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The End of Days in the Mosaics of the Meroth Synagogue

Asher OVADIAH and Sonia MUCZNIK

Carla Gomez de Silva
in memoriam

In the course of the archaeological excavations carried out in the area of the ancient synagogue at Meroth in 1984 (fig. 1-3), a fragmentary panel of a coloured mosaic pavement was discovered. Its dimensions are 2,15 x 1,70 m. and it is located in the north-east end of the eastern aisle. The colours are as follows : white, red, yellow, pink and black. In addition to the extant panel, there are signs that indicate the existence of an adjacent panel (fig. 4-8). Both these panels were separated by a plain frame of a black line (A1)¹ and surrounded by an external frame consisting of a guilloche (B2) and another wider plain frame (A1)².

A male figure seated within the panel with various weapons dispersed around him is shown in a three-quarters view, with his hands stretched out forwards. He is depicted with a young face and rich hair ; his eyes were damaged, either by weathering or by iconoclasts. The short light-coloured tunic he is wearing has long sleeves and embroidered round motifs, one on his upper right sleeve, and two others on the lower part of the tunic ; over it a red mantle, probably a *sagum*, is held by a *fibula*³. The weapons around the figure include an oval shield, a helmet, a long sword (*spatha*), and an unidentified round-shaped object.

An Aramaic inscription, inserted on the right side of the figure, reads (fig. 4-5, 8) :

יודן ברשמצוך מני⁴

"Yudan the son of Shimeon *menei*"⁵

The closest comparative examples of a figure seated or resting on a shield, can be found on a Roman mosaic pavement from Tipasa in North Africa (fig. 9)⁶, dated to the third century CE, where one of the bound barbarian prisoners is shown in a similar posture ; another one is from Antioch (Worcester Hunt) (fig. 10)⁷. Other parallel examples of this pose are shown on a few Orpheus mosaics, such as the second century CE Perugia mosaic, the third century CE

¹ A. OVADIAH, *Geometric and Floral Patterns in Ancient Mosaics*, Rome 1980, p. 23.

² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³ Z. ILAN and E. DAMATI, *Meroth, The Ancient Jewish Village*, Tel Aviv 1987, p. 53-56 (Hebrew).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 56-57.

⁵ One of the probable meanings of *menei* is a sum of money given as a donation ; see Z. ILAN and E. DAMATI, "Excavations of the Synagogue at Meroth", *Qadmoniot* XVIII, 1985, p. 48 (Hebrew).

⁶ R. BIANCHI-BANDINELLI, *Rome, The Late Empire*, London 1971, p. 237-238 (ill. 219) ; K.M. DUNBABIN, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa*, Oxford 1971, p. 24, pl. III (7) (the mosaic is dated to the mid-second century CE).

⁷ Doro LEVI, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, Princeton 1947, pl. CLXX (c. 500 CE).

Edessa and the fourth century CE Sparta mosaics (fig. 11)⁸. Additional examples of this pose are found in other works of art, such as mosaics⁹, ivories of the Roman and Early Christian periods¹⁰, and on a silver plate of the fifth century CE¹¹.

The garments of the figure are designed in a very flat, stylized manner; the embroidered ornaments on these are very frequent in works of art, such as mosaic pavements, metal works, etc. of the Roman and early Byzantine periods¹². Undoubtedly, these ornaments indicate that the figure belonged to a high social status and not, as was curiously proposed, that these were either emblems of military units, or indicated membership in some organization or class¹³.

The helmet, the sword (*spatha*), and the oval shield appearing around the figure (fig. 4-8)¹⁴, are frequently represented in Roman and early Byzantine works of art¹⁵. The sword (*spatha*) which consists of reddish brown cubes (*tesserae*) seems to be covered by an object of dark *tesserae* at its lower end. This representation suggests that there may have been another oval shield, as the dark *tesserae* form a curved line. This suggestion is supported by another curved line of dark *tesserae* in the right lower corner of the panel. It is difficult to identify the curvilinear dark object close to the figure, which has a rectangular projection. Could the pose of the hands, especially the fingers which are still extant, suggest that the figure was harping a stringed instrument (*kythara* or *lyra*), represented by the curvilinear dark object on the ground near the figure?

The scattered weapons in the cases of the Gemma Augustea in Vienna¹⁶ and the Apotheosis of Antoninus Pius and Faustina¹⁷ represent trophies, shown under the feet of the Emperor and *Dea Roma*, symbolizing the victory over the enemies of Rome. The weapons in the

⁸ A. OVADIAH and S. MUCZNIK, "Orpheus Mosaics in the Roman and Early Byzantine Periods", *Assaph*, Section B, I, 1980, p. 51-53, fig. 4-5, 8. For a similar pose of a shepherd playing a flute, in a late fifth century CE illuminated manuscript, see K. WEITZMANN (ed.), *Age of Spirituality*, New York 1979, No. 225.

⁹ V. DORIGO, *Late Roman Painting*, London 1971, ill. 196; C. GOMEZ DE SILVA, *The Iconography of the Holy Sepulchre in Early Christian Art* (unpublished MA Thesis, Tel Aviv University 1985), fig. 3 (Hebrew).

¹⁰ GOMEZ DE SILVA (above, note 9), fig. 6-7.

¹¹ WEITZMANN (ed.) (above, note 8), No. 168.

¹² Cf. DORIGO (above, note 9), ill. 98-99, 101-104, 106-107, 116, pl. 7, 9, 12; BIANCHI-BANDINELLI (above, note 6), ill. 199, 226, 227, 313; WEITZMANN (ed.) (above, note 8), No. 425-427, 429, 433.

¹³ ILAN and DAMATI (above, note 3), p. 56.

¹⁴ For similar depictions of scattered weapons, see WEITZMANN (ed.) (above, note 8), No. 168 (fifth century CE), 197 (fourth century CE), 202 (seventh century CE); S. REINACH, *Répertoire des reliefs grecs et romains*, III, Paris 1912 (repr. 1968), p. 524, fig. 2 (Valentinian III: the depiction on this silver disc is the closest to our case, as the three weapons in Meroth appear here as well).

¹⁵ For the oval shield with an ombo, see D.E. STRONG, *Roman Imperial Sculpture*, London 1961, pl. 70-72 (Column of Trajan), 102-103, 106 (Column of M. Aurelius); WEITZMANN (ed.), (above, note 8), No. 64 (388 CE), 203 (first quarter of fifth century CE), pl. VI (late fifth century CE); REINACH (above, note 14), p. 524, fig. 2 (Valentinian III); BIANCHI-BANDINELLI (above, note 6), pl. 226. For this type of helmet, see H. RUSSELL ROBINSON, *The Armour of Imperial Rome*, London 1975, pl. 179-182 (late second-third century CE), 257-259 (second century CE), 273-282 (late second-early third century CE), 376-377 (late second-third century CE), pl. IV. For the sword (*spatha*) see: *ibid.*, pl. 298, 301-303 (first century CE). These examples are typical of auxiliary cavalry.

¹⁶ STRONG (above, note 15), pl. 45.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pl. 91.

Meroth mosaic most probably belong to the figure, but are not trophies or *spolia*, as proposed by the excavators¹⁸. This representation of the figure may indicate a moment of repose, rather than the victory over an enemy or opponent following a combat.

The excavators in their examination of the Aramaic inscription present a number of suggestions regarding its significance (fig. 4-5, 8)¹⁹. In our view, it seems that the most plausible interpretation is that this is a dedicatory inscription of the donor, rather than the name of the artist or artisan. This donor, Yudan Bar Shimeon, paid a sum of money (*menei*) for the laying and completion of the mosaic pavement, despite the absence of the usual formulas, such as, "be remembered" (דכיר לטב), "gave" (דינתב), "made" (צבד), "donated" (אתחזיק), which appear in other synagogues²⁰, as part of the inscription. It should be noted that there are dedicatory inscriptions without one of these formulas²¹.

It is difficult to accept the suggestion that the figure in the mosaic pavement represents either the portrait of a hero, or a gladiator, or a warrior, or a military commander, whose name was "Yudan Bar Shimeon", or the image of King David, after his victory over Goliath²². Nor can we accept the suggestion that the inscription refers to the name of the artist or the artisan²³, since this would have included the Aramaic word "made" (צבד), as it appears in another mosaic pavement of the synagogue in the Kyrios Leontis Complex at Beth Shean²⁴.

If the intention were to represent King David, one would expect that the figure would have been displayed in the nave in a central place, so that the visitor would view it immediately upon entering the synagogue. Moreover, if the figure were King David, an inscription identifying him would have been placed above his head or close to it (there is enough space to insert such an inscription). It should be pointed out that in some synagogue mosaic pavements such as those in Gaza-Maioumas²⁵, Beth-Alpha²⁶ and Na'aran²⁷, the names identifying the figures are inscribed above their heads. The absence of a similar inscription above or near the figure in Meroth does not allow to identify the image of the soldier as King David.

It should be noted that the interesting comparative examples and the iconographic analysis of those who proposed to consider that this is the image of King David, are absolutely irrelevant to the depiction of the figure in the Meroth mosaic²⁸, as none of these examples are suitable to

¹⁸ ILAN and DAMATI (above, note 3).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56-57.

²⁰ See for example, Beth Shean (Kyrios Leontis Complex), 'Ein Gedi, Eshtemoa, Hosefa, Jericho, Ma'on (Nirim), Na'aran, etc.

²¹ ILAN and DAMATI (above, note 3), p. 57 and note 26.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 58, 149 ff.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁴ Cf. R. and A. OVADIAH, *Hellenistic, Roman and Early Byzantine Mosaic Pavements in Israel*, Rome 1987, p. 36 (No. 31 B).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pl. LIX, CLXXVIII.

²⁶ E.L. SUKENIK, *The Ancient Synagogue at Beth Alpha*, Jerusalem 1932, pl. XIX; A. OVADIAH, *Mosaic Art in Ancient Synagogues in Israel from the 4th to the 7th centuries*, Tel Aviv 1993, p. 35, 56.

²⁷ A. OVADIAH, "Observations on the Mosaic Art in Ancient Synagogues", in *La mosaïque gréco-romaine* IV (Trier, 8-14 août 1984), Paris 1994, pl. 128 (2).

²⁸ ILAN and DAMATI (above, note 3), p. 150-151.

our case, and especially to its seated-resting pose. Moreover, the 'red hair' of the figure²⁹ is not enough evidence to identify him as David, because many 'redheads' are depicted on mosaic pavements³⁰.

It seems possible that the scattered weapons and the repose of the figure may imply the idea of universal peace and the End of Days, as described in the Bible in the consolation prophecies for redemption and salvation :

He shall judge between nations, and shall decide for many peoples ; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks ; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Isaiah 2 : 4)

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; and their young lie down together ; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.... (Isaiah 11 : 6-9)

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox ; and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord. (Isaiah 65 : 25)

A similar idea is formulated also by Micah :

... and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks ; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more... (Micah 4 : 3)

Support for this hypothesis is provided by the Biblical depiction in the fragmentary mosaic pavement of the so-called *beit hamidrash* (theological school, בית-המדרש) where a quotation from the Book of Isaiah is inserted : "*Wolf and lamb shall feed together*" (Isaiah 65 : 25) (fig. 12-14)³¹. The fact that the so-called *beit hamidrash* is an integral architectural unit of the synagogue complex, emphasizes the clear link between the Biblical depiction on its mosaic

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

³⁰ As for example, Pella and Piazza Armerina, etc.

³¹ ILAN and DAMATI (above, note 3), drawing on p. 153, and lower colour photo (opposite p. 160).

and the image of the soldier and its symbolic content, despite the later date of the *beit hamidrash* (eighth century CE³²).

Though other scenes are not preserved, there is a possibility that the depiction which could have existed before the destruction of the pavement, might have consisted of Biblical scenes. Archaeological evidence seems to suggest that the whole eastern aisle of the synagogue, and most probably the western aisle as well, was divided into panels; an assumption which is supported by an existing panel with geometric patterns³³. In the sixth century CE church of Kissufim, the mosaic pavement is similarly divided into panels, where the thematic concept is unified, *i.e.* hunting scenes³⁴. Thus it seems plausible that a similar thematic and technical division of the pavement might have existed at Meroth.

* * *

The iconographic analysis of the figure, based on similar depictions in the mosaic pavements of the Roman and early Byzantine periods such as those of Piazza Armerina, Antioch, North Africa and others, indicate the influence of various currents in its form. It may be assumed that the mosaicist of Meroth was familiar with the pattern-books or models which also circulated in Eretz-Israel.

The soldier has removed his helmet and laid down his weapons, as he sits on his shield, while resting. This scene may symbolize the desire and yearning to end war and to bring peaceful days. This symbolic significance seems visually echoed in the scene of the wolf and the lamb depicted in the mosaic pavement of the so-called *beith hamidrash*, as well as in its Hebrew inscription (fig. 12-14). This may reflect the intention of the spiritual leaders in Meroth to express or reveal their belief in the Divine Providence, which will bring peace, salvation and redemption³⁵.

War is finally over, and weapons are laid aside and a universal peace will prevail on earth, instead of enmity and hostility. This is expressed in the Biblical allegories of the End of Days found in Isaiah and Micah, quoted above, which suggest expectation and hope for a better future for all people on earth and for the Jewish communities in Eretz-Israel, including Meroth. On the other hand, perhaps the scenes under discussion may reflect the difficulties and the unstable situation of the community of Meroth and other Jewish communities in Eretz-Israel at that time. The mosaic pavement with the scene of the seated soldier, dated to the second quarter of the fifth

³² Initially the excavators dated the *beit hamidrash* to 700-730 CE (ILAN and DAMATI [above, note 3], p. 58); lately, however, DAMATI suggested it may be dated to 750 CE onwards, after the destruction of the synagogue in the earthquake of 749 CE. This dating was given to us personally by DAMATI on October 21, 1994. Our thanks are due to him for this information.

³³ ILAN and DAMATI (above, note 3), drawing on p. 150.

³⁴ A. OVADIAH and S. MUCZNIK, "The Mosaic Pavement of Kissufim, Israel", in *Mosaïque. Recueil d'Homages à Henri Stern*, Paris 1983, p. 273-280, pl. CLXXXIII (1, 2).

³⁵ One cannot ignore the Messianic meaning of the scene in the mosaic pavements of Meroth.

century CE³⁶, together with the fragmentary mosaic of the wolf and lamb, dated to the mid-eighth century CE, symbolize the belief in the End of Days, Messianic hope and expectations that are true for every generation.

Addendum

Five similar examples of scenes depicting the theme of the End of Days or the Peaceful Kingdom, based on the inscriptions of Biblical quotations from Isaiah, were found on mosaic pavements in early Byzantine churches. Three are in Turkey : Karlik, dated to 490-491 CE, Korykos, dated mid-to second half of the fifth century CE, and in the Necropolis at Anemurium, dated mid-fifth century CE. A fourth example is the church of the acropolis at Ma'in, Jordan, dated 719-720 CE. Finally, the fifth example is in Corsica, dated late fourth century CE or first half of the fifth century CE. See S.D. CAMPBELL, "The Peaceful Kingdom : a liturgical interpretation", in *Fifth International Colloquium on Ancient Mosaics (Journal of Roman Archaeology - Supplementary Series Number 9)*, R. LING (ed), Part. 2, Ann Arbor, MI 1995, p. 125-134, fig. 1-8. On another mosaic pavement, found in the house of Farid el-Masri at Madaba, dated to the second half of the sixth century CE, the allegory of Paradise is probably depicted, despite the absence of an inscription (cf. the mosaic at Ma'in). See H. BUSCHHAUSEN (ed), *Byzantinische Mosaiken aus Jordanien*, Wien 1986, p. 69-70, Abb. 58.

These examples strengthen our interpretation of the scenes on the mosaics of the Meroth synagogue.

DISCUSSION

Jean-Pierre **Darmon** : Le symbole classique de la Fin des Temps est celui de la paix messianique des animaux, comme vous le rappelez. Un symbole aussi nouveau que le guerrier désarmé pour signifier ce thème bien connu paraît surprenant. L'inscription hébraïque près du héros ne peut-elle être un *titulus* donnant son nom, et ne peut-il s'agir, dans un contexte de synagogue, de Judas Maccabée ?

³⁶ ILAN and DAMATI (above, note 3), p. 53-54 ; during the reigns of Theodosius II and of Valentinian III.

Asher **Ovadia** : The Aramaic inscription is unequivocally the sum of an amount given by the donor. As we know from other cases, the identification of figures depicted on mosaics, especially on mosaic pavements in ancient synagogues, is based on inscriptions inserted above their heads or nearby. The Biblical sources as quoted in the presentation supports undoubtedly the symbolic significance of the proposed interpretation for the End of Day and Messianic expectations. The Biblical scene of the wolf and the lamb together with its inscription strengthens the above mentioned hypothesis.

Stephen **Zwirn** : If you are right with your interpretation of figure and weapons as a reference to the End of Days, then is this image the *only* one of its kind, because I do not know of any comparable image in Jewish Art or Early Christian Art in which a contemporary figure is used to refer to End of Time. Eschatological references are usually allegorical representations.

Asher **Ovadia** : It is true that this scene is unique to the best of our knowledge in Jewish-Christian works of art in Late Antiquity. Certainly, the scene has a symbolic significance with eschatological connotations. In some cases, symbolism exists in Jewish works of art, such as the Binding of Isaac or Daniel in the Lion's den, based on literary sources, and the historical-political and social circumstances.

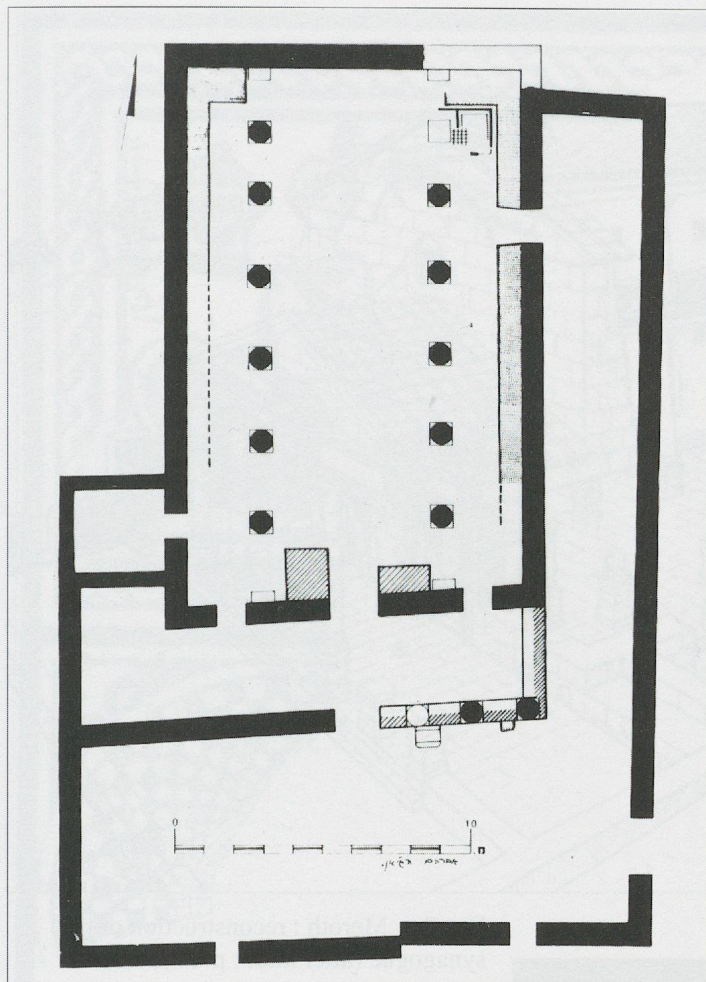


Fig. 1 : Meroth : plan of the synagogue (after ILAN and DAMATI, *Meroth*, p. 94).

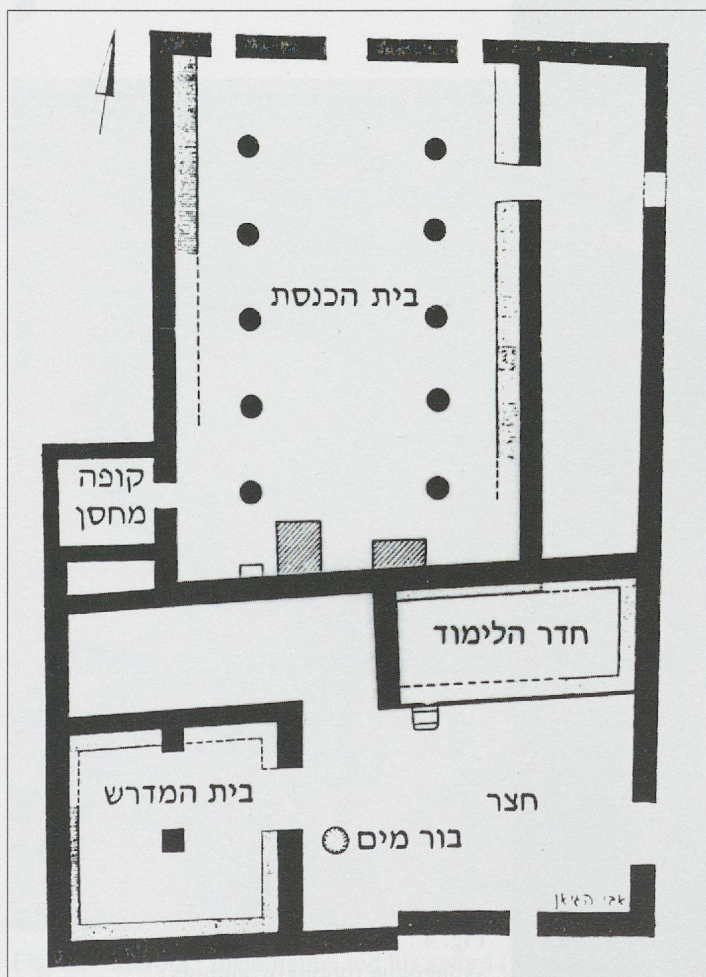


Fig. 2 : Meroth : plan of the synagogue and the "beit hamidrash" (after *ibid.* : p. 63).

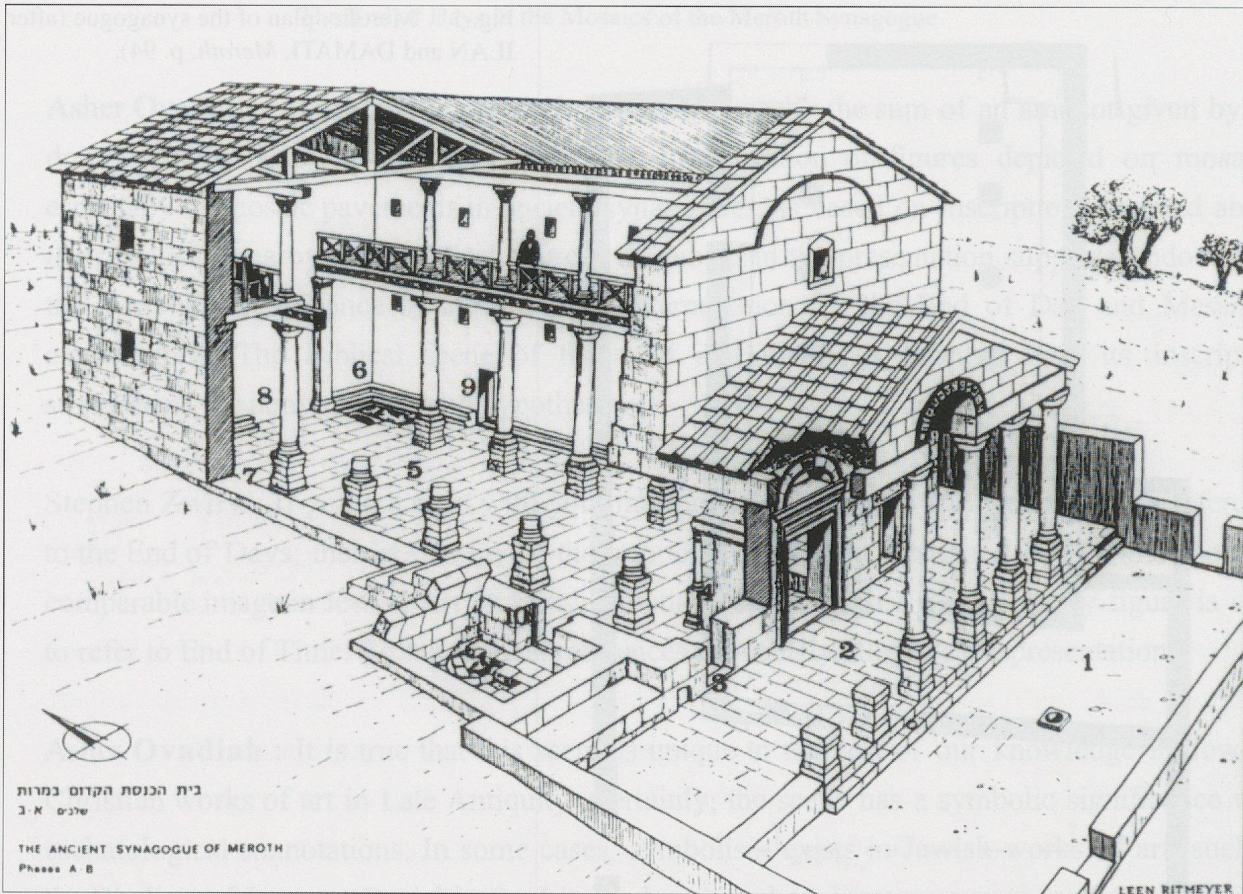


Fig. 3 : Meroth : reconstruction of the synagogue (after *ibid.* : p. 58).



Fig. 4 : Meroth : male figure from the synagogue (photo by authors).



Fig. 5 : Meroth : drawing of figure 4 (after *ibid.* : p. 150).



Fig. 6 : Meroth : male figure and his sword (photo by authors).



Fig. 7 : Meroth : male figure and his shield (photo by authors).



Fig. 8 : Meroth : the helmet and the Aramaic inscription (photo by authors).



Fig. 9 : Tipasa : mosaic of bound barbarian prisoners (after BIANCHI BANDINELLI, *Rome, The Late Empire*, pl. 219).



Fig. 10 : Antioch : Worcester Hunt mosaic (after LEVI, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, pl. CLXX).



Fig. 11 : Sparta : Orpheus mosaic (after G. STEINHAUER, *Museum of Sparta*, Athens n. d., p. 86).

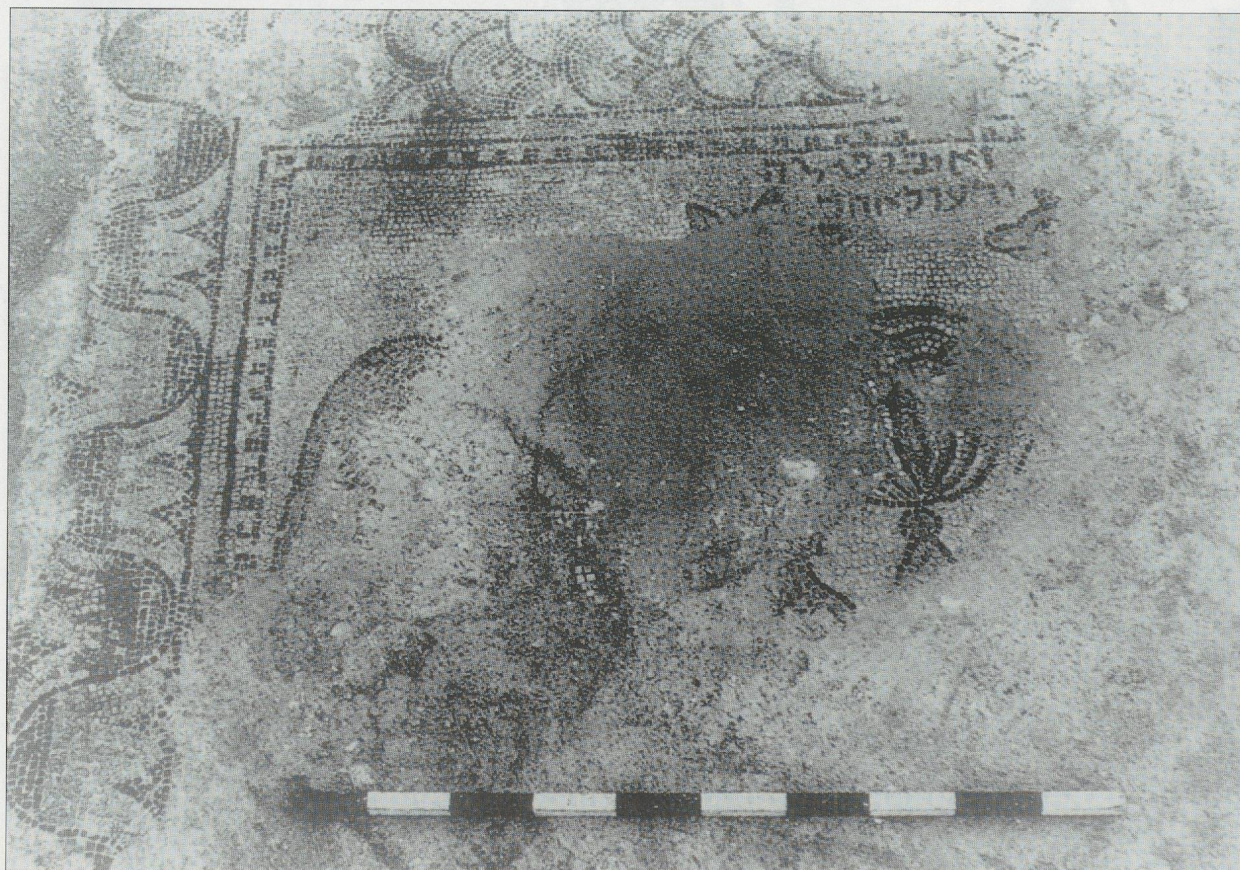


Fig. 12 : Meroth : the wolf and the lamb, and the Isaiah inscription from the "beit hamidrash" (after ILAN and DAMATI, *Meroth*, p. 79).

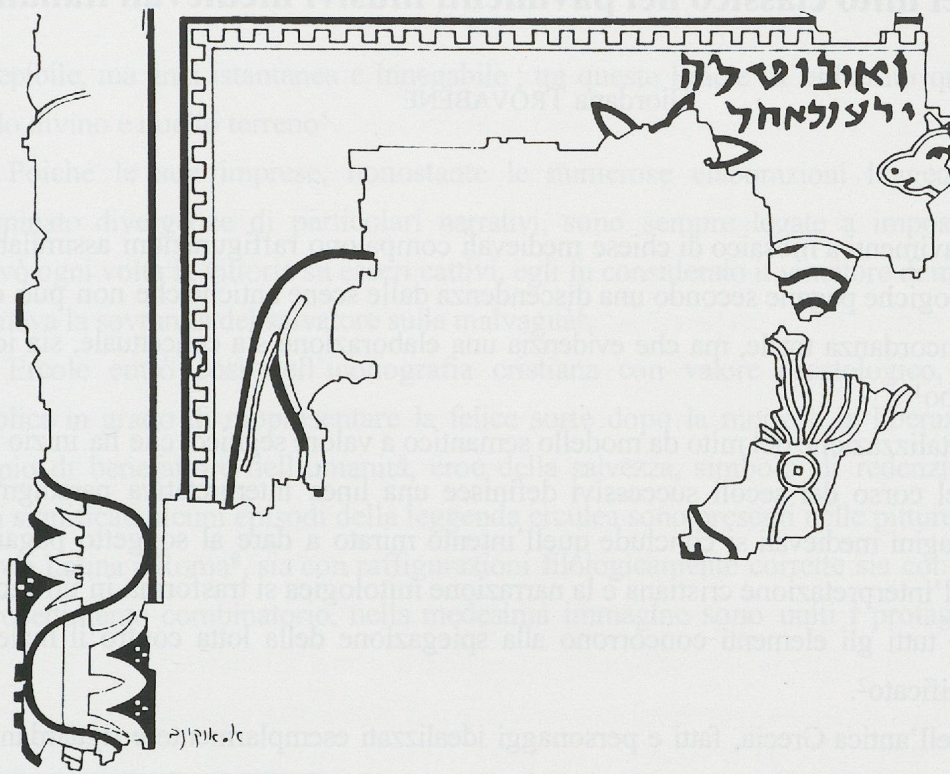


Fig. 13 : Meroth : drawing of fig. 12. (after *ibid.* : p. 153).

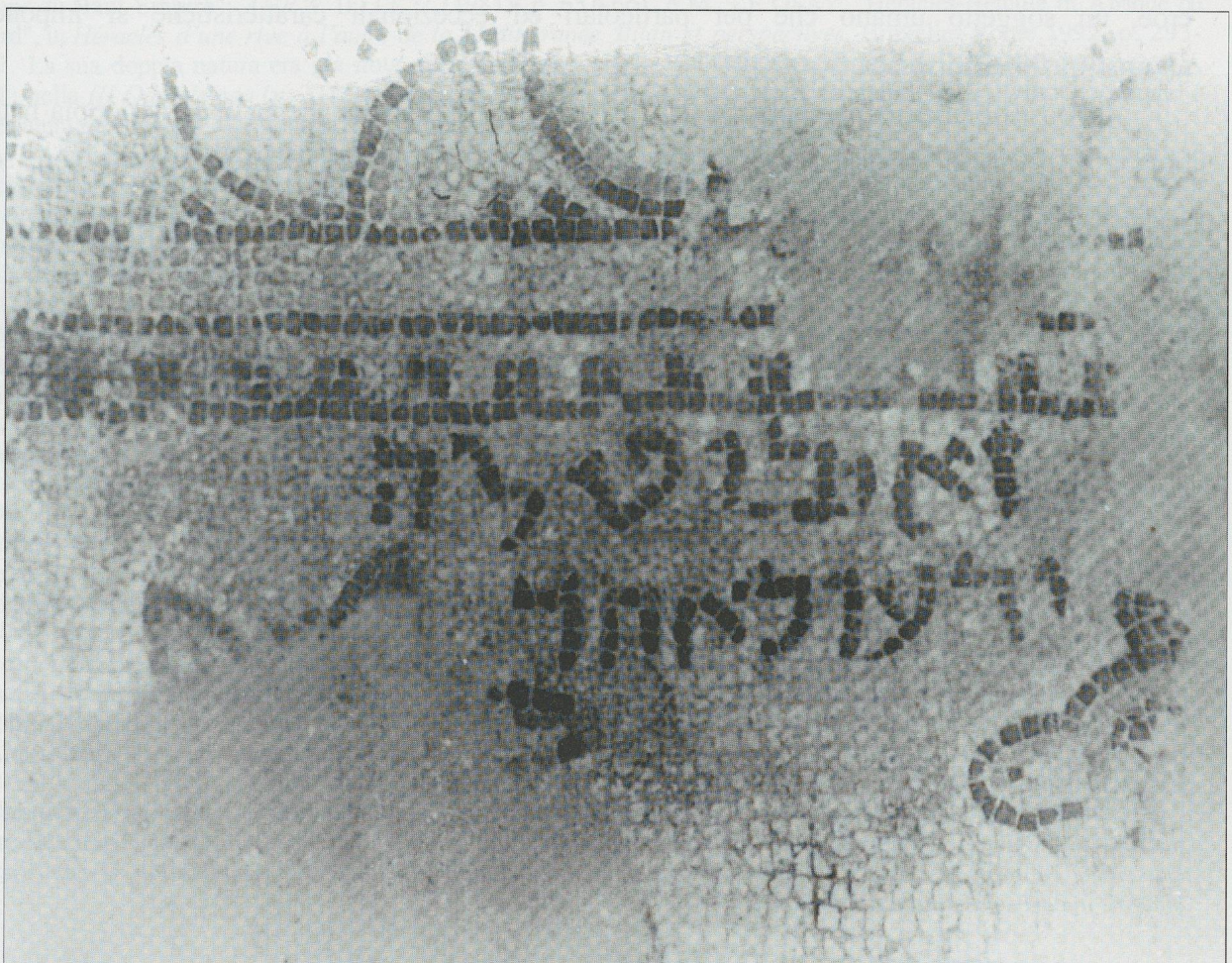


Fig. 14 : Meroth : the Isaiah inscription from the "beit hamidrash", detail (after *ibid.* : p. 80).