Ancient Mosaic Pavements

Themes, Issues, and Trends
Selected Studies

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Noah’s Ark

The narrative story of Noah’s Ark appears on two mosaic pavements: on the floor of the Gerasa synagogue (Jordan) and on the pavement of Misis-Mopsuestia (Cilicia, Turkey).

The story of Noah and the flood is told in Genesis chapters 6-8 (see also the Noah’s Ark legends collected by Ginzberg 1947, I: 165-167). The part of the story portrayed in the mosaic pavements represents the end of the tale (Gen. 8: 10-20):

...He waited seven days more and again sent out the dove from the ark. She came back to him towards evening with a freshly plucked olive leaf in her beak. Noah knew then that the waters had subsided from the earth’s surface. He waited yet other seven days, and when he sent out the dove she did not come back to him. So it came about that on the first month, the first day of the month of the six hundred and first year, the waters had dried on the earth; and when Noah removed the hatch and looked out, he saw that the ground was dry. By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was dry. And God spoke to Noah, saying: ‘Come out of the ark together with your wife, your sons, and their wives. Bring out every living creature that is with you, live things of every kind, birds, beasts and creeping things and let them spread over the earth, and be fruitful, and increase on it’. So Noah came out with his sons, his wife, and his sons’ wives; and all the animals, creeping things, and birds; everything that moves on the ground came out of the ark, one kind after another. Noah built an altar to the Lord; and taking beasts and birds of every kind that were ritually clean he offered them as whole-offerings on it. (Gen. 8: 10-20)

Noah’s Ark on the Mosaic Pavement at Gerasa

The mosaic panel in the east vestibule of the early 5th-century Gerasa synagogue is a rendition of the latter part of Noah’s Ark narrative. The panel is oblong with a broad border (figs. IV-6,7). This synagogue comprises an atrium on the east, a vestibule, and a large hall. The synagogue and its mosaics were found under a church apse built over the synagogue structure in 530-531 CE (Sukenik [1932: 55-56] suggests a date between the mid-4th century and 530 CE; Kraeling 1938: 323; Piccirillo 1993: 290, figs. 546-551, listed the identification of the animals).

The synagogue orientation was different from the above church. Its entrance was from the east and those entering the east courtyard could observe the Noah’s Ark scene. The building was identified as a synagogue by the Greek and Aramaic inscriptions as well as by the depiction of the menorah and the four ritual objects (Kraeling 1938: 473; Hachlili 1988: 292-294).

The mosaic panel in the east vestibule, only partly preserved, is shown from left to right and starts in the south corner of the framed central panel.

The surviving part of the mosaic shows on the left a perched dove holding an olive branch, conveying the news of the receding flood (figs. IV-6,7). Under the branch two partly preserved human heads with the inscribed names ‘Shem’ and ‘Japhet’ are portrayed; originally Noah’s family was probably depicted leaving the ark or sacrificing after they came out (Genesis 8: 11, 14-19). The rest of the panel consists of three rows of realistically rendered animals, striding from left...
The Gerasa scene commemorates the moment when the animals leave Noah's Ark, as Noah and his family celebrate the event. The panel is bordered by a frieze rendering beasts chasing their victims, with flowers and plants filling the space; the frieze scene begins at the inscription with the beasts facing opposite directions. In the centre of the east border frieze is an inscription placed upside-down in relation to the entrance of the vestibule. The partly destroyed Greek inscription contains the greeting 'Holy place. Amen. Sela. Peace to the Synagogue'. It encircles a menorah together with the four ritual objects: lulav and ethrog on one side, shofar and incense shovel on the other (Hachlili 2001: 58-61).
The difference between the scene of the animals leaving Noah’s Ark and the chase scene around the border is interpreted in various ways. The two scenes picture the situation before and after the flood according to the narrative in the Midrash (Sukenik 1932: 56). The main scene renders the pure animals while the border depicts tainted animals (Kraeling 1938: 320-321, however that is not exactly accurate). The animals leaving the ark are tame while those in the border are wild beasts, which were not taken into the ark (Goodenough I: 259-260; he also [1968, XII: 133] asserts that the beasts in the border symbolize immortality and the afterlife). Yet the border scene may quite simply be decorative; a similar pursuit scene is found in the Beth She’an small synagogue, where the animals are shown in an inhabited scrolls design. Compare also the chase scene around the border of the mosaic pavement of the Martyr church at Beth She’an (see Chap. VII).

**Noah’s Ark on the Mosaic Pavement at Misis-Mopsuhestia**

The central scene of Noah’s Ark surrounded by various animals is depicted on a mosaic pavement found in a building in Mopsuhestia, the Cilician city on the road from Tarsus to Antioch, south of the Taurus Mountains (Asia Minor). Today Misis is a Turkish town. The building and its mosaic pavement most probably date to the late 5th century CE.

The remains of the building consist mainly of parts of the mosaic pavements and a few remnants of walls (Budde 1969: 31-37).

The mosaic floor is divided into a wide nave, a south aisle, and two north aisles; the mosaic on one aisle shows episodes from the biblical story of Samson (Budde 1969; Kitzinger 1973; Hachlili 1998: 209-216); Budde (1960 and 1969) maintains that it was a martyrion church, but the structure is probably a synagogue, as suggested by Avi-Yonah (1981: 186-190): it resembles synagogues in the Land of Israel such as Hammath-Tiberias, which also has a nave flanked by two aisles on one side and a single aisle on the other (Kitzinger 1973: 136; Hachlili 1998: 51-52; 209-216; 249-256).

At Misis-Mopsuhestia two renditions of Noah and the ark are portrayed on the western panel of the nave’s mosaic pavement. The earlier panel is in the lower half of the nave. A relaid mosaic lies in the western, later, part of the nave, probably close to the entrance (Budde 1969: 54; pl. 50). It shows a much simpler depiction of Noah’s story, crudely rendered.
The decorated ark is in the centre of the square panel forming the focal point of the scene. It is a three-dimensional chest standing on four legs; it is open and the lid is folded back. A dove can be seen inside the ark and the tail end of another dove (?) protrudes from the side opening (Budde 1969: figs. 26, 30). The Greek inscription KIBWTOC NWEP on the inner open lid of the ark means ‘The ark of Noah the redeemer’ or ‘The redeemed ark of Noah’ (Budde 1969: 41-42; Avi-Yonah 1981b: 186; but see Buschhausen [1972: 67-68] who asserts that the Greek Ρ means 100, that is, 100 years between the building of the ark and the flood). The word KIBWTOC means box or chest and is the word used in the Septuagint for Noah’s Ark as well as for the Ark of the Covenant. In Hebrew the word for the ark of Noah is תיבה.

The ark is decorated with three coloured rectangles similar to standard decorations of Torah arks appearing on the mosaic pavements of Hammath-Tiberias, Susiya, Beth ‘Alpha and others (figs. II-9-12) (Hachlili 1976: 40-50; 1988: 272-278, figs. IX 21; 22, pls. 102-105; 2000: 154-5, figs. 11: 4, 5, 12: 1-4; but see Buschhausen’s suggestion [1972: 65] that the ark is a type of columbarium).

The animals are arrayed in two wide rows around them so they can be viewed from all sides. Two rows of animals surround the ark, an inner row consisting of birds and an outer row of mammals. The birds are identified as crane, cock, hen, peacock, dove, nightingale, and stork; some are depicted in flight, and some stand on a simple base line (Budde 1969: figs. 27, 28, 34, 36, 38, 39, 42). The mammals stand on a thicker line, which may indicate landscape. The animals also have an added line in darker colours between or under their feet. The mammals appear to be arranged, for example, the savage beasts such as the bear, lion, and panther or leopard are placed at the corners, one of which is damaged (Budde 1969: figs. 26, 27, 29, 32); the domesticated animals such as ox, deer, donkey, gazelle, and camel are placed in between the corners (Budde 1969: figs. 30, 35, 40-42; Avi-Yonah 1981: 186). In this row one bird, a crane, is also depicted among the mammals. Surprisingly, the animals are not depicted in pairs: only a single example of each animal species appears. Furthermore, Noah and his family are also missing from the scene, although they do appear in the later mosaic.

The animals’ movement is stereotypically awkward and stiff, body bulk is excessive and their eyes are large and emphasized; they are portrayed isolated on a white background. Differences in bird size attest to the probability that the depictions were from observations in nature, as well as copied from some model books. The scene is comparable to the Antioch tradition of the Martyrion of Seleucia (Kitzinger 1965: 345, 348-9; Buschhausen 1972: 61). Dunbabin (1978: 230-31) suggests that the rows of animals at the Misis mosaic accord with a favourite theme in Christian churches, namely bands of animals moving peacefully. This is interpreted as the Animal Paradise, a peaceful assembly of animals prophesied by Isaiah (see below).

The style of the pavement emphasizes the ark, which is three-dimensional but lacks perspective or shadow, though there is some influence of a Hellenistic illusionary description. Kitzinger (1976a: 345, 348-9; Buschhausen 1972: 61) claims that the pavement with Noah’s Ark surrounded by animals is a figure carpet, although it ‘retains a certain vestige emblema’.

The other Noah’s Ark scene on the repaired later part of the mosaic is viewed from the opposite direction to the older mosaic (Budde 1969: 54-55, Fig. 50, 55, 113-114).

This mosaic has two parts (fig. IV-9): one shows a large figure holding a vessel in the left hand. An animal (panther?), a bird, and an upside-down bird cage are between this figure and a much smaller figure on the left. A red box-like object appears under the first figure. The other part of the mosaic shows three animals, one open-mouthed without ears. Budde (1969: 54) contends that they are a lion and a panther, and that the third animal looking back on the right has an elephant’s trunk. A bird is placed above this animal, and remains of a building are beside it. Budde suggests that this scene shows Noah and his two sons Shem and Japhet offering thanks after their salvation. He compares the primitive, rustic style of the Misis mosaic to the Beth ‘Alpha mosaic style. Neither is of high artistic standard and both were executed by local artists. The later pavement at Misis is especially crude compared with the high quality of the earlier mosaics.

The date of the early mosaic pavement is disputed. Budde (1960: 116, 123) first suggested the end of the 4th or early 5th century, the period of Theodore, Mopsuhestia’s famous bishop (392-428), but in his later book (Budde 1969: 34) he
dates the mosaics to the third quarter of the 4th century, mainly on grounds of stylistic comparison with the Antioch mosaics (also Kitzinger 1973: 138, note 20). Avi-Yonah (1981: 189) likens the mosaics stylistically to the mosaics of the Church of Nativity at Bethlehem. The Misis pavement style combines several influences, and seems to have been created in the intermediate period of the continuation of the Graeco-Roman mosaic traditions coincidentally with the beginning of the new direction of the Justinian mosaics (Kitzinger 1976a: 64). Buschhausen (1972: 59, 61-63) suggests a later date, in 6th-century Justinian times, also on the basis of stylistic comparisons. Most scholars, however, prefer a date in the second half of the 5th century (Lavin 1963: 273, note 424; Kitzinger 1976a: 66; 1973: 138; Grabar 1966: 10, 15; Dunbabin 1978: 223).

In the mosaic pavements of both Gerasa and Misis the Noah’s Ark scene is rendered at the moment of the animals’ emergence from the ark (because the dove is already portrayed in the scene), thereby probably suggesting the symbolic meaning of the event, which is that God has promised not to destroy the world again (Genesis 8: 18; 9: 9-11). However, the two interpretations of the Noah story on the mosaic pavements differ in their emphasis. At Misis, in the earlier mosaic the ark is placed at the centre of the scene, whereas at Gerasa it is entirely missing. At Gerasa the animals appear in pairs and Noah and his family are present. At Misis the animals are shown singly and Noah’s family is not even depicted. Still, at Gerasa and at Misis alike the main narrative topic is the animals.

The depictions of Noah’s Ark in early Christian illustrations, on catacombs wall paintings and sarcophagi, differ iconographically from the mosaics just described. An abbreviated scene usually shows Noah in a box-like ark sending off the dove, which appears in flight, and no depiction of the animals is found. The ark is usually a square box, sometimes with four small feet (fig. IV-10). Usually Noah is rendered in one of two types, as follows.

The first type shows him in an orans pose emerging from a box-like ark, the dove with an olive branch above him or Noah extending his
hands towards it. This type occurs on 4th-century wall paintings and sarcophagi from the catacombs of Rome (Hachlili 1996: 253-4; fig. V-10 a, d); on a gold glass found in a sarcophagus dated to the 4th century (Cologne Museum no. N991, Reusch 1965: 130-31, no. 124). Other examples appear on the wall painting of the Roman catacomb in the Via Latina, cubiculum O (Tronzo 1986: fig. 96; Ferrua 1991: fig. 142), in the Priscilla, Domitilla, Petrus, and Marcellinus catacombs (Ehrenstein 1923; Kapitel IV: 1-10; Bock and Goebel 1961: pls. 1, 22, 41, 43). The same portrayal is found on a glass bowl from Köln (Morey 1959: 68, no. 421, pl. 34; Schüler 1966: 51-52); and on a small glass medallion (Morey 1959: 30, No. 139, pl. XXI). One of the few biblical depictions on Christian mosaic pavements appears on a 6th-century mosaic floor from the south transept of the East Church at Apollonia in Cyrenaica: it is rendered inside one of the sixteen squares of the mosaic; some of the other surviving squares are filled with genre scenes (Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980: 61, 88; fig. 3, pl. 37, 1). The scene depicts Noah in the orans pose emerging from a chest-like ark and dispatching the dove. The inscription NEW identifies the scene.

In the second type Noah stands in the box-like ark, turning aside, his hands outstretched to the dove. This appears on a wall painting, a sarcophagus, and a gold glass from the catacombs of Rome (Bock and Goebel 1961: pl. 40; Hachlili 1998: fig. IV-11b, c, e).

Different depictions in early Christian art are found in another painting in the Roman

Figure IV-10. Noah’s Ark on catacomb wall paintings and sarcophagi.
catacomb of Via Latina, cubiculum B (Ferrua 1960: 118, fig. 47; Kötzsch-Breitenbruch 1976: 51-54, pl. 4a), where Noah and his wife are shown sitting next to a tree while water pours onto the ark. The Noah sarcophagus from Trier ( Förster 1965: 18, Katalog no.2) shows Noah in a coffin-like ark surrounded by his family and the animals; Noah extends his hand to the dove.

Another important example of the Noah legend is found on bronze coins from the Phrygian town of Apamea (Asia Minor, Turkey), struck under Septimus Severus (193-211), Macrinus (217-219), and Philip the Arabian (244-249). The coins portray the images of Noah and his wife in the ark on the reverse (fig. IV.11) (Hachlili 1998: 255-256, fig. V-11). The ark is in the form of a chest; a raven perches on it and a dove flies above, carrying an olive branch. The ark bears an inscription in Greek. Two figures interpreted as Noah and his wife move leftwards next to the ark, their right hands raised in an orans gesture. They stand on dry land. The scene represents both the flood and their salvation.

Illuminated manuscripts show different representations of the biblical story: eleven illuminated scenes of the Noah’s story were depicted originally on eight pages in the Cotton Genesis (British Museum, Cod. Cotton O B, IV., fols. 10-12); it is probably the oldest illuminated manuscript, dated to the 5th-6th century, and has 330 miniatures in the Genesis text (Weitzmann 1971a: 45-48, scenes b,e,h, j, Figs. 23-26). The miniatures illustrate several parts of the Noah’s narrative: God commands Noah; Noah brings his family into the ark; Noah sends forth a raven and the first dove; Noah sends the third dove. The Cotton Genesis illuminations are considered the inspiration for the wall mosaics of San Marco in Venice. Some miniatures were reconstructed on the basis of this comparison too.

The Vienna Genesis (Vienna Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Theo. Gr. 31) is a 6th-century illuminated manuscript ( Weitzmann 1971b: 207-208) which preserved 24 purple leaves with 48 miniatures out of the originally estimated 96 leaves which must have contained 192 miniatures (the archetype of the manuscript probably had about 400-500 scenes). Each miniature rendered several scenes, with two or three on the bottom half of each page. Two miniatures in the Vienna Genesis show part of the Noah’s narrative: one illustrates the ark during the flood, the other Noah and his family leading the animals in pairs out of the ark.

Scholars disagree about the sources for the Noah’s Ark story (Stichel 1979). Grabar (1951: 13) argues that the Noah images in early Christian catacombs and on the Apamea coins are based on Jewish wall paintings that decorated a building in Apamea, and that this is perhaps the oldest example of a Jewish image based on a biblical subject. He provides no proof for such a building; he further states that the influence on the Christian-Roman catacombs was Jewish. Weitzmann (1971b: 317, 321-3; see also Friedman 1989: 14-5) maintains that the pictorial elements in the Vienna Genesis are based on Jewish legend, further proposing that the source might have been Josephus’ illustrated Antiquities (of which no proof has been found to date). Kötzsch-Breitenbruch (1976: 54) maintains that the Apamean coins are similar to the Noah’s Ark images at Via Latina and are linked to Jewish illustrated manuscripts. Murray (1981: 103-104, Fig. 38) argues that the source for the ark in the Early Christian images may be the pagan story of a figure in a chest cast on the water, similar to the Greek myths of Auge, Telephos, and Danae with her baby son Perseus. Murray argues that the connection between these coins and early Christian art seems remote; the iconography is probably not related, the main difference being that on the Apamea coins the Noah story is a narrative, whereas in the early Christian scenes the image of Noah tends to be symbolic.

Murray further suggests that ‘it may perhaps be better to speak of “Jewish inspiration” in the matter of the iconography’. The Early Christian depiction of Noah standing in the box-like ark is symbolic. The interpretation of the story in Christianity is usually different. It has funerary connotations and it symbolizes death and resurrection; the ark is vox Arche, ‘the
Christian church’. Allen (1963: 155) maintains that ‘Noah is usually the joyful emblem of the risen Christ’ and the ark looks ‘like a sarcophagus or the funerary box in which the body of Christ was laid’. This is also the interpretation of Budde (1969: 55) for the Misis depiction. The central position of the ark in Misis symbolizes, in his opinion, the Christian Church, bringing salvation to the world as Noah’s Ark saved the animals (see also Grabar 1966: 15). Others interpret the flood story as a prefiguration of the Baptism of Christ. Christ is represented as the new Noah and the ark is the church (Gutmann 1977: 63).

The emphasis in Gerasa and Misis is on the animals, and the story is depicted in a narrative-illustrative form, with the animals marching along the panel; by contrast, the scene is different from the way it appears in Early Christian art on catacombs and sarcophagi. The art of the catacombs usually carries a symbolic rendering of the ark (as a box) with Noah in it, sending off the dove, and no depiction of the animals is found.

King David at the Gaza Synagogue

A synagogue decorated with mosaics was discovered on the Gaza-Maiumas seashore with a Greek inscription dating its pavements to 508-509 (Avi-Yonah 1966: 221-223; Ovadia 1969; Barash 1980). The floor of the synagogue hall was originally paved with mosaics on the nave and side aisles, the southernmost of which is decorated with an inhabited scroll design.

A fragmentary representation of King David is on a section of the western end of the central nave; he is identified by the inscribed name דְוִד David in Hebrew (pl. IV-3, fig. IV-12). The figure of David as a musician in frontal posture is rendered in the known iconographic manner of Orpheus. He appears crowned with a diadem, a nimbus around his head and wearing royal costume: a Byzantine emperor’s robes and chlamys. David sits on an elaborate decorated cubic box-like seat or throne, whose geometric decoration has similarities with the ornamentations of the ark on the mosaic pavements of the Hammath Tiberias and Susiya synagogues. With his right hand David strums the cithara with a plectrum, while his left hand holds the instrument from behind; the cithara is to his left on a cushion positioned on the throne. To the king’s left the animals listening to the music are rendered. Only a lioness, the head and neck of a giraffe, and an elephant’s trunk or a serpent have survived (Hachlili 1988: 297-8, pls. 66-67; Jesnick 1997: no. 73b). David’s sitting posture and the way he plays the musical instrument is similar to many of the Orpheus mosaics (Jesnick 1997: 183-189, however, she does not consider the Gaza figure Orpheus).

David was known as the royal psalmist and a magical musician with some extraordinary quality attributed to his musical instrument:

…whenever an evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his lyre (םַלְכִּים) and play it, so that relief would come to Saul. He would recover and the evil spirit would leave him alone (1 Samuel 16: 23).

The animals originally surrounded the centrally positioned musician figure on all sides, as is seen on many comparable Orpheus mosaics. As noted, in the scene at Gaza only a few survived: a lioness bows her head (but see the mistaken interpretation of the animal as a lion or lion-cub by scholars: Avi-Yonah 1966: 222; Barash 1980: 18). The bending stance of the lioness apparently captivated by the musician is a dramatic representation that seldom appears in Orpheus depictions. This lioness is quite similar to the one with the suckling cub portrayed on a medallion in the inhabited scrolls pavement on the southernmost aisle. The giraffe’s head and neck with a band around it, next to the lioness, is similar to the giraffe rendered on a medallion in the inhabited scrolls pavement of the southernmost aisle (pl. XII.7a). A giraffe is highly unusual in connection with King David, and to date has only once been found in an Orpheus scene (2nd-century Orpheus mosaic at Santa Marinella I in Italy; Jesnick 1997: 78, Cat. no.3); it was considered a tame and peaceful animal in late antiquity and is perhaps an additional symbol of redemption associated with Orpheus (Barash 1980: 19, and note 68). The other animal below the lioness is a serpent, or an elephant of which only the trunk has survived.

The figure of David in the Gaza scene is similar to some characteristics of Orpheus iconography in Roman mosaic pavements. Many portrayals are seen on villa mosaics dating to the first quarter of the 4th century; Jesnick (1997: 8-19, 68-90, 124-147, catalogue; figs. 23a-g; lists more than 91 examples. Orpheus is usually portrayed in the centre in a typical posture, seated on a rock or a box-like seat, sometimes in a landscape surrounded by animals; he wears a Phrygian cap, is dressed in long Thracian or Greek robes or a short Phrygian tunic or a chiton. He plays a