for their names was relatively short-lived—or rather, it suffered a very long hiatus. For at some time during the troubled period of war and confusion that marked the later centuries of antiquity the village was abandoned or destroyed,

and the synagogue died with it.

The roof and walls fell in, and the debris of centuries piled deep over the tessellated floor. Greek and Saracen, Crusader and Turk, fought each other to the death or made treaties and traded; all through the middle ages and modern times life ebbed and flowed through the Plain of Esdraelon where the town had once stood, and the forgotten stones of its houses lay as dumb and unheeding as dead men's bones.

New Town on Old

Then came the thunders of the World War, like the trumpet of resurrection. The land, long prone beneath the hand of the Turk, stirred and shook itself. Under a new regime, a people who had possessed it ages before sent back some of its scattered sons and daughters to till the land that their fathers had known. Under the banner of the Zionist movement Jewish colonists sprang up in many parts of the old Kingdom of David and Solomon. One of these agricultural colonies settled on almost the exact site of the long-forgotten village in the Plain of Esdraelon. Its founders, young men and women from Galicia, Germany and Czechoslovakia, called their town Beth Alpha. There were old stubs of walls sticking out of the soil here and there; but ruins are common in an old land like Palestine, and the new colonists were too busy wrestling with the present and providing for the future to dig much into the past. The problem of water was with them, as it had been with their ancestors in the wilderness, and they undertook to meet it by means of an irrigation ditch.

That trench brought them into contact with the past, whether they would or no. Wherever you go beneath the surface of the ground in Palestine you are very likely to come face to face very suddenly with antiquity. The diggers uncovered a strip of the mosaic floor which Marianos and his son had laid with careful fingers fourteen centuries ago. Some of the stones were arranged to form Hebrew letters: the diggers had



THE STORY OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AS TOLD IN MOSAIC

On the floor of a synagogue in Palestine, 525 A.D. Notice from left to right—servants with the donkey, the ram in the thicket, the restraining hand of the Lord, and Abraham with a knife in hand holding Isaac before the flaming altar.

without intending it made a find of major importance, had dug up a forgotten chapter from the past of their own people.

They made haste to notify the Hebrew University at Jerusalem, and Dr. L. Sukenik, archaeologist, came out to investigate. He arranged for careful and complete excavation at once, though the season was unfavorable, so that the colonists might be able to finish their irrigation ditch.

When at last Dr. Sukenik's workmen had laid the whole ruin bare, he had the ground plan of the ancient synagogue in full, and the interesting mosaic pavement in a remarkably well preserved condition. The building had been in some respects typical of the synagogues of that time in Palestine; in others, it introduced new features.

New Features of Building

The main portion had been divided into three naves by rows of pillars, the ground floor reserved for the men, with a gallery for the women worshippers. The three entrances customary in synagogues were at the "wrong" end of the building, however: they were on the north end instead of on the side nearest Jerusalem, which in this instance hap-

pened to be the south. Furthermore, they did not open directly into the synagogue itself, but into a transverse ante-room known as a narthex, typical of early Christian churches but hitherto unknown in synagogues of that period.

Another departure was the erection of an apse, or projecting end, in which stood the ark which always faces toward the Temple at Jerusalem. This again is more characteristic of Christian than of Jewish places of worship. There were stone benches around three walls, where the people sat during prayers.

But the great find is the mosaic floor. This tells a colorful story of orthodox piety and faithfulness to Jewish history, tempered with a cheerful eclecticism that did not refuse a bit of decoration that savored of the Greek, so long as it did not introduce the hated and dreaded worship of idols.

There is also a curious contrast between the taste of the workers in selecting their stones and their technical skill in working out their pictures and designs. For the bits of stone that are wrought into the figured floor are astonishingly assorted, showing no less than twenty-two nuances of color. But the figures themselves are astonishingly,

childishly naive, even crude. The faces on the human figures are almost duplicates of the efforts of early American tombstone sculptors, and the drawing of their limbs and those of the animals is reminiscent of that in children's sketch-books.

Lacked Skill, But History Straight

But regardless of their lack of skill, the father and son who laid the mosaics had their Bible history straight, and they also faithfully portrayed the various objects used in the ancient Jewish ritual: the Ark, the Perpetual Lamp, the Shofar, or ram's-horn trumpet, the Lulab, or palm branch, the Etrog, or citron used at the Feast of the Tabernacles.

The big job of portrayal that these two pious artisans undertook was the story of the Sacrifice of Abraham, as told in the twenty-second chapter of the book of Genesis. It is all shown, in primitive but graphic outline: Two servants holding the donkey with the empty packsaddle, remaining behind as Abraham told them to. Farther along stands the bearded and robed patriarch before an altar on which the flames already rise high. He holds the luckless young Isaac suspended in one hand, and in the other poises a long and wicked looking

knife. Behind him, unnoticed as yet, is the ram in the thicket, which Abraham eventually offered up. The dramatic interruption of the contemplated sacrifice by order from on high is symbolized by a hand surrounded with rays, extended out of a cloud, with the inscription in Hebrew characters: "Lay not thine hand upon the child."

It may be that the artist-artizans omitted a full representation of the angel of the Lord who thus relieved Abraham from the agonizing task of sacrificing his own son simply because the space was already crowded with human and animal figures; but the omission suggests itself, was not this omission possibly due to the reverent dread the Jews have always had of depicting the incorporate and infinite *Yhwh* in any bodily form? Even when God was present only through His agent, picturization may have been judged an impiety.

The question becomes one of some interest and importance for the understanding of the synagogue of Beth Alpha because of the great mosaic design that occupied the center of the floor. This is not directly connected with the Jewish ritual at all. It is Greek; it might even be called pagan. Within a circle formed of the twelve signs of the zodiac are the four horses and the driver of the chariot of the sun.

A Lesson In Astronomy

If this had been found in any building not otherwise identified, one would immediately jump at the conclusion that it was a representation of the pagan sun-god Phoebus-Apollo. But here in a synagogue, surrounded as it is by indubitable evidences of the orthodox and uncorrupted Judaism of the congregation, the sun-symbol must be taken simply for a cultural picture—one might say a lesson in astronomy assembled in stone. This interpretation is strengthened by the presence of winged figures at the four "corners" of the circle, which appropriate inscriptions present as the spirits (djinn, if you like) of the four seasons.

The presence of any human or animal figures at all in the decorations of a synagogue may be a puzzle to some, in view of the known strictness of the rule against graven images. But a Jewish

writer in the German scientific journal *Die Umschau* calls attention to the fact that these "images" are not, in the strict sense, graven. They are flat figures, and the idols against which the Mosaic legislation was originally aimed were carved "in the round." So pictures of this kind might well be tolerated; just as the Orthodox Christian churches of the East forbid carved statuary but permit painted and enameled ikons, as well as wall painting and mosaics.

The interdict on graven images, "the likeness of anything that is in the heavens above, the earth beneath or in the waters that are under the earth" has never been interpreted with absolute

ment they received at the hands of their Seleucian conquerors, the semi-Greek dynasty set over them by Alexander the Great. They regarded their oppressors as idolaters, and hence themselves became radical iconoclasts when they achieved their last independence under the Machabees. This intolerance of images survived until the days just before the destruction of Jerusalem; for Josephus tells of a great golden eagle that the half-Romanized King Herod set up but was compelled to take down again and break into pieces because of the opposition of the people.

That this iconoclastic temper of the Jewish people was again somewhat modified half a millenium later is testified by the elaborately pictured floor of the synagogue at Beth Alpha. It is possible, too, that in this part of the country, remote from Jerusalem and in more intimate contact with Greek culture, such modification was a little easier.

Thus, much of interest to Jew and Christian alike, can be read from the ruins of this one synagogue—a village synagogue—at that, and in a town so obscure that all memory of it had perished when the young men of the new settlement of Beth Alpha stumbled upon it. There must be many more such places

waiting for the spade of the archaeologist—in Jerusalem alone, Josephus says, there were 394 synagogues. The synagogues of the larger towns must have been places of greater distinction, whose remains will tell even more than the ruins at Beth Alpha have revealed. Prof. Sukenik and his colleagues of the Hebrew University are seeking them, and their search will be followed by the keen interest of their own people and by the sympathy of Gentile scholars as well.

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More than one out of every ten resignations from the sales force of a department store are due to health conditions, a study conducted by Dr. C. J. Ho at the R. H. Macy and Company department store in New York reveal. More women than men leave because of ill health, and resignations for this cause are more frequent in the spring than in other parts of the year.



THE FLOOR LAID IN MOSAIC

"There must be many more such places . . . in Jerusalem alone, Josephus says, there were 394 synagogues."

literalness. If it had been, it would have prohibited the making of images of flowers, fruit and other parts of plants; and it will be recalled that such images were actually required as part of the ceremonial garments of the priests.

Even animal images were used in the holiest places, and under the most solemn and weighty authority. Over the Ark of the Covenant itself there watched two "theraphim" which, so far as we may judge by their description in the Bible, were human-headed animal figures with wings—possibly something like the winged bulls of Babylon. Then there was the brazen serpent Moses made for the saving of the people in the desert when a plague of snakes menaced them. It was kept as a very holy relic in the Temple until the zealous King Hezekiah found his subjects inclined to revere it as an idol, and so destroyed it.

Pictures, Not Images

Israel underwent a violent revulsion against images as a result of the ill treat-