

SEPPHORIS

Historical Background. Sepphoris, sometimes styled “The Forgotten City,” was an important administrative center in Galilee during the time of Jesus. The fact that it is not mentioned in the New Testament has a large part to do with its being “forgotten.” Sepphoris is known as Zippori in Hebrew; the city got its name from the Hebrew word for “bird” (*tsippor*) because it sat on a mountaintop like a perched bird (Talmud *Megillah* 6a). It rests some 380 feet above the Beth Netofah Valley.



Views of the Valley Below Sepphoris



Under the lead of Pompey, the Romans attacked the Jews in 63 B.C., taking control of their land. At that time, Sepphoris was made the capital of one of five districts (Josephus *Antiquities* 14.5.4). Later, Herod attacked the city in a snowstorm and took it from his archrival Antigonus (*Antiquities* 14.15.4; *Wars* 1.16.2). When Herod the Great died in 4 B.C., Judah ben Hezekiah revolted in Sepphoris. In response, Varus, the governor of Syria, came and destroyed the city (*Antiquities* 17.10.5, 9).

Herod Antipas inherited the region of Galilee from his father, Herod the Great. He chose to rebuild the city, and it served as the capital of Galilee until the development of Tiberias about A.D. 20 (*Antiquities* 18.2.1). Even after that time, Sepphoris still maintained its influence in the region. Josephus called the city “the ornament [or ‘security’] of all Galilee” (*Antiquities* 18.2.1).

Later on, Sepphoris once again served as the capital of Galilee, under the reign of Agrippa I (*Life* 9 [38]). Although predominantly Jewish, the city was loyal to Rome during the First Jewish Revolt (A.D. 66-70). Since the citizens there did not rebel, the city was spared from destruction by the Romans (*Wars* 3.2.4). After that time, coins minted call Sepphoris the “City of Peace” (*Eirenopolis*) or “Nero’s City of Peace” (*Eirenopolis Neronias*). After the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Sepphoris became an important center for Judaism. It was the seat of the Sanhedrin in about A.D. 200, and work on the Mishnah was completed there.

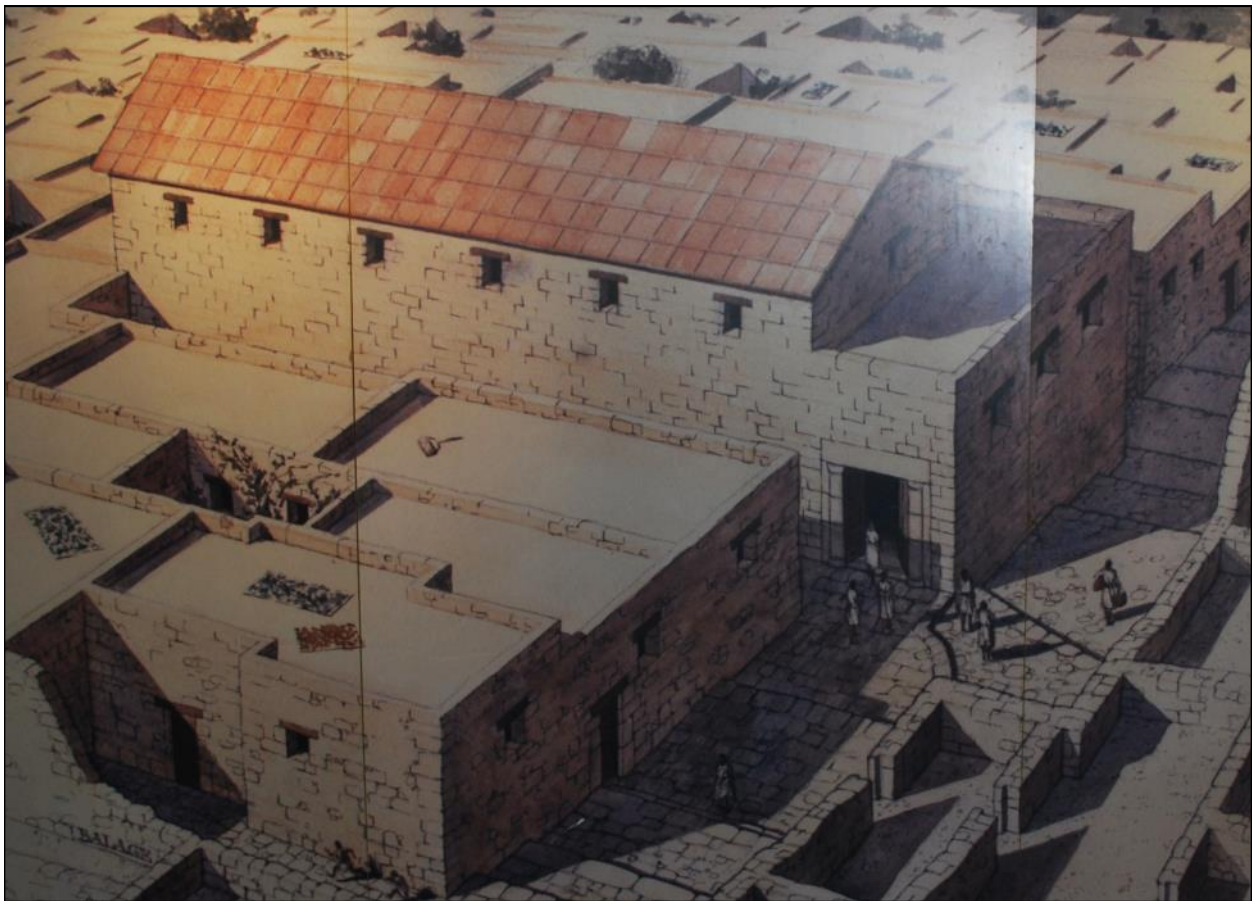
Jesus and Sepphoris. The rebuilding of Sepphoris by Herod Antipas took place during Jesus’ youth. This important city—which was a cultural, political, and military center—was about four miles north of the village of Nazareth, midway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee. Perched on a hill, Sepphoris could be seen from the vicinity of Nazareth; as a child, Jesus may have seen the city lit up at night. This view could have been the remote background for his statement in the Sermon on the Mount: “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden” (Mt. 5:14).

Many scholars have suggested that Joseph and Jesus traveled to Sepphoris for work; it was about an hour’s walk. In the Gospel Accounts, Jesus is called “the carpenter” (Mk. 6:3) and “the carpenter’s son” (Mt. 13:55). Since it was the practice of a father to teach his son his trade or skill, we can assume that Joseph trained Jesus for this vocation. The Greek word for “carpenter” is *tekton*, which could signify a worker in wood, stone, or other materials. If Joseph and Jesus worked only in wood, they would have made farming implements (plows, yokes, carts), house parts (doors, frames, locks), or furniture (tables, cabinets, lampstands) in Nazareth. However, if they were skilled builders, working in stone as well as wood, then perhaps they were involved with some of the building projects in Sepphoris. Nazareth was a small village, presumably lacking in the kind of construction projects that would provide sufficient

work for skilled builders. With extensive building in progress an hour’s walk away, it is possible that on some occasions Joseph and Jesus would have been employed in Sepphoris.

Regardless of whether Jesus worked in Sepphoris, he was certainly acquainted with its predominantly Greco-Roman culture. One indication of this is his use of the word “hypocrite” (*hypokrites*). When he applied this term to the scribes and Pharisees (see Mt. 6:2, 5, 16; 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 24:51), he may have considered the Sepphoris theater, where one might act under a mask or pretend to be someone he is not.

Another connection has been suggested between Jesus and Sepphoris. According to tradition, it was the home of a couple named Joachim and Anna; they were the parents of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The tradition states that, when Joachim died, Anna and Mary moved to nearby Nazareth—where Mary eventually met Joseph. The Church of St. Anna in Sepphoris marks the traditional location of the home of Joachim and Anna, where Mary was born and spent her early years. Another tradition, however, says that Mary was born in Nazareth (*The Gospel of the Birth of Mary* 1.1-2).



Reconstruction of a 5th or 6th Century A.D. Synagogue at Sepphoris



Synagogue Mosaic Floor (Looking to the West)



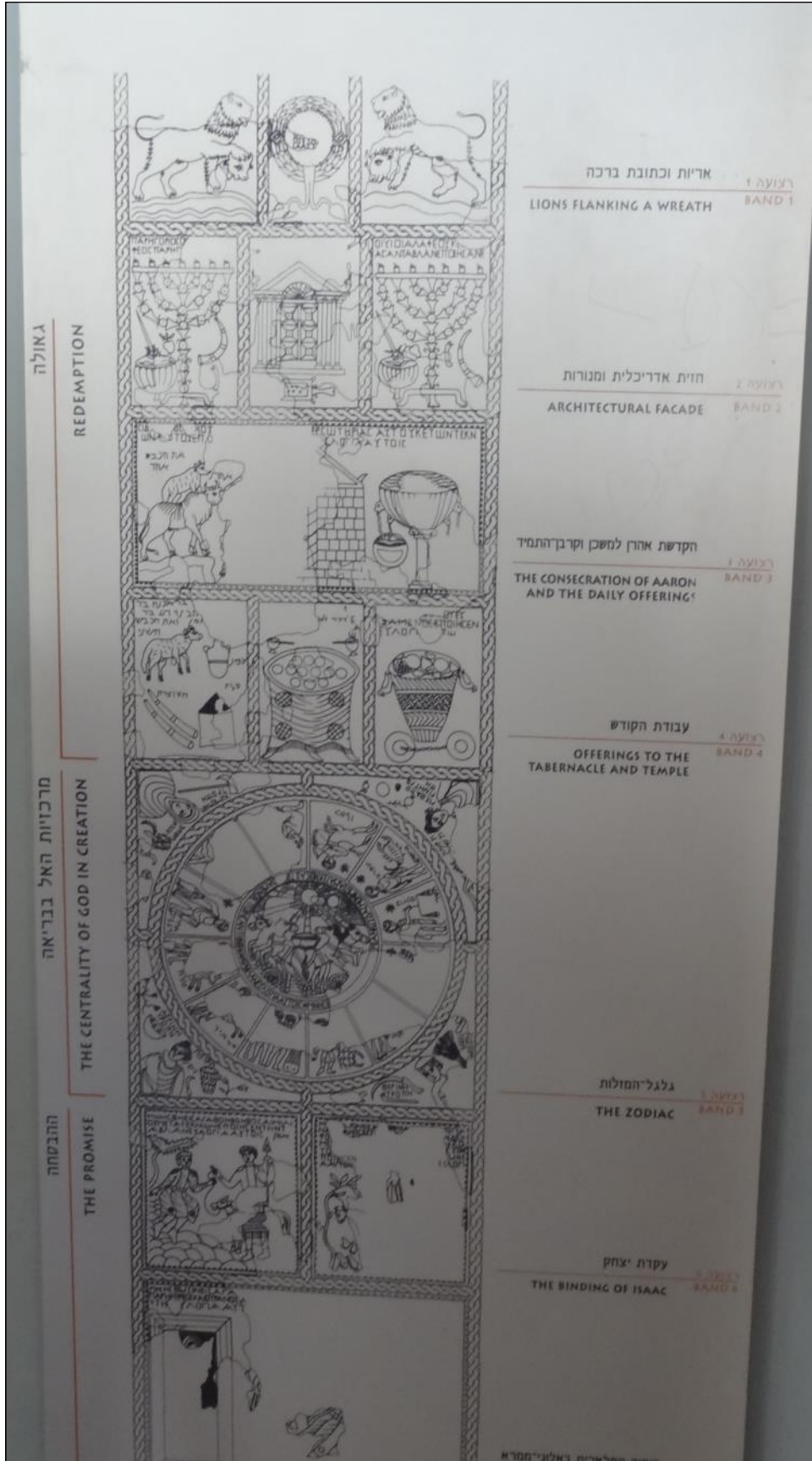


Synagogue Mosaic Floor (Looking to the East)

The synagogue at Sepphoris dates to the fifth or sixth century A.D. It was a long, narrow hall measuring about 65 by 28 feet. This hall was divided into two unequal parts by a row of five columns. The place for the *bema* (speaker's platform) was at the west end. The synagogue had a magnificent mosaic floor, with seven panels. These included important biblical symbols (such as, the lion and the menorah) as well as scenes from biblical stories (the consecration of Aaron and Abraham's binding of Isaac). Surprisingly, in the center of the mosaics is a circle with the signs of the Zodiac. In the center of this is a smaller circle with the radiant sun—perhaps used to represent the Lord. This representation seems out of place in light of the second commandment (Ex. 20:4). Perhaps the Jews of that period were beyond idolatry and did not have a problem with the representation since it was not a three-dimensional idol.

The panels of the mosaic follow this order (from west to east):

1. A wreath flanked by two lions.
2. A temple in between two menorahs.
3. The consecration of Aaron, the first high priest of Israel.
4. The table of showbread and the basket of firstfruits.
5. The Zodiac with the radiant sun in the center.
6. Abraham's binding of Isaac.
7. Sarah standing in the doorway while Abraham offers hospitality to the three visitors.



אאולה

REDEMPTION

מרכזיות האל בבריאה

THE CENTRALITY OF GOD IN CREATION

ההבטחה

THE PROMISE

אריות וכתובת ברכה

רצועה 1
BAND 1

LIONS FLANKING A WREATH

חזית אדריכלית ומנורות

רצועה 2
BAND 2

ARCHITECTURAL FACADE

קדשת אהרן למשכן וקרבנותיו

רצועה 3
BAND 3

THE CONSECRATION OF AARON AND THE DAILY OFFERINGS

עבודת הקודש

רצועה 4
BAND 4

OFFERINGS TO THE TABERNACLE AND TEMPLE

גלגל החולות

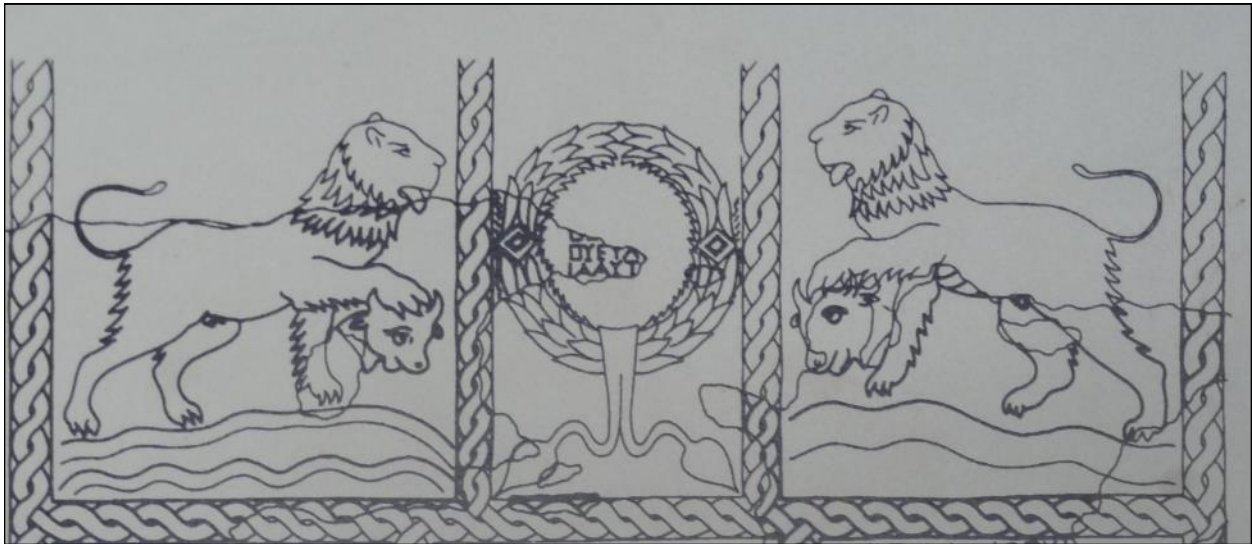
רצועה 5
BAND 5

THE ZODIAC

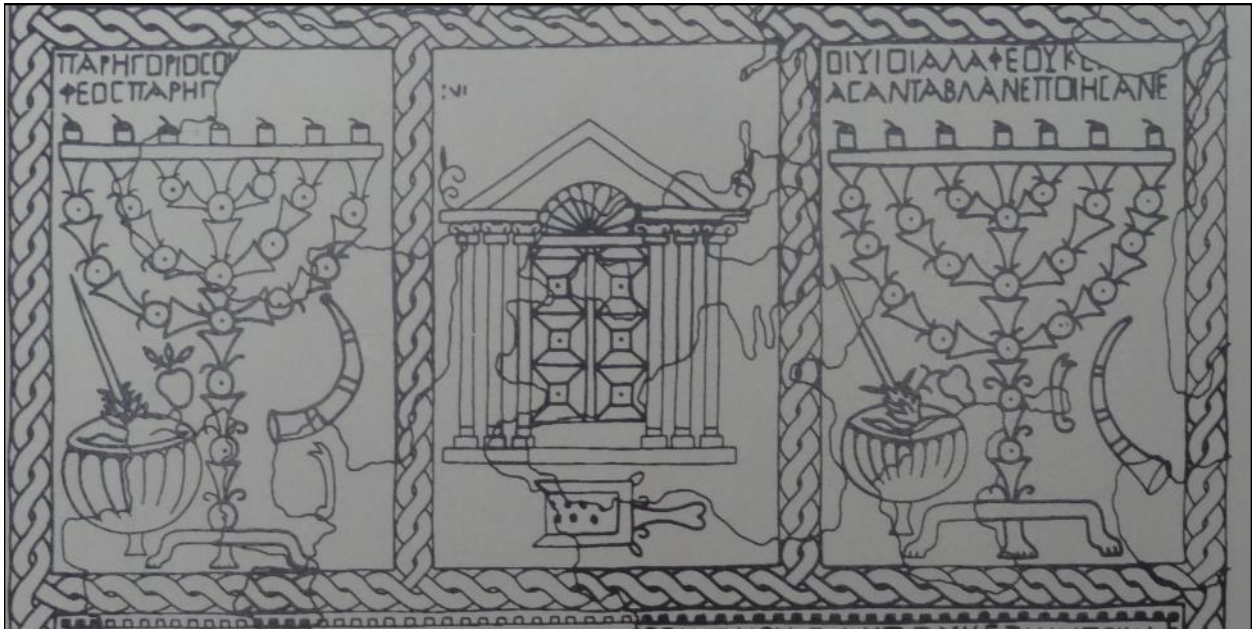
קרת יצחק

רצועה 6
BAND 6

THE BINDING OF ISAAC



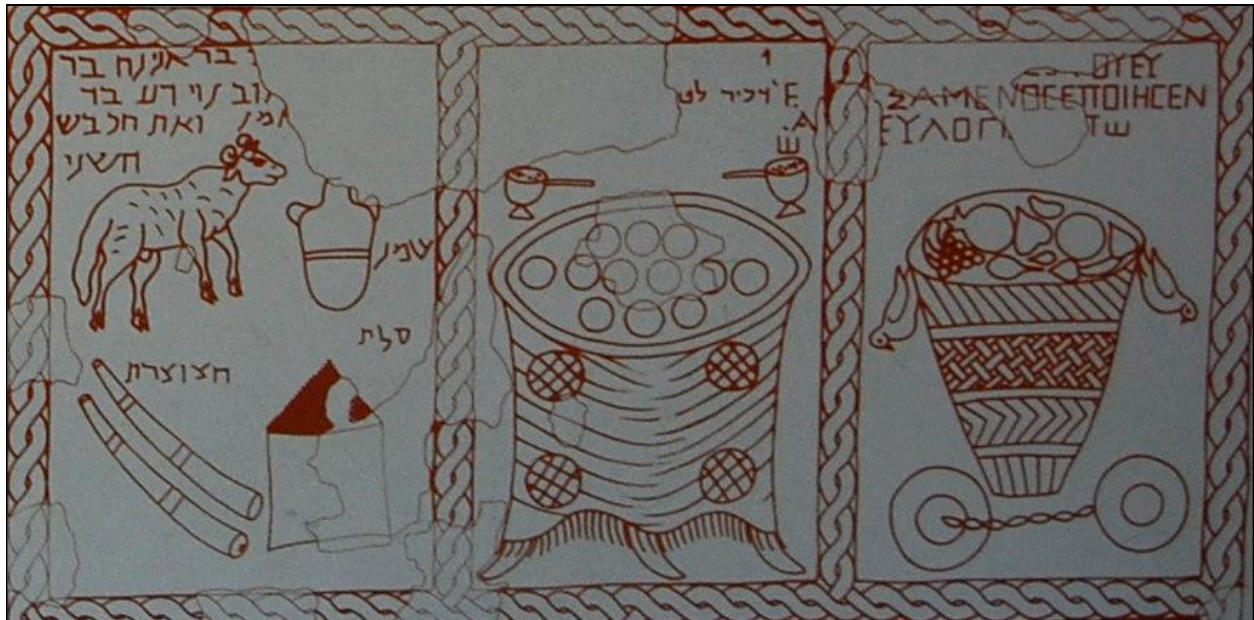
Panel 1—A wreath flanked by two lions. Although this panel is in poor condition, it once portrayed two lions, each holding the head of a bull in its paw. Between the two lions was a wreath with a Greek inscription inside. Such imagery was common in the artwork of the ancient Near East. It has been suggested that, in this context, the lions represented God's protection over the assembly of the synagogue. This particular panel was closest to the *bema* (speaker's platform).



Panel 2—A temple in between two menorahs. The central frame features the front of a temple with a peaked roof resting on six columns. Between the two sets of columns is a pair of double doors. (Instead of a temple, some say it is a Torah ark.) Below the temple is an incense shovel. To the sides are two menorahs and shofars (rams' horns). Perhaps these symbols demonstrate the desire to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.



Panel 3—The consecration of Aaron, the first high priest of Israel. This panel portrayed the consecration of Aaron to the service of the tabernacle (Ex. 29:1-45). The water basin on the right side of the panel represents the purification of Aaron and his sons (Ex. 30:18). The middle portion is part of the altar; one of the four horns is visible. To the left stands a sacrificial bull and a lamb. Aaron stood just to the right of these animals. His name appears in Hebrew above the bull's head, and the edge of his garment is visible with bells at the bottom (Ex. 28:34).

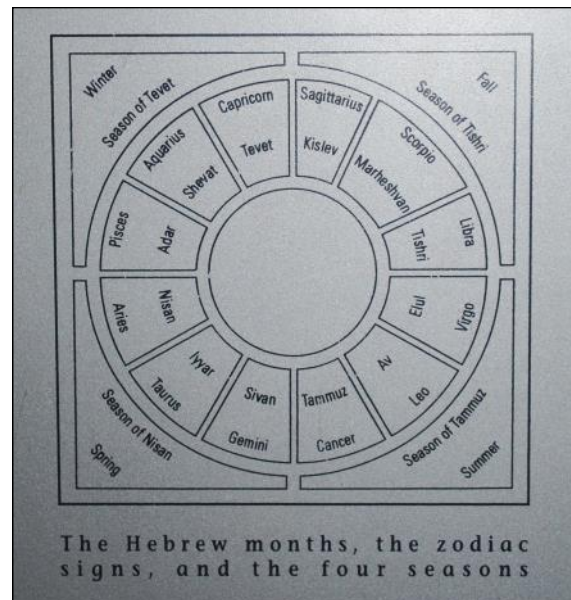


Panel 4—The table of showbread and the basket of firstfruits. The center frame has the table of showbread, even though its design does not fit the biblical description (Ex. 37:10-16). On it, there are twelve loaves of bread representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Above the table are two censers of frankincense. The right frame portrays a basket of first fruits (Deut. 26:1-11); two birds hang from the side so they do not spoil the fruit (Jerusalem Talmud *Bikkurim* 3.4). The left frame portrays another sacrificial lamb, oil, and flour. A pair of trumpets are also visible, which, according to the Mishnah, were sounded at the daily sacrifices.





Panel 5—The Zodiac with the radiant sun in the center. The four seasons (women) are at the four corners, illustrated by various harvests. While the sun god Helios is not present, perhaps the radiant sun is an abstract representation of him along with his four-horse chariot. Along with the sun is the moon and a star. These symbols are perhaps used to represent the power of God. He rules over the four seasons, the months of the year, and even the heavenly bodies.





Panel 6—Abraham’s binding of Isaac. The left frame portrays two of Abraham’s servants taking care of a donkey at the base of Mount Moriah as they waited for their master. The right frame, which is severely damaged, portrayed Abraham with a knife and Isaac by his side. Due to being on holy ground, they had taken off their shoes (see Ex. 3:5; Josh. 5:15), which can be seen turned upside down at the bottom of the frame. The scene emphasizes God’s redemptive promises (Gen. 22:16-17).



Panel 7—Sarah standing in the doorway while Abraham offers hospitality to the three visitors. Three men (angels) came to Abraham while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent near the great trees of Mamre. He fed them veal, bread, curds, and milk. The furniture on the right side of the panel is a low table. Sarah listened to their conversation from the entrance of the tent. The scene represents the promise that the aged couple would indeed have a son, Isaac (Gen. 18:1-15).



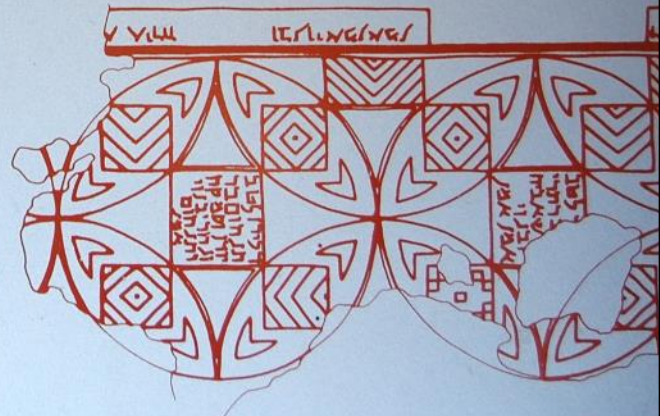
The synagogue's only aisle runs along the northern side of the nave. The aisle is covered with a rich geometric carpet. Aramaic dedicatory inscriptions were incorporated into the medallions and near the columns, but very few of them have survived. Some of the names appearing in the inscriptions occur more than once. It is possible that they reflect several generations of a single family of donors.

Right:

May he be remembered for good
Yudan son of
Isaac the Priest
and Paregri his daughter
Amen Amen

Left:

May they be remembered for good
Tanhum son of
Yudan and Semqah
and Nehorai the sons
of Tanhum
Amen





A Roman theater, dated to either the first or the second century A.D., was built in the hillside at Sepphoris. It was 230 feet in diameter and seated about 4,000 spectators. The lower rows of the seating have been reconstructed. The center stage features a stone base with a wooden platform on top of it. The theater had five entrances; three of them opened into the rows of the seats, while two were on both sides of the stage. If built in the first century A.D., this theater may have influenced Jesus as a youth, serving as the background of his use of the term “hypocrite” (*hypokrites*) (see Mt. 6:2, 5, 16).



Excavations on the Acropolis



Closeup of the Excavations on the Acropolis



Miqweh Among the Excavations



Plaster on the Back Wall of the *Miqweh*

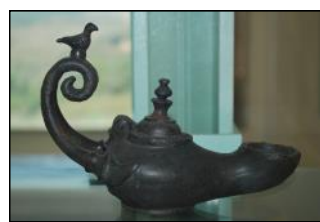
A *miqweh* is a Jewish ritual bath used for ceremonial purification; the Jews would immerse themselves on a regular basis. The presence of ritual baths testifies to the Jewish population in Sepphoris. Plaster was often used to make ritual baths water tight.



Flora at Sepphoris Today



The acropolis of Sepphoris is adorned with a fortress. The stonework betrays the fact that it was rebuilt in different periods (Crusader and Ottoman). The lower right hand corner of the back of the fortress features a recycled sarcophagus. Today, the inside of the fortress functions as a small museum, whereas the top of it serves as an observation deck (where one can view the fertile valleys below).

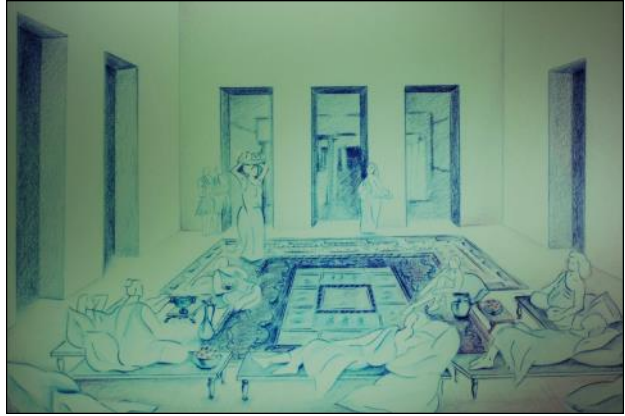


Artifacts in the museum include an oil lamp and a rhyton (drinking vessel).





Mosaic Floor of the *Triclinium*



Artist's Rendition of the *Triclinium*

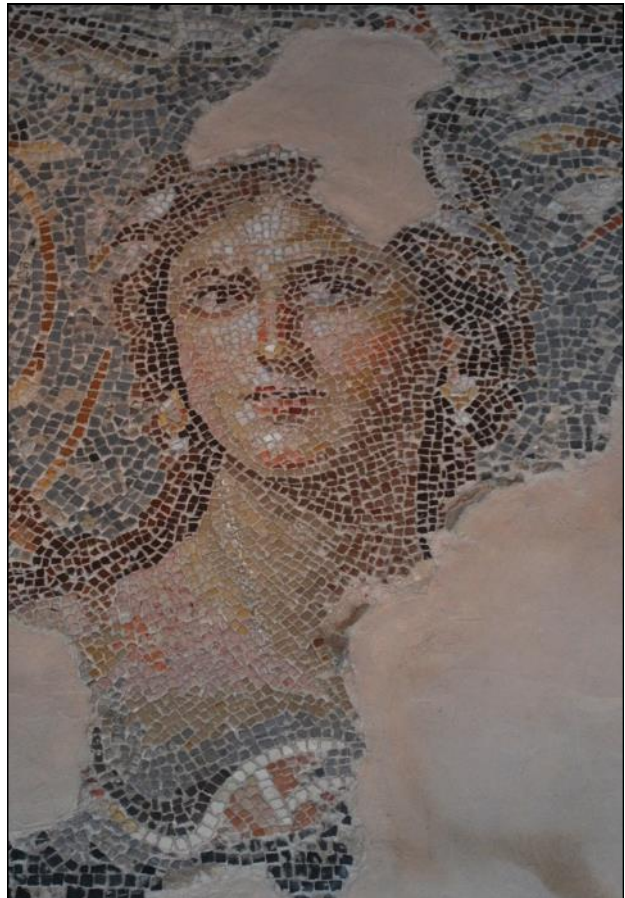
Located on the acropolis east of the fortress is a Roman villa built in the third century A.D. The dining hall (*triclinium*), located in the center of the home, is richly decorated with floor mosaics, which tell stories about Dionysius, the god of wine. One frame features a beautiful woman, who is commonly referred to as "the Mona Lisa of Galilee." She is wearing a laurel wreath and earrings. She appears to always be looking at you, regardless of your vantage point. (Note that the U-shaped part of the floor where the diners reclined is undecorated.)



Three Satyrs Treading Grapes



Drinking Contest Between Heracles and Dionysius

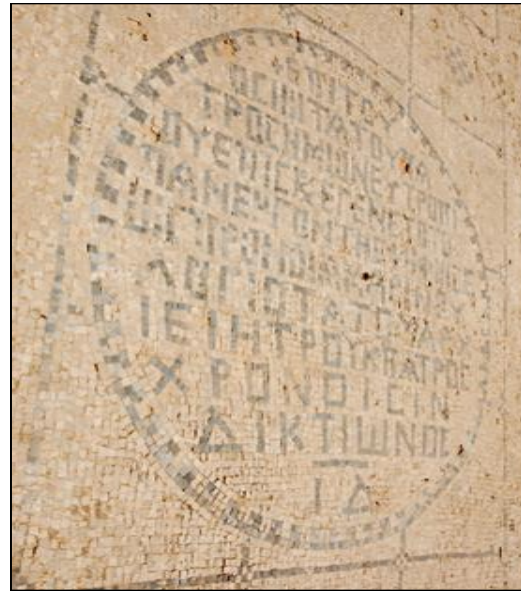


The Mona Lisa of Galilee

The lower part of Sepphoris was located southeast of the acropolis. It was laid out in a grid pattern with a main street (*cardo maximus*) generally running north-south and an intersecting secondary street (*decumanus*) traveling east-west. These streets had shops and businesses on either side.



Portico Side of *Cardo Maximus*
with Mosaics



Mosaic Inscription at the Junction of the
Cardo Maximus and *Decumanus*
(c. 4th century A.D.):
“Under our most saintly father Eutropius the Bishop, the whole work of the mosaic [pavement] was done by the provision of the most learned Marianus, the chief physician and father of the city in the time of the fourteenth indication”
(Murphy-O’Connor, 473).



Decumanus

In the lower part of the city, to the southeast of the *cardo maximus*, one can find the Nile House. This mansion, named for one of its mosaic floors, was built around A.D. 400 and later destroyed by an earthquake in the seventh century. The Nile room portrays the flooding of the Nile River in Egypt. The Nilometer is featured at the top of the mosaic; it is a pointed tower used to measure the rise of the Nile during the period of annual flooding (July to September). The flooding of the Nile brought rich silt deposits, which usually resulted in a good crop at the next harvest. The Pharos appears in the bottom half of the mosaic; it was the famous lighthouse in Alexandria that was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The mosaic also features many wild animals.



The Nile Room



Nile Floods from the Hippo's Mouth



Nilometer



The Pharos



Animal Scenes



Gate of Alexandria, Egypt